

Trinitarian Conversations

Volumes 1 and 2 Combined

Published by Grace Communion International
and Grace Communion Seminary

October 2019
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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 130 interviews available. You may watch them or download video or audio at <https://www.gcs.edu/course/view.php?id=58>.

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 series may be made at <https://www.gcs.edu/mod/page/view.php?id=3314>

1. STARTING THEOLOGY WITH JESUS

J. Michael Feazell: 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 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 jure* – 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. MUSIC AND THEOLOGY

Gary Deddo: I've been reading your book, *Resounding Truth*, and find it fascinating. It's an important topic that you bring up there, of the relationship of Christian faith with the arts, and music in particular. I'd like us to talk about that. But before we get into that, you have an unusual background that brings together music and theology. Can you tell us how that happened?

Jeremy Begbie: The theology came much later than the music. About the age of three or four, I started playing the piano and improvising. I was entranced by this world of music and the kind of sounds you get out of this strange instrument. My mother was very musical (my father, not so), so I was surrounded by music from an early age. I knew that's what I wanted to do for the rest of my life – there was no question of anything else. Right through my school years, that was the chosen profession. I was composing; I started the oboe when I was 13; I was playing in competitions.

Throughout that time, I had no particular interest in Christian faith. My mother was a churchgoer. My father sporadically, but we didn't talk about those things much. I had no evangelical background or anything like that. Then I went to the University of Edinburgh to study music and philosophy. It was during that time that I caught up with an old school friend of mine called Alan Torrance. We'd been at school together in Edinburgh. I had a spare slot in my degree program for an elective. He said, "Why not go along and hear my dad lecture in theology." It was a crafty thing to do, but I thought, "Yeah, I'll do that." I sort of snuck along there like Nicodemus at night, concerned not to be recognized, and sat at the back. I listened to a lecture. I think he was talking about Hebrews and the High Priest of Christ.

GD: This is James Torrance?

JB: James Torrance. I don't think I understood a word he said, but he had something I didn't have. I knew that. He was full of a kind of profound joy that I had not met before. He was also intellectually very sharp. This is probably the first Christian I had met who



was clearly very brilliant as well as very devout. Indeed, he started with prayer as well. I met a kind of wholeness in that person that I had not seen before, and that captivated me. I thought, “Whatever he’s on, so to speak, I wouldn’t mind having a bit of that or at least getting to that more fully.”

Through many conversations with Alan and his father, James, I started reading the New Testament, which I had not read before, and reading the rest of the Bible as well, or at least large parts of it. I fell into faith over a period of about two or three months. Grace got hold of me. From the beginning, all I heard was a message of grace. I had never heard this before. I didn’t know that’s what Christianity was. That struck me.

Another thing that struck me, I think most of all... I didn’t come to faith through feeling terribly guilty about something. If you had said to me at the age of 19, “Are you aware of a great gap in your life?” I would say, “No, not really.” Isn’t there some deep running unhappiness deep down in you? I’d have said, “No, not really. I’m quite content, thanks very much.”

What initially attracted me about Christianity was it was a worldview. It was an entire way of looking at reality with Jesus Christ at the center. That was extraordinary. I said, “This is a way of accounting for things. It’s a way of integrating things.” Its initial appeal was intellectual, and I saw it lived out in a family, with the Torrances. They took me into their home and I had the kind of welcome that I had not experienced before. I asked crazy and very aggressive and angry questions. They just took all those and answered them gracefully. That’s how I came to faith. It was later I was aware of sin and guilt and the cross, but that’s not how I came into it.

Then the challenge was: how is music going to be integrated with that?

GD: Right. You were training to be in music performance.

JB: Music performance and possibly in the academic world, maybe a PhD, something like that as well, because I was academically very interested in music. There was a sudden change. I felt a strong vocation early on to be a minister for the gospel. That shocked my parents, but they took it sort of well.

Short of it, I was due to go on to Oxford to do another degree in music, but I decided to do theology with James Torrance at Aberdeen. He was an extraordinary teacher and gave me a Trinitarian, particularly Christological, but also Trinitarian view of reality; it just fired me up intellectually. My years at Aberdeen were incredibly happy.

As far as music was concerned, I was performing then. I was teaching. I was doing all that. I kept it going. But in those days, there was very little written that would integrate the world of music and the arts with vibrant

theology. Now, we have a lot. Not so much possibly music, but certainly in the arts generally. There's been a great burgeoning of literature, but then there was not very much.

That was the challenge. Since then, I've been trying to hold those worlds together. Yet, even that's not quite right: I've been trying to see how they are integrated and can be integrated.

GD: Why is that important? It was personally important; that's clear. Aren't they distinct disciplines? Music, Christian faith, worship, theology itself, aren't they separate?

JB: It's important for all sorts of reasons. One is that there's no society known on the face of the earth that's not done something like music. However poor, however deprived, they'll always be singing. They'll always be playing. Music is at least as universally and ancient as language, easily so.

If we're giving a Christian account of reality and a concern that our entire life is Christ centered and integrated with our faith, then something has to be done with this extraordinary phenomena we call music. That's the main reason. If Christ is Lord of all, we need to see and show what it means to have Christ as Lord of music (he is already Lord of these activities that we call music). That's first of all why it's important.

Then along with that, music has been used in worship from the beginning. What's going on and how can we use it responsibly? Another reason is that music can be used for great harm as well, and has been. It can be very manipulative. It can be divorced from ethics, and in worship, sometimes divorced from the word or scripture and take on a life on its own. It easily becomes an idol. We need to ask, "How do we avoid that or how are we going to get a grip on those questions?"

GD: Right. In your book, you talk about the importance of the doctrine of creation. I don't know any Christian that would say, "I don't believe God is creator." That's just standard. God is the creator. That's fine, but they don't necessarily take that much further. On the other hand, Christianity is about Jesus and Jesus is about the cross. Isn't that the center? Jesus is interested in redemption. We tend to align creation with the Father, and redemption and the cross with the Son. But really, that's not the whole story. In some ways, that music question and Jesus being Lord of all raises, what does Jesus have to do with creation?

JB: That's the key issue. Jesus is about the cross and redemption, but what does Colossians say? "The one in whom, for whom, by whom all things were created and all things have been redeemed through the blood of the cross" (Colossians 1:16, 20; Romans 11:36). In other words, you have Christ at the

center, at the center of the entire creation. He is the rationale behind the making of the universe. The risen Christ is the embodiment of the end of the universe. If we want to know what the entire created order is about and what it's meant to be doing, that's where we go first.

That's Paul and the very earliest traditions. Christ was being linked not simply to the human sphere, though quite rightly and properly, but also to the entire created order. (Sadly, in a lot of Protestantism, and indeed in a lot of evangelicalism, these things have been separated out. Christ is about the salvation of your soul, but the world at large and also probably your body, physicality as well, these things can be set to one side because Christ is not interested in those.) That seems to be in Colossians, Ephesians, 1 Corinthians, virtually every book in the New Testament ... John's Gospel is often forgotten; there is an incredibly important theme of the new creation in John's Gospel. The one through whom all things were created is the one who will recreate all things. The resurrection is being portrayed as the new creation; there's no doubt about that. It's right through John's Gospel as well.

That was the vision that excited me from James Torrance. I should also mention the name of Colin Gunton. He was the one who pushed that even more strongly, the kind of a creation-wide vista. That's why it's important to get that perspective on music.

When we're thinking about the history of the thinking about music, musicology as it's called, history of music and thinking about music, there was a big change around roughly 1450 to about 1650. Up until then, by far the dominant tradition in thinking about music was a cosmological tradition, that music turned into sound the order of the cosmos. The cosmos, the creation at large, has an order to it, a glorious beauty about it. What music ought to be doing is that we're tuning into that and turning it into sound.

Sounded music becomes the embodiment of created order. That's behind the "music of the spheres." It's in Plato, Pythagoras, it's taken into the Christian Church, particularly via Augustine and then a little bit later Boethius, and right through the medieval era. It was just assumed that music was giving expression to lots of things, but first of all to the order of the universe. When it wasn't tuned into the universe, it was liable to do you a fair amount of harm.

For all sorts of reasons during the late Renaissance and then early modern period, music gets pulled out of that context. It becomes justified primarily and mainly in anthropological terms, or human-centered terms. Music becomes a way in which we influence each other, in which we persuade each other emotionally, in which we move each other. It's primarily a means of

emotional communication and nothing else. The ancients thought that as well. They set it in this cosmic context. Music has been taken out of that context, largely in the modern years. Now we just take it for granted. It's nothing to do with nature at large. It's to do with whatever I make it to be. It's a very constructive view of music. As you know, Gary, that's not just in music, but right across the board in many disciplines, that's been the case. Charles Taylor I think speaks about the dis-embedding from the cosmos at large. Ethics taken out of cosmic context becomes what I...

GD: Yes. It can be reduced to, "What's the benefit to me?" If I can't discover what that is or nobody can explain it to me, then it's irrelevant.

JB: When I teach courses in theology and music, I say there's a question that is disallowed for the next thirteen weeks. That is, "Do I like it?" There's another question. "Dr. Begbie, what kind of music do you like?" They often want to know that. I say, "Not going to tell you." The reason, not because that doesn't matter, but because I think we need to learn the discipline of not making that the first question. The first question we ask is, "What's going on here?" Then yes, like it or dislike it. But we live in a culture that said, "Do I like it? Yes. Do I not like it? No. If I don't like it, I needn't even listen to it. I needn't bother with it."

To think if we treated everything like that, if we had no curiosity about the world at large, but simply responded "Do I like it? Is it good for me? Is it going to give me a good experience?" It would be a very sad world.

GD: Very small.

JB: A tiny view of reality that would be, wouldn't it? Depressing.

GD: Most Christians I know recognize God in nature. Sometimes you can see God in the waves and in the clouds, in the stars and things like that. There's that recognition – there's got to be some connection there even if it's not directly connected to Jesus Christ. What about the arts? I find a couple of different things. For a small group, the arts is in some ways more spiritual, most spiritual and out of that, probably music is the most spiritual. Others are saying, on the other track, arts are like icing on the cake. It's just extra. It's embellishment. It's fun, but it's not essential. You can take it or leave it. I may like it, but there's not that much missing if it's missing. I find two streams dividing in that way. What would you say about that and how to address that?

JB: If I understand you on the kind of spiritual, are you talking about a view where the arts are kind of inflated in their significance?

GD: I think so. They would say pure spirituality is esthetic and sometimes non-cognitive, non-rational.

JB: In the nineteenth century, this was the Romantics' view of music. In the high Romantics and particularly German Romantics, music offers the supreme experience of the infinite. That's what they want to say. If you want to get high on the infinite and the infinite aesthetic experience, music is where you go. Along with that, they said the fact that it seems distant from language or that it can't assert things like "this is a table," this is a settee, or whatever, is an advantage. It can be free from the particularity of words and take you into the (well, there are various versions) infinite movement of the divine spirit or something like that. That is one extreme.

The modern versions of that pop in at all sorts of places. Often, people come up to me after talks and say, "I listened to this or that music and it was a spiritual experience. It was incredibly powerful." What they often mean is it was a very strong emotional experience, which is fine. We need to be very careful in aligning that with the Holy Spirit of God and the Spirit of Jesus Christ as if we could divorce spirit from that entire theological nexus. I usually try to retranslate that language and say, "God is indeed giving you an experience of wholeness by his Spirit insofar as that prefigures the new creation and the final re-creation of all things. Hallelujah. But you might just be enjoying yourself and nothing else, so be careful."

Another thing we have to be careful of is running into ... This is the Romantics thing again, running into the arts for an extreme experience in order to get away from words. If I'm asked to speak at a church on a Sunday morning, they often say, "Will you need a piano and demonstrate lots of music?" I said "No. I just need a music stand or a pulpit or whatever you put your notes on." Christianity is irreducibly verbal at its core. That doesn't mean it's exclusively verbal, but at the heart of it is a message that has to be spoken. I think we should be unapologetic about that. That's not because of some kind of Protestant obsession with words. It's because God has become a human being who has spoken. Words have been validated, sanctified, confirmed as vehicles for his self-communication.

There never comes a time, it seems, that a Christian absolves him- or herself from responsibility to words, supremely that means the words of Christ and the words of Scripture. But I want to say at the same time, God has also given us nonverbal media to access the realities of which those words speak. He's given us J.S. Bach to access the glorious redemptive truth of the crucifixion of Jesus in the Matthew Passion. He's given us Bach's musical genius to do that. What's happening there is we're not running away from words or running away from Scripture. We're saying God has given us different ways of accessing those realities and sometimes in ways that can't

be spoken.

GD: So they're complementary.

JB: Precisely.

GD: And not in competition.

JB: There's never been competition. There's some kind of aestheticism around. There are evangelicals (I say this in all kindness. I count myself as an evangelical. There's no problem with that...) who have been hammered with a certain kind of word-obsessed theology. Then they run away into the arts and hold hands and look at pictures and sing songs and say, "Forget all that wordy stuff." I think that's a big mistake. I can understand why it was done, but I think it's a big mistake. It's why I'm not ashamed to use words, but basically I'm a systematic theologian in the midst of the arts. Do you see what I'm trying to get at?

GD: I think it makes a lot of sense.

JB: That was the spirit thing. The other was "they're mere frills." To that I say, "Why then is it that every society has music of one sort or another?" When people say that, I say, "You go to church?" Right. "You sing?" Yes. "Suppose I said you'll never have any more music for the next ten years?" They respond, "Well, I don't know about that." Then I go to a piano and I demonstrate the difference between words sung to one tune and then to another tune, the dramatic difference in meaning. That's another thing I do.

Then if I'm being interviewed like an occasional like this, I might point to pictures on the walls, in their house perhaps. I say, "Do you think these are just frills? How much did that cost?" They say, "It was about \$500." I say, "Really? You spend \$500 on a frill?" In my own country, when Princess Diana got killed, what happened? Thousands of poems get written. Is it just a frill? When people lose a loved one, they will instinctively lament in some form, in musical form. Is that just a frill?

If we take art to include metaphorical expressions, it's hard to speak without some kind of metaphor, without something approaching poetry. The Bible is absolutely stuffed full of metaphorical expressions and artistic forms. We often treat the Bible as if God unfortunately gave us the wrong kind of book. If we could just translate it into five points all beginning with P or something, then we would make the meaning clear. That's not what he gave us. Are we going to respect the forms that God used? That's the kind of reply.

GD: Jeremy, thanks for being with us. You have talked about the powers of various arts, and music is one of them. I was wondering if you might demonstrate for us some of those powers that might apply to life in general and perhaps worship, things like that.

JB: We were talking earlier about knowing your medium, and for some people, there's a danger that they'll think that music, for instance, is a mere thrill. It has no theological power or substance to itself. If I hear that and I'm anywhere near a piano and I'm with Christians who worship, I often speak about this tune: "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," right? That's the well-known tune, and it's fairly upbeat and fun and easy-going. "What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear." There's not a great deal about sin and grief there, but there's plenty of cheerful joy.

If we set it to this [other] tune, everything changes, because this is heavy. It's dark. We're reminded that he is our friend, but he's the friend who's borne our grief, the griefs which we bear. March, that's the kind of plodding marching thing. It's different. The words are exactly the same, but they're now inflected, nuanced in all sorts of different ways through the music. Film composers know this, of course. It's just taken the church a little time to wake up to that, because then you can flip around these tunes and it makes a difference, as if the tunes were simply varnish on what we could see quite well otherwise. No, the varnish can change the way you look at that wood very dramatically.

I've taught theology for most of my adult life, I suppose. I've found over and over again that music has distinctive powers, to help us not only feel and sense things, but actually understand them, as well. One powerful way I think in which that's the case is when it comes to thinking in Trinitarian terms, which is very much an interest of your own. Part of the difficulty we've had in Christian theology and thinking about the Trinity is we will tend to rely very much on our eyes. The way we look at the world, things will occupy bounded locations, but they can't be in the same place at the same time and visible as different things. A patch of red on a canvas that a painter has put there and patch of yellow on the same space, you try to put those together, either the yellow hides the red or it could be the other way around, red hides yellow, or if the paint's wet, they merge into orange.

In the world that we see, you can't see two different things in the same space at the same time as different. In the world of sound, you can and do all the time. That note or any note that I play, that note fills the whole of your heard space. You don't say of what you hear, "Oh, it's there, but it's not there." There's no interval between anything. It's just there in the whole of your heard space. If I add another note, that second note fills the same space and yet, you hear it as distinct. Undeniably, two notes. In the world that we hear, things can be in and through each other. They can sound in and through each other. They can inter-penetrate. Now if we go to John's Gospel, and all

that language about the Son in the Father, the Father in the Son, I love that “in” language, what Richard Bauckham calls the “in-one-anotherness” of Father and Son. That is very hard to draw.

When I’m teaching, at that point, I would take a pen and give it to a student and say, “Would you like to draw that for me?” Of course, no one does. Not even those Bibles that have all those illustrations will try to demonstrate that visually. It’s very hard, but it’s very easy to hear, because what you’re hearing there is two sounds in and through each other. It can go further than that, because if this was a real piano, then there would be two strings here, and they would be setting each other off. One string will tend to resonate with another if they have what’s called a harmonic series in common. The more this resonates, the more that resonates. Now, between those two, you have Father and Son who love each other, who mutually establish each other, you might even say, in some Trinitarian theology.

Now we’re into the Trinity, and I’m sure you’ve got there already. This three-note chord is, in my own view, by far the most potent way of not only sensing but also beginning to comprehend intellectually all that “in-one-anotherness” language that pervades the New Testament. The trouble is, a lot of Trinitarian theology has over-relied on the eye, and therefore what can you see? You can see oneness, you can see three separates, or you can go kind of modalist. You can think there’s one in the middle but three on the outside. You can see how so many struggles of the church with the Trinity have been because they’ve over-relied on the eye.

If we begin to think sonically, that isn’t the case. Here we have a kind of sonic space and a mutually resonating space that opens up the Trinity in extraordinary ways. Then what happens is other notes around that will resonate with that and get caught up in it, and you can understand, therefore, participation in the Trinity through the Spirit as a form of attunement. We are tuned into God. You can think of sin as a matter of being out of tune with God, radically so, and unable to communicate, therefore.

What the world of sound has done for me is help rethink all that area, and also re-read the history of doctrine. I think there’s a lot of work to be done, but it’s a lovely thought that something as simple as a chord, something as simple as something you could strum on that guitar in the corner of your room that you’ve neglected, it’s just sitting there waiting. If you ever preach on Trinity Sunday, as you do in my denomination, I’m telling you, I think it’s a lot better to be using that kind of personic metaphor and embodiment, you might even say, not just a metaphor, than many of the visual illustrations we typically trot out and confuse people with. Also, with the Trinity, we tend to

present the Trinity as a problem to be solved. That way, it becomes a mathematical problem to be solved. The Trinity is not a problem to be solved — it's something to enjoy.

GD: That certainly opens up for us the connection between theology, the words of theology and the arts and music. Thanks so much. It's been a pleasure.

JB: Thank you very much indeed.

4. OUR PARTICIPATION WITH CHRIST

Our guest today is Douglas Campbell, Professor of New Testament at Duke Divinity School. Dr. Campbell is author of *The Deliverance of God* and *The Quest for Paul's Gospel*.



J. Michael Fezell: Thanks for being here.

Douglas Campbell: You're welcome.

JMF: I would like to talk about your book, *The Quest for Paul's Gospel*, or at least some of the concepts that are in it. But I'd like to start by talking about the cover (it's a unique cover), and if you could tell us about how that came about and what the meaning of some of these symbols are on it.

DC: Well, this is the secret to the book. You have to be nice about the cover because it was designed by my wife.

JMF: Very good.

DC: I think it was very funky. She's a very funky woman. Buried in the collage are codes about what I'm talking about in the book, so my students always pick it up and have a chuckle. At the top, there are two boxes and the arrow, A to B. Most people have a theory about how Paul gets you from Box A to Box B. Box B is where you want to go. But there are lots of different theories about how you set up Box A and Box B and how you get from one to the other. Some of these theories can get in the way of what Paul is often doing.

But the model that I like, that I really push for in this book, is sneaking through the middle here.

It uses these letters. You've got two Ps and then an M and an E going around the corner. What I'm getting at there is that, I think Paul's gospel is all about P for participation, and E is for eschatology, which is one of those wonderful words you should use at a cocktail party from time to time. Meaning, there's a sense in which God has brought to us a new reality, a perfected reality, which is superior to the one that we're occupying. In Christ, he's managed to organize things so we participate in it in Christ.

How does that work? I think Paul tells us about this in some detail, particularly in Romans 6, but also with insights from Romans 7 and Romans 5, a little bit going on in Romans 8, but Romans 6 is really where it happens. What seems to have happened in Paul's mind is: Christ has entered our situation, the human situation, which is good, but there's a sense in which we're oppressed, and disordered (and fractured even) by evil powers. The power of Sin (Paul effectively spells that with a capital S—the power of Death, capital D). These demonic forces have unfortunately taken up residence in the stuff that we're constituted out of (our flesh), so that we're transient, we're corruptible, we decay, we sin, and we die.

This is a very heavy burden for humanity to bear. What God has done to drag us back (because this is not God's intention for creation, for humanity, for any of us, he wants to pull us back into fellowship; this is something we've done to ourselves), he sends his Son into that situation to become part of it



and to assume it. As the [church] fathers said, “That which is not assumed is not healed.” So Christ takes on all of this mess when he becomes a human.

Then the crucial thing for Paul is that when Christ is executed, when he dies on the cross, that condition is terminated. I’m in the province of termination, and here we are. That places a massive full stop after all of this corruption, all of this dislocation, all of this disorder.

In order to get us through and transform us and heal us, God must provide a state beyond this. This is the eschatology, the eschaton, the things to do with the end. *Eschaton* is Greek for “end,” *ology* is just “words about stuff.” So we’re talking about the end, but the end has come right to us, now. So, Christ has taken everything that we are, has terminated it, and then has been resurrected again into this new state where he’s enthroned and sits on the right hand of the Father.

By doing that, because he is God, because he is also the creator, because he is also the new Adam, the second Adam, the one who starts off a new humanity, there’s a sense in which this is now true for every one of us, a reality for every one of us. But God doesn’t leave it at that. The Holy Spirit draws each one of us into this reality in a very powerful, palpable way.

So the second P is very important. The first P is important, that’s the participation in Christ, the second P is the Spirit—it stands for *pneumatology* [after *pneuma*, the Greek word for spirit]. Our participation in Christ is by way of the Spirit. As we’re drawn into what Christ has done, we’re drawn into this new transformation of what we are. And this [pointing at the cover] is a humanity in which the power of sin and death and corruption has been broken. It’s quite concrete. I want to say that this is Reality with a capital R. This is more real than anything else that you or I experience.

The sharp-witted among you will have noticed I’ve only covered three letters. I’ve done a P, a P, and an E. Why have I put an M in here at the risk of making the whole thing hopelessly complicated? Well, this reality, this new creation that we stand in the midst of, is not obvious on one level. Paul’s converts knew this. They sensed that when he talked about the new reality, sin being broken, the power of death being broken, they couldn’t see it. Paul said to them, “If you’re part of Christ’s story, you are guaranteed the fullness of this reality. But you must be part of the front end of the story.”

How do we know we’re part of the front end? It’s when we participate in Christ’s sufferings. So the M stands for the *martyrological* side of what Christ did when he obeyed the will of the Father, suffered, was obedient to the shame of the cross, and died. It’s the story of his faithfulness unto death. It’s the story that Philippians 2:5-11 talks about so much.

Paul is emphatic that as we experience some of the suffering in this life, at the same time we experience some of the faithfulness and the obedience, we experience some of the martyrological side of Christ, and we know from that, that we are bolted into this story, and we are at the front end of a story that ends in the termination of all that's bad, but a glorious resurrection of all that's good.

That sounds complex, but this is the heart of Paul's gospel. This is what powers him up, what excited him, what he thinks God has done in Christ. This is what leads him to travel all over the eastern Mediterranean to suffer, to struggle, to found little communities everywhere. This gives meaning to the Lord's Supper, this gives meaning to baptism. Baptism symbolizes beautifully and nets this idea of participating in Christ's death and then also being resurrected to new life. I find it all incredibly exciting and helpful.

JMF: Not only Paul, but we often find throughout the New Testament it's as though the letters begin with the assumption that the recipients are undergoing some kind of suffering, it can be persecution, oftentimes. Then he's moving from that into "but it has this great meaning for you."

DC: Very true.

JMF: How is that any different from what all of us experience? All you have to do is listen to the adults, if you're a kid, and they're talking about what hurts, and how the government is doing something to mess things up. There's always something going on that's painful, a tragedy, a crisis. We live from one crisis and tragedy to the next.

DC: There's a sense in which, apart from Christ, it's hard to give meaning to suffering. We can try, but part of the struggle of life is we suspect often, "Does my pain have value? Does it have worth? Does it mean anything?" I think what Paul is offering us here is an understanding of suffering that has a real core of meaning in it. It's not any old suffering.

I think we get this from one of Paul's rather neglected letters – 2 Corinthians articulates at great length what it means for him as a leader of the church to suffer. He talks about this suffering—he hasn't gone looking for it, it's found him. But this is a mark of his authenticity, and a very powerful one. I don't want us to run off and look for pain, but there's a sense in which if it does encounter us, it can mean something.

The other thing we get from 2 Corinthians is the suffering that Paul catalogs there is suffering in which he is reaching out with the gospel to those who do not know about it, and in a way are even hostile toward it. It's the suffering that's generated when you take the incarnation seriously and you act in an incarnational way. That's when you begin to follow the Spirit into situations and locations where you're uncomfortable, with people that you're

uncomfortable with, where God is calling you to go. When you have to push through these barriers and boundaries... (We love to surround ourselves with barriers and boundaries and keep out the people we're uncomfortable with, but God is ahead of us and is often pulling us through those to engage with those people.)

When you move through those barriers, get out of your comfort zone, get into cultures, get into languages and situations that you're not comfortable with, then you experience suffering. You experience incomprehension and rejection. To top it all off, you're arriving with this shocking gospel—a gospel that is a wonderful gospel of grace, but it's also a gospel that says to people, “You can do nothing to please God. God has done everything to help you. God has come the whole way to you.” That means, in effect, “All the things that you're offering me, you just have to put away for now.”

It's a message that in its very generosity can elicit conflict and hostility. Paul gives us a narrative in 2 Corinthians of the sort of suffering that is often associated with Christian ministry and Christian life. What he's trying to say is, “It's okay, this is going to happen, enjoy it if you can, rejoice in it, because this is an authentic mark of the reality of the Christian gospel.”

JMF: Where do you look for assurance of being in Christ if you're *not* experiencing that kind of suffering?

DC: That's a good point, and should allow me to clarify something that's important. I'm not advocating going and finding pain, but we often define it very strongly with reference to ourselves in an individual way. What Paul is talking about is an attitude of burden-bearing. The pain that Paul often talks about is, in part, the pain of other congregations and other people and other groups that he is shouldering and carrying—the pain that he is feeling. I would say that God is calling us to carry the burdens of people. This is where we're meant to be going.

The Spirit is often way ahead of us. I think of John 4—when Jesus brought out the disciples to look at the fields and said “a few more months until harvest, and I say look, the fields are white and ready for harvest now.” It's true. The world around us that's ripe for harvest is a world that is suffering and struggling. That's where we're called to be. There's a sense in which well, it doesn't have to be us.

I wonder if we don't need to be in contact with people who are, in a sense, struggling. There should be, perhaps, a story that we can tell sometimes of relationships that have been set up that we've followed the Spirit into where we're trying to help. And in helping, we are helped and enriched ourselves. Often when we come as people who are prepared to give, we are the ones who end up receiving.

JMF: Paul uses that kind of language in the opening to several of his letters where he talks about how one congregation's heart is going out to the suffering of another and that sort of thing.

DC: Yes, the language of sharing is all over his letters. It's because the reality that he's involved with is a participatory reality. We are bound up with one another, and so what happens to you affects me in a direct way. The sort of community that we're being birthed into by this process is a communion. It's the communion of God, the divine communion, and we've been called to be part of that, and so we're being called to be part of a community where every person is bound up with the reality and the life of every other person. We look at Christ, we look at the Father, we look at the Son, we look at the Spirit—they're all defined and inextricably intertwined.

When we're experiencing fullness of our personhood in Christ, what we experience is the reality that we're involved with one another. We're very relational. Personhood is all about these relationships. My relationship with my wife is a huge part of who I am. She is a huge part of my personhood. She's not the only person that's a part of my personhood, but she's a very important one. This is a central truth. So, in a sense, we need to be engaged with the people around us who are hurting, and hopefully they'll be engaged with us when we're hurting.

JMF: When we talk about the gospel and salvation, we are not talking about details of rules and laws to keep—we're talking relationships—restorational relationships, building right relationships, good relationships, being together, being in communion with God and with one another.

DC: Absolutely. That's the church. That's the reality of the church, which is a reality that's in God, and you don't legislate a reality like that. That's to make a big mistake. There's a freedom to these relationships that's very important, because we're in touch with the person who's making the rules, as it were.

It turns out that this person, God, is not making rules. God is just calling us into these relationships that have a certain shape, so there's a flexibility about it, there's a malleability, if you like, which is liberating. Once you start to try to legalize it and legislate it, you mess it up. In the end of the day, there's one legislator, and that's Jesus Christ. If we have any problems, we can go to him and ask him about stuff, which is nice—it's a good feeling to be operating in a situation like that.

JMF: Often we read Paul as though we have a relationship with the rules. When our relationship is mediated by the law, our focus is on "where are we falling short in terms of this rule or that rule" instead of thinking about it in terms of living out the relationship into which we've been called, the

relationship we've been given that we are a part of and participating in, whether negatively or positively.

DC: Yes. I think Paul was anything but a legalist, and you can see this when you lay his letters out alongside one another and look at their diversity and see the very different advice that's going to Philippi from the advice that's going to Corinth, even the advice in the second letter that goes to Corinth, the advice that goes to Colossae, the advice that goes to Rome—extremely diverse, which suggests to me that Paul is very context-sensitive. He's not laying down universal rules—he's speaking out of a universal reality, which is a very different thing. That reality is essentially personal. It's a community that involves people; it involves the divine community.

JMF: It's like he gets to the very different needs and conclusions by the same path.

DC: Exactly. Under the same Lordship, one might say.

JMF: A lot of similarity in Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians, and yet addressing different issues.

DC: Right. Paul is what we might call almost a command ethicist. He's worried about the thought that you lay down a rule, because he thinks while that can be a good thing for a while, as he points out in Romans 7, eventually you can make that rule and go to some situation where it will do some damage—you can exploit it. The demonic forces that are unleashed in the world that stand against us are much more sophisticated than we are, and they can manipulate these things and can break you down by putting them to work.

So Paul's approach is, he's no longer orienting himself primarily by written instructions or by rule after rule or even by propositions—he is orienting himself through Christ. He's listening to Christ, and Christ is telling him what to do. It's a living situation where he's getting instructions from the one who is controlling and organizing everything. He's getting his instructions from the Spirit and from the Father as well—it's not just Christ who's doing this. That's a very different mentality, isn't it? It's a much more intimate reality than we tend to live in ourselves.

JMF: An example of that might be in the way unity is often used with churches. Paul is talking about unity in the Spirit and in the faith, and we, instead of seeing that as being rooted in the relationship of love, we instead use it as a weapon as a church to compel...

DC: Right. Legislate.

JMF: We legislate a lock-step approach to something and *call* that unity as though it's unity, but it it's far from anything resembling communion.

DC: Right. What Paul is talking about is, the church *is* actually unified, because it is in Christ, and Christ is unified, and he holds everything together.

It's a failure by people to recognize a unity that Christ has established. We don't have to go out and work at establishing this.

JMF: To create it.

DC: We can respond to something that's already there.

JMF: To live in the reality of what is already true.

DC: Exactly.

JMF: Which means I need to change, as opposed to making everyone else agree with me.

DC: Right.

JMF: Robert Capon calls it left-handed authority as opposed to right-handed authority.

You've mentioned that Paul illustrates some of his theological positions in his ministry in what he wrote about the slave Onesimus and also Lydia in Philippi. How do you see those playing out in...

DC: If I'm right about Paul's gospel and what was making it tick, you've probably detected by now that God comes down so far to us, and we're all so deeply involved in the situation that's wrong, and we're accountable for that wrongness on a certain level, that it levels out all the distinctions that we like to introduce to stratify our relationships. The gospel of grace knocks down status and pretensions. When Paul talks about the new reality that we live in, he does so quite clearly from time to time, that these old barriers have been broken down and transcended, so that there is no Jew or Greek, there is no slave or free, there is no male and female, that you're all children of God in Christ Jesus. That's his most famous saying about those things, in Galatians 3:28.

We're fond of saying that from the pulpit and even our Bible studies, but it's another thing to actually enact the erasure of these status differentials on the ground and to push past them—that's hard work. So the question arises—was Paul himself somebody who was actually committed to doing that, or was he a bit of a theorist? Was this something he was happy talking about, or was it something he actually did?

I was enormously impressed when I pushed into his letter that he wrote to Philemon and reconstructed that situation there and realized that he was really practicing what he preached and the situation in that little letter.

Paul has written to a guy called Philemon, who's married to a woman called Apphia. Apphia is a Phrygian name, and I think Philemon was probably accompanying [the letter to the] Colossians, so it's going to an ancient territory in present-day western Turkey—it would have been ancient Phrygia. It looks as though Philemon and Apphia are a Phrygian couple, which make them members of an ancient civilized barbarian race.

Paul is writing on behalf of a guy called Onesimus. Onesimus is not his name, it's a slave name, a Latin name, just means "useful." It's like as we would call "Handy Andy." Slaves were so depersonalized in the ancient world that they weren't allowed to use their own names, but were just called things like Number 1, Number 2, Number 3, or they were called after places where they were born, or they were called pet names. Onesimus is a slave, this is his slave name.

When we read the letter to the Colossians, that's also going to the same situation, I think, we read a similar statement to Galatians 3:28 in Colossians 3:11, but it's oriented slightly differently. Paul says there's no Jew or Greek, circumcised, uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, or free. Barbarian, Scythian, slave, or free. What's a Scythian doing in Colossians 3:11? What is a Scythian? A Scythian is a barbarian that rides around the Russian steppes. It was a name that was applied to people who were enslaved from the northern part of the Black Sea. Everyone who was enslaved out there was called a Scythian—you often got a higher price for them if you called them a Scythian. These slaves were brought down into the Mediterranean, and they were mainly sold at Ephesus, one of the great slave markets of the ancient world.

It's likely that Onesimus or his parents is some poor white guy who's been enslaved by pirates from the north shore of the Black Sea. He's come down, he's been sold at Ephesus, and now he's working for this Phrygian couple, and there's a problem in this household, there's great unhappiness, there's a fractured relationship.

Paul has run into Onesimus in jail, and Onesimus has come to him and said, "Please help me out here. Something is wrong in this household." This was something you could do in the ancient world—it wasn't quite as bad as running away. If you ran away and you were caught, you were branded, you could be executed, terrible things would happen to you. But you could run to a friend of the family and say, "I'm in deep trouble here, please help me out."

So Onesimus comes to Paul, and as we reconstruct the relationship, this is what happened. It doesn't look like he was a Christian when he arrived. He's a pagan boy that's unhappy. He is the lowest of the low. He's an unhappy slave, branded as lazy, he's a white slave from a far-off barbarian land. In terms of social status in the ancient world, he's as low as you go.

Paul practically falls in love with him. He says, "This boy is my heart now, he has become my heart to me while I'm in chains." He sends him back to his master, Philemon, with this letter, but also having converted him. He sends back a cover letter saying to the leader of the congregation, "Look, take

care of this situation, look out for him.”

Then he says, “Charge any money to my account, I’m coming to visit soon.” What I see in there is that Paul has reached out to this, this probably teenager, and has grasped him, drawn him to the reality of Christ, given him that gift, and set up a relationship that seems deep and committed and genuine between a high-status religious figure and this very low-status marginal guy who’s been causing trouble, this person from the bottom rung of society.

So I thought to myself, well, it looks to me as though Paul’s really delivering on this from time to time. It’s quite a challenge to us and for us as well.

5. SIN AND ITS SERIOUSNESS

JMF: In your book, *The Deliverance of God*, you focus a great deal on Romans 5-8 and the very positive, powerful assurance of salvation that is present in those passages. The question that seems to arise when we talk about the power, the strength, and the assurance of grace, which is most assuredly present, are all these nagging questions about the “but”s — the “but”s syndrome — “when it comes to grace, but...” What are some of those, and how do we work with those?

DC: A lot of people resist a gospel of grace for three reasons. They’re worried about judgment, they’re worried about ethics, and they’re worried about sin. They see those things as connected together. What one runs into here is the inability to step outside of an essentially conditional mentality where people think, “If I can’t threaten you with something, with a negative future state, how can I get you to behave well?”

JMF: Exactly.

DC: So [if I stress grace] I’ll be soft on sin, I won’t be doing my ethical job, and I’ll let judgment go, and all these things are held together. While this is the model that is pursued with the best of intentions, I think it’s wrong on all accounts: as an account of judgment, an account of ethics, an account of sin, and about how people behave. Most importantly, it’s wrong about God.

The gospel wants to do things very differently. Perhaps if we talk about that for a little bit, we can come back and see where the fallacies lie in these sorts of protests. The gospel of grace addresses ethics and sin in a radical way. It says to you immediately, you are so sinful that you can contribute nothing to this process. That’s a very strong judgment on your sinfulness and what needs to change, and people sense this. The flipside of the gospel of grace is this very stern word of judgment.

You say to me, “How do I behave, once this gospel of grace arrives? Does it just let me do whatever I want?” “Absolutely not!” (to quote Paul, who says that a lot, especially about this question). You’ve involved in a transformed reality now; you have to cooperate with it as much as you can. You need to throw yourself into this new reality, and it asks that of you. It asks you to respond, at least in the relationships that you’re in. It will take every ounce of willpower and effort that you have, and more, to continue to respond to the Spirit and the presence of Christ in your life.

This is what true freedom is. As we respond in these relationships, we discover what liberty is, what it means to be set free from sin, and the tyranny of death, corruption, and sin, and to be free to live for God as God wants us to live. That’s true freedom, but it’s freedom that you have to be involved with. It’s real freedom. *You* are doing this. But you’re not choosing to step

away from him or choosing not to be involved with him. It's a relationship that's given to you that you then need to respond to. It's the freedom of response and the response of freedom.

This is something that's hard for us to grasp because it's a very non-modern, non-Western way of understanding freedom, but if I can put it like this, it's rather like when a beautiful chord is played on a piano. Certain notes that are in harmonic resonance with this chord will resonate with it, and it's as if God is playing this chord, and we are free to resonate with what God is doing in our lives and to fit into this magnificent orchestration. If God is not playing this chord, we're not free, nothing happens, we're inert. But when that chord is played and when we are struck, when that note is struck, we resonate. That is the freedom of God. We can push back on that and refuse to resonate. We can reject the freedom that God gives us. We can reject the gift that comes to us. But that's not free, that's not a choice. The Bible calls it sin, and it's an irrational decision for slavery. I wouldn't grace that whole operation with the word freedom.

When the gospel of grace comes to us, it reshapes our understanding of what true human freedom is. As our minds are reshaped and our responses are reshaped, I think we live as we're meant to live, and we see more clearly why these other ways of approaching ethics and judgment and sin are wrong. You can probably see by now where I'm going with this in terms of having someone protest against the gospel of grace and says it's soft on sin, I don't know whether to laugh or cry. Because when I'm looking at grace, I'm seeing something that treats sin with incredible seriousness. When I'm in this relationship of grace, and I know that God accepts me in Christ, I'm then free to see myself as I really am. I'm free to see the depth of the sin in my life because I'm secure.

JMF: Without fear.

DC: Exactly. I know that I cannot fall out of his loving embrace, and so I can be honest in a way that I cannot be honest in any other situation or system.

JMF: There's a huge freedom in that. All the burdens are lifted. There are no more pretenses.

DC: The burdens are lifted, but the reality is sometimes slightly horrible, because you begin to go on a journey when you get exposed to depths of sin that you hadn't even suspected were there. So a confessional quality becomes part of your discipleship — it becomes part of Christian leadership, where the deeper we go with God, the more sense, unfortunately, we have with our own struggle with sin...the more we appreciate the enormous accomplishment of Christ on our behalf, who shared this horrendous situation and didn't slip into that. It produces a more honest church culture;

I hope it produces a slightly more honest culture of discipleship.

There are some lessons about sinfulness that I didn't even smell a whiff of until I had been a Christian probably 15 or 20 years, then all of a sudden, bam, you're confronted by something that you do, that's a pattern of behavior, that it's been in your life from the get-go, and suddenly God is asking you to address that — an issue like violence. You can't even see how deeply immersed you are in violence until one day the Holy Spirit puts you in an incident, puts his finger on it, and says okay, it's time for you to address this now. That is an utterly painful experience, but it's the sort of repentance that needs to happen in Christian lives. It's taking sin incredibly seriously in an ongoing way.

If you're pushing the other kind of model, the one that I'm not so happy with, the more conditional contractual model, you're protesting against my emphasis on grace and you're saying well, what about sin? Aren't you soft on sin? I'm saying no, *you're* soft on sin. If you're approaching the gospel as if sin is something that you learn about and confess before you become a Christian, I think you're treating sin in a trivial way. You're approaching sin as if you can understand it without God revealing this stuff to you in an ongoing way—as if you could understand sin without being confronted by the reality of Christ. You're treating sin as if it's something you and your sinful situation can deal with yourself so that you can become a Christian.

That trivializes sin. The assumption seems to be that through your good actions, you've left it at the door of the church when you walked in and became a Christian. You *didn't* leave it at the door of the church — it walked into church with you — unfortunately it comes back to grab you time after time. So I have a deep worry that this fairly conditional contractual approach to the gospel doesn't treat sin with sufficient seriousness. I find that ironic when I get accused by advocates of that gospel, of being too soft on sin.

I also think that they're soft on ethics. There's this belief that human beings have it in them to generate a certain amount of good behavior in order to become a Christian, before they become a Christian. Once you're a Christian you keep on with the good work. But this is deluded about the depth of sin and the human condition. We cannot generate good behavior and good deeds until God has come down and transformed us and changed us. This is a wildly over-optimistic evaluation of human ability and capacity. These are things that I've learned from standing in the tradition of grace, standing in the reality of grace.

JMF: Isn't there also the idea of being forgiven, to have your past sins removed, and then the concept... now the Spirit will come and help you maintain some level of righteousness, rather than the model you're talking about.

DC: The false model has this sort of funny two-step pattern where you get sins wiped away and then you step into the church by doing certain things. For example, making a decision of faith...supposedly makes you a Christian. Then the Holy Spirit arrives like the seventh cavalry to help you out when you get into a difficult situation. There's something a little odd about that.

What really seems to be going on is the Spirit is involved from well *before* your involvement. Now, from the foundation of the world, the Spirit with Christ has been working toward your and my inclusion in all of this. The Spirit has been working on your journey often when you're not aware of it, leading you to an understanding of Christ, of the church, of God, of sin. They are all involved together. This is so much more than forgiveness of sins. It is forgiveness of sins, but it's release *from* sin.

There's a little word play that Paul does on the genitive connection [in the Greek grammar]...and you can talk about forgiveness of sins or forgiveness of transgressions, in which the transgressions are the object of the forgiveness. I'm going to forgive those sins over there. But there's also with the same word a sense of *release* from sins, which becomes release from sin in Paul's genitive of separation — we're getting released out of or away from the sin. This is talking about actually changing us — not wiping away acts, but changing the way we function so we don't act in that way.

JMF: This transformation has to do with being in Christ in a way that he is our life, he is our righteousness.

DC: Absolutely. There's a danger that when God comes to us in grace, we then think "okay, so much has been done for me, now it's over to me to respond" — possibly I've been overemphasizing that. There's a sense in which grace from God doesn't just come all the way to us—it takes us back as well in Christ. Christ is the one who has walked in the way that we couldn't walk. It's as if we're in a massive snowdrift, helpless, bound there, but Christ is the one who has smashed the furrow through the snow — we walk behind him, he pulls us, he carries us behind him through the snow. God hasn't just come all the way down to us, he's also hauling us and Christ all the way back to him. All of our acting and responding, in a way, is an echoing of Jesus' perfect response for us.

We see this again in Romans 8, where Paul talks about prayer, for example. We struggle, we don't know what to pray. But then we realize the Spirit is praying in a deeper way than we can pray. Christ is praying for us as well. Christ is continually offering prayer to the Father, the Spirit is offering prayer to the Father (knowing much more about the situation than we do), and we're entering into that prayer that is being undertaken on our behalf. It is a gift that comes all the way down and comes all the way back. It's a marvelous thing. We could never dream this up. This is not something that a

clever person has thought up. This is an act of God.

JMF: So we're participating in the prayers of Christ and don't have to worry about whether our prayers are good enough.

DC: We don't have to be anxious—we just have to respond to this divine community as doing things on our behalf. All our activity is like that — we're caught up into worship in Christ, we're caught up into the behavior of Christ by the Spirit of Christ. We're caught up in the understanding of Christ, the mind of Christ. The faithfulness of Christ is something we're caught up in as well. We don't have to generate this ourselves—God is giving this to us. It's a gift that's so much bigger than we realize, and yet Paul knew this. He wrote in Ephesians, "I'm going to pray that you would have power to grasp with all saints the height and the depth and the breadth and the width of the love of Christ which is past all understanding." He understood that you could fall forever into the love of Christ. That's a pretty powerful expanse of benevolence, is it not?

JMF: Yeah. So our faith that we have at the time of believing should not be thought of as a work that causes God to change his mind, causes God to look at us in a new way.

DC: No, not at all.

JMF: It isn't the beginning point of our salvation.

DC: I don't think so.

JMF: Or even our transformation.

DC: This is where we can get Paul wrong, by turning faith into a deed or a work that accesses the benefits of Christ. It's like our Visa card — we trot off to the ATM with it and get money out of the account. Without the card, you don't get any of the good stuff. No. This is a misunderstanding of Paul. For Paul, our faith is something that Christ has as well as us. In us, it's a fruit of the Spirit. It's very important, but it's a sign that we are in Christ in our responding to the Father as Christ himself did.

In a way, faith has many dimensions. It's correct understanding of what's going on, which is important. One of the most important elements is that we understand what sort of God we're involved with — the God of love. It involves unwavering trust, it involves fidelity through suffering. When struggles come, we can be faithful. These are all signs that the Spirit is bearing fruit in our lives and that we're echoing the character of Christ.

Here I am using this reading of a couple of phrases in Paul that the King James Version got right when it translated them as "the faith of Christ." Modern translations can seem to emphasize our decision, making the role for faith, unfortunately, changed or reinterpreted, so they became "faith in Christ." Recently scholars have begun turning back to "the faith of Christ." Some have begun realizing that this makes better sense of the texts where

these phrases occur. I'm persuaded by that; I think they're right.

JMF: The fact that it's the fruit of the Spirit...often we'll hear a sermon or a Bible study or group, and fruit of the Spirit will be listed or read from Galatians and then the admonishment is to start living like this because, after all, this is the fruit of the Spirit, so you need to get more of this in your life. Isn't that kind of turning around the whole...

DC: That's missing the point (laughing). It's not that we're not involved. God wants a response from us, and we are fully involved in this. But we don't have to generate this out of our own resources. We're not thrown back on ourselves. We don't have to strive to produce these sorts of things as proof that we're involved in the reality of Christ. We can chill out to a large extent, and attend to the glories of the gospel, respond to it as best we can, and Christ and the Spirit will do this work through us. There is restfulness and a sense of relaxation about people who are grasped by this truth. Paul would say people grasp this truth because they're grasped by this truth. This is the hallmark of people who are walking in grace.

JMF: Going back to the title of the book, *Deliverance of God...* The subhead is, *An Apocalyptic Re-Reading of Justification in Paul*. Why is it an apocalyptic re-reading of justification in Paul?

DC: What I'm getting at there is that there's a bad way of reading Paul, a way that I don't approve of and that gets him wrong. That reading of Paul produces a false model of the gospel, and it springs out of what we could call "Paul's justification texts." These are passages where he uses justification words, which in the Greek are using the *dikaio* name. We could call them as *dikaio* texts.

In those texts, Paul is doing something interesting with faith and works — works of law over here, faith over there, someone's been justified or *dikaio*(ed) and is also the righteousness of God running around. Those are the texts out of which a very conditional contractual understanding of the gospel has been generated, particularly since the second and third generations after the Reformation. I think that is where the damage was done. I don't think the main Reformers got this wrong. There was a little bit of it going on, but Calvin, Luther, I don't get the sense when I read them. But later on, second, third generation — certain theological systems were developed in a very conditional, contractual way, and these are the ones that did the damage.

To understand Paul properly, I think we need to eliminate this false dogmatic way of reading Paul. The way we eliminate it from the justification texts is, we grasp they're all about revelation, particularly when Paul's talking about faith. That's what I mean by *apocalyptic*. Apocalyptic is just a fancy word for revelation, the Greek word for revelation. *Apocalypsis* is Greek, *revelare* is the verb in Latin. So what I'm getting at is, there's nothing conditional or

contractual going on in these justification texts. Paul is talking about the disclosure of the good purposes of God through the faithfulness of Christ, which elicits from us a response and an echo of faith as we are involved in him. This is what Paul is talking about in these texts.

We've tended to miss that because we've taken away the faith of Christ and we've taken that faith and made it into an action that *we* undertake. We've made these texts about human beings and about conditions that we can fulfill. But I don't think that's what Paul was writing. When he says *dikaiosyne theou*, the righteousness of God (or even better, the deliverance of God) has been revealed through *pistis Christou*, he's talking about the faith of Christ. It's Jesus' faithfulness to death on the cross and his resurrection where we see God's definitive righteous purpose revealed.

When we miss that, we misunderstand and misconstrue all of Paul's teaching about salvation. It's a great tragedy that's gripped a lot of the conservative church... We're used to saying that the liberal church has messed things up because they dumped the Bible and wandered off. But the conservative church tooth and nail will defend this as the true gospel...and it's a great tragedy for the church, because what was going on in Paul was the antithesis of this "gospel." It's time for us to recover that.

JMF: It seems like the Christian walk is a lot more fun and enjoyable than it's often made out to be by those who seem to take it seriously...in the sense of being very sober and uptight, unable to enjoy themselves, unable to have fun with other people. It's not fun, it's a burden as opposed to a joy, because it's laced with fear.

DC: I think so. What can be joyful about being flung back on your own resources and asked to satisfy...

JMF: Especially when you have none, so you have to pretend you have some, which leads to judgmentalism and to condemnation and to everything that divides people instead of bringing them together.

DC: And hanging over your head is this fearsome scenario of what's going to happen at the end of the age, and you're worried, you don't have any sense of assurance.

JMF: In the gospel, there is no fear of the judgment.

DC: Love drives out fear. I don't believe that God wants us to be afraid for a millisecond of anything, except perhaps our own stupidity.

JMF: There's a solution for that: by trusting, over against our stupidity.

DC: That's right — trusting what God tells us about ourselves instead of what we perhaps want to believe about ourselves.

JMF: That would take another full interview alone.

DC: Exactly.

JMF: What do you do for recreation, for hobbies?

DC: I have fun. I follow the suggestions of my wife, who is an expert at having fun, and we have cats and dogs, we run, we do Pilates and yoga, we go to the beach, we travel. I spend time with the kids, watch a lot of films, read. We have a terrific life. I feel positively guilty about the amount of enjoyment that I get out of life. But you can't have fun in your spare time if you're not having fun at work, often.

JMF: What's your next project? What project are you involved in that we'll eventually see?

DC: People are asking me to write a shorter version of *Deliverance of God*, and I'm hearing those cries, so I think I will. I don't know that I always explain myself as well as I would like to. The feedback is coming in on the big book. Folk are not grasping the theological issues with as much clarity as I had hoped. So I need to spell those out a little more clearly. I think I'm getting a hold of them more clearly as I talk in situations like this. So a shorter book that shows how to read Romans the right way I think is what I'm going to work on in the next few months.

After that I have a very long-running project on the life of Paul, because I've always been passionately interested in how he worked as missionary — where he was, what he was visiting, what ships he sailed on...in a concrete gritty way. I've visited most of these cities, so I wanted to write a book about that and then collapse. And I should come to you for another suggestion.

6. IN CHRIST — CONVERSION AND CALLING

Paul's method of preaching the gospel

Michael Morrison: You've spent a lot of your scholarly time on Paul. You've got a couple of big books here about Paul. You said in one of our earlier interviews that you are interested in the life of Paul. I thought maybe you could talk a little about that. I'm somewhat familiar with the conversion of Paul from the book of Acts. But how does Paul himself describe his conversion?

DC: We're a little too familiar with his conversion from the book of Acts. We don't pay enough attention to how *he* tells us he got converted. He never uses the language of conversion when he is describing what happened to him; he uses the language of *call*. He echoes the call narratives of Jeremiah and Isaiah strongly to emphasize that God encountered him in a direct and dramatic way. What took place was a *revelation*.

So on one level, what happened to him is extremely important for us to understand, which is that a meeting with God took place that God initiated, very unexpected. On another level, it's a little dangerous to make Paul's "conversion" the paradigm for our conversion, because he had something very special happen to him. He was called to be an apostle. I'm not sure that all of us are called to be an apostle. Some of us, maybe.

MM: I've never been struck down in the way that Paul was. But does his story have any exemplary value for the conversions that we have?

DC: I think it does. But we also need to look harder at what he was doing, how he was converting people. We find there's a network of friendships and relationships that's spreading. He's utilizing networks, sometimes in unexpected ways. People are converting in the context of relationships that they already have.

For example, he often tries to hook up with family networks or Jewish networks where he's visiting. When those don't work, he goes and takes employment as a hand worker, and he begins to make friends with the people in the workshop. This is roughly how he met Lydia. Lydia was involved in handworking and textiles. She's somebody who's networking with women. He's not just staying in the networks with men.

He's probably also working veteran networks when he can as well. Remember, there's a veteran at Philippi. There's another veteran probably at Colossae. These are colonies of soldiers who have retired from the Roman Army, they've done their 25 years of service, and they kept in touch with one

another, and they probably were working in textiles.

We see Paul doing something typical of a new religion, which is sort of playing hopscotch from network to network and exploiting those networks and those relationships and people who know him and are friends of his, become friends of his, who are friends of friends, they're converting and forming the basis of his new communities.

MM: So could he go into a city and start a church in three weeks, for example? Is that...

DC: Well, this is a bit of an exaggeration. In the ancient world, if you went into a city cold and you didn't know anybody, you would die. They didn't know you, you had no food, you had no water, if you fell ill you dropped on the street, you had nowhere to stay. You had to have contacts. These are hostile missionary environments. They don't like strangers coming in and telling them that the way that they've been doing things for hundreds of years is wrong. You need to know somebody who's there already.

Once you've linked up with them, stayed with them for a bit, you need to try and hook onto the sorts of networks and friendships that that person has. This is what we see him doing. In each city around the Mediterranean, he knows somebody who knows somebody, and he goes and stays with them and then links up with somebody else. It's all about who you know.

MM: What kind of a message would he preach in that situation? How would he introduce them to Jesus?

DC: This undermines our slightly stereotypical notion of Paul arriving and preaching one dramatic proclamatory message that people then respond to with some sort of decision, the altar call takes place on the corner of the streets of Corinth and the Corinthians all come forward. This is not how it worked.

When you're working with somebody – say you're a handworker and you're working on leather or you're working on sandals or stitching canvas awnings or something like that – you don't preach at them all day. You chat with them. You get to know them. You're probably listening to them as much as you're talking at them. A conversation takes place over many days and weeks and months, and then you turn around after that process, and lo and behold, these people believe what you're saying. You're telling the story about how the Spirit who once created everything is also gathering us up into this person. It's language they can understand, but it's also language that challenges them.

It will make more sense if you've heard Jews speaking, probably, if you've hung around the local synagogue, which you could do, if you've heard these

types of stories about the God of Israel before. That's going to help you. But Paul is happy to communicate even if you've never heard of that material. He can translate his good news into your idioms and your thought forms. He can talk about adoption or benefaction, grace. These are things that every Greek and Roman would know about. They would know about having a patron, they would know about being gifted things, they would know about being adopted into someone's family, they would know about being immersed as a ritual of entry.

This is Paul communicating also in the language of the street, in a way that makes sense. He's a very good missionary. He knows what he's doing. He's contextualizing.

MM: You mentioned immersion. At what point would Paul baptize these people? Did he realize that they had crossed over from one religious belief to another?

DC: I think so. Sometimes there's a dramatic moment when you can point your finger at something and say, an event has taken place here, and we need to acknowledge that Jesus is Lord, and you would get baptized along with all your household. Other times I suspect that the process was gradual. But at some point it's appropriate for you to get baptized to signify the reality that you're now standing in. This would be one of the things that took place.

You would attend the communal meals where the Christians gathered. These are meals taking place every day, and these are *meals*. A lot of people in ancient times were hungry, maybe two-thirds of the population was hungry, one-third of the population was very hungry — they lived from hand to mouth. So you went to Christian meals, you went to Christian celebrations of the sacraments partly because they were offering you food.

But in the middle of the food was the breaking of the bread and the passing around of the cup. You're participating in this. As Wesley would say, probably the cup and the bread are functioning like converting ordinances at that time — they're making the reality of Christ present to you. The cup is going around and the bread is being broken and eaten, and people are saying, "We're all part of this, this is all one with us, and we're one with someone who died, but also who is alive now and who is present with us now in a real way."

I assume that, like most Greek meals, you had the food first and you had the entertainment afterward. The singing would begin, the Christian singing, people maybe would have brought along a song (which was extremely democratic), and the worship would begin, and you would get a sense, "Goodness me, we're in the presence of the living God here."

MM: People found themselves in a community.

DC: Exactly. A worshiping community. They were gathered up into its worship. In this way probably many were powerfully affected. This is pretty exciting stuff for an ancient Greek — especially if you're a woman. You didn't have access to this type of stuff ordinarily. But these Christians were kind of strangely democratic. If you're a woman you could come along, you could bring a song, you could prophesy, you could pray, you could participate, as long as you didn't humiliate your husband in public (which is still probably a good rule of thumb) ...this is how these meetings operated. They were very vital and participatory.

MM: Is it just a *story* that Paul is telling, or is there something there that he's also exhorting them to make a decision? How do you go about growing this community or solidifying it?

DC: It's not *just* a story — it's a story about a reality that you're a part of, and that reality has certain claims on you, if you like, has a certain shape. It has a certain set of relationships built into it that you have to respond to. Paul is expecting a response. He has high expectations of his converts. He's got high expectations of their behavior. There's a strong emphasis on ethics, in particular what we might call the ethics of relationships.

This is where Paul is innovating — where the Spirit of God is doing something exciting, but also slightly intimidating — in the sense that if you're a Jew, you would be expecting to do a lot of your responding to God in the temple at Jerusalem, in a particular place, in a particular building, in a certain state of purity. You'd be expecting to do a lot of your responding to God in accordance with strict calendrical observances and diet. Paul's view is: that stuff is now purely negotiable. If you're a Jew you should still do it, unless you're called to engage with another constituency.

But the pagans that he's calling in his communities off the street...what he's challenging them with is the inter-relational stuff that we see so much of in the Bible. How do I relate to you? Am I bitter toward you? Angry, hostile, backbiting, slanderous, am I in a status game with you? All that stuff has to stop. How do I speak to you? How do I talk with you? Am I charitable? Am I humble? These sorts of things. This is what Paul is pushing his people to do. (Pushing is the wrong expression.) He's talking about something that's *drawing* them into this in a new way.

MM: So the motivation for the behavior is different than ...

DC: Very much so.

MM: He's offering them a gift of salvation, but once they're already saved, then what's the motive for them to do what is right?

DC: He's offering them participation in a new reality. When you're in that new reality, you've been set free from a whole lot of stuff that is dragging you

down, fracturing you and breaking you and harming you. You see more clearly what the good things are in life that God wants you to do. Basically you're an idiot if you don't want to do that.

MM: So he's painting a new reality.

DC: He's not painting it in the way that we would *limit* things to that. You're right, he is depicting something that's really here. He's witnessing, in a way, to a reality, so his stories and his depictions are helping Christians understand what's going on.

It's exciting. This is why he calls himself an apostle. He's a diplomat who's announcing the good news of what God is doing — and what God is doing is really what matters. That's what's central, and that's what's real, and that's why if you're a Christian you're characterized in part by belief, which is, you understand what's going on. You're the one that's walking around with your eyes open. You're the one that's in the daylight. Other people are stumbling around in the dark with their eyes closed. You're the one that really knows what reality is all about.

That's an exciting summons. He's stitching away in his leatherworks, stitching the soles of his sandals, and he's talking about this stuff to these other impoverished stone workers around, and they're getting interested in it. They're going, "Sounds like a good deal."

MM: Once he builds this community, then he leaves. What are they going to think of that? Or, how long would he be staying in a city?

DC: It looks as though he stayed for about a year and a half, roughly, depending on how things went. Then he shot off, which strikes us as shocking. But he did keep in touch with everybody. We've got all these letters, because even after he left, he was still networking with these communities. When you see the thought and the effort that has gone into these texts, you realize how much they're still on his mind.

If they get into trouble, he's on a boat straight away and shooting back to visit them. But he's a missionary, so he's church planting. His plan is to put these communities in place and then move on in the hope and expectation that they will flourish, and also begin to do the same around them. That's probably the plan.

MM: As I understand it, letter writing wasn't that easy in antiquity, and yet he invested quite a bit of, I don't know, maybe financial resources to be able to do this. As you say, he's keeping that relationship.

DC: It is a big investment. It's an investment of time, too.

MM: But he also wrote to some places that he had not been before.

DC: A couple of times, yeah. Paul believes, as I said at the start, that God has revealed himself to him and revealed Christ to him, and he also believes that God has revealed Christ to him in a way that has special significance for

people converting out of paganism, not for other Jews. So, when pagans are converting around the place, even when they haven't converted through his direct ministry, he feels protective about them. And thankfully he writes a letter occasionally to sort them out.

So we have, I think, Ephesians written for this reason. There's a little group of converts, they've converted, they're not Jews, and Paul's view was you didn't have to become a Jew to engage with this new reality, because the Jew/Greek distinction was something that was being transcended. He's not down on Jews – it's just that the Jewish people and their history, the nation, is being fulfilled in *the* Jew, who is Christ, and we're stepping through into a new reality. There's no need to go back and around the long way. It's controversial, by the way – they said this, not everybody liked it.

MM: So the important part of a person's identity was not their ethnic category.

DC: Exactly. That is a shocking thing to say, and something that we're still coming to grips with, is it not? We love to group people. We love to look at ourselves in groups.

MM: You're either with us or...

DC: Exactly. Paul is saying no, that's not where you are primarily. Primarily you're characterized by the fact that you're *in* this person who has died and been resurrected. Now you're beyond. That's where you are. That's the real you. So it's a shocking thing to say. It's exciting, it's liberating, but terribly, terribly hard to take on board.

Being “in Christ”

MM: Right. Even your expression there (which I know comes from Paul), that you are “in” a person. How does that translate into our modern concepts? We're not physically in a person, so what does Paul mean?

DC: Right. It's a special metaphor that is trying to convey to us a couple of things. The first thing that it's trying to convey is that this is real and concrete, so it's referring to your being. It's referring to what we call your ontology, what you're made of, the stuff that really matters that puts you together. When Paul says you're “in Christ,” what he's saying is you're no longer “in Adam.” Now, everybody is in Adam in some sense. It's what we all are, it's how we're all constructed.

MM: It comes with the flesh.

DC: So to say we're in Christ is a strong statement about what we're constructed out of. The other thing that he's getting at with the “in Christ” motif is when you're in something, you're inside it or it's in you — there's a sense of closeness and intimacy that's being conveyed by this expression. He's saying not just that this is the way you're made, but you're made in a

way that's very close and intimate with this particular person.

MM: The word *identity* comes to mind here. Is it identification?

DC: You're closely identified, without losing who you are. There's a sense in which (paradoxically) the more involved with Christ you are, the more your own personhood is affirmed, and, in a way, the more you grasp the distinctions between you and him.

MM: He gives us freedom to be individuals, different.

DC: He gives us the freedom to be persons, not individuals. We're persons. I think we're being rescued from individualism, actually. But a personhood is something that we need, something we want to have. We want to have full personhood. That is exactly what being in Christ gives us.

MM: I see this distinction you just made between individual and person, and I hear you saying that we are most truly persons when we are in community.

DC: Yes. In relationship. Very much so.

MM: Which ties back in with, our new reality is in these relationships.

DC: It's an interpersonal reality. Because it's a communion characterized by these relationships all interlinking or lacing together, it follows that the more invested we are and involved in this community, the more fully personal we are.

MM: And that's all in Christ.

DC: We tend to think of being in a community and being in an individual as a zero-sum game — the more community the less individuality, the more individuality...it's almost like people are bubbles. Little areas of space that can't exist with somebody else without popping.

MM: Yes, personal space.

DC: That's right. Our culture is telling us this all the time. This is a fundamentally wrong understanding of what being a person is all about, according to the gospel and according to what Paul is telling us. Being a person is all about, actually, investing heavily in these relationships with other people. It's all about being relational.

MM: That's why Paul spends so much time telling people....

DC: That's right. He is a very relational person. Your personhood is bound up with how these relationships are functioning. There shouldn't be a strong distinction between who you are and how you behave — they're both parts of the same thing.

MM: So in the first part of the letter he can say you're not saved by what you do, but then later in the letter he talks about what you're supposed to do.

DC: Right. He's getting at slightly different things there. When he says you're not saved by what you do, he's trying to emphasize that you don't

access this reality yourself by doing anything, and you don't control it by doing anything. There's nothing that you can bring to this party that isn't being done for you. But when you're involved with that, there's a lot that you're asked to do by way of response. He's coming from a very different place when he says that. Asking people to behave ethically and in a good way by way of response...it's just a completely different ballgame from telling them to shape up so that they can get involved in something — very different things going on there.

MM: I like the way you put it earlier — he's inviting them to participate in a new reality, and that reality is in these good relationships.

DC: I could put it more strongly and say he's inviting them to *recognize* this new reality, because I think there's a sense in which God is reaching out to us and working with us and doing things for us even when we're not.

MM: It's already there ...

DC: It's closer than the heartbeat in your throat, but it doesn't help us much if we're not cooperating, recognizing, responding, and obeying.

MM: That's part of the faith response?

DC: Exactly. Faith, in a way, is just recognizing what's there. We're also gifted the ability to do that. My advice is not to resist it too strongly. I imagine that Paul's advice was kind of similar. Don't resist the reality that has come upon you. Why would you do that?

MM: People have choice in what they believe and accept. If you describe reality well enough, isn't it going to automatically [make me] say "that's right," without me making a specific decision, "Okay, I will have faith in this. I'm not sure if it's right, but I will have faith."

DC: It's easy to lose our way at this point. It's important that we respond to this reality freely; this is free. And we need to respond with everything we've got. There's no limitation, no "statute of limitations" on how much we need to give to this. We give it everything. All our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and all our strength. But I wouldn't describe this as a *choice* that we're making.

The only choice that we would make in this situation would probably be a choice to do the dumb thing, which is to sin or resist or reject. This is what gets us into trouble. We tell ourselves, it's okay if we push back on this reality, it's okay if we disobey, if we reject a certain amount of what's going on here, but the Bible basically calls this transgressing or sinning, because there's something stupid and destructive about it. My advice is not to do it. [laughing]

I wouldn't present the gospel in such a way that you had a choice to walk away from it, because it's a declaration of reality. You can respond to the reality that's in front of you and you can walk away if you really want to, but

you're denying what *is*, and there's something a little foolish about it, and this is why we get the declaring language coming through so strongly.

MM: Proclaiming.

DC: Exactly. This is how it is. Why wouldn't you be involved with this?

MM: Right. The gospel is good news and not a good invitation.

DC: Right. It's a declaration. Exactly. It's a slightly different way of thinking about what's going on, but it's not aggressive because, as I said before, it's worked through in these conversational settings. People are often converting as this washes over them in time.

MM: Not putting people on the spot.

DC: Right. You're getting to know them, welcome them into your home, feed them, listen to them, talk with them, have a good time with them, share this sort of thing with them, and particularly, if it aligns with how you behave, that will be a powerful witness. You will turn around and after a few months or years, most of those people will have joined your community.

MM: Those people will like what they see of the gospel in you.

DC: Right. You'll mediate the truth of the gospel. Fortunately, it won't be entirely down to you or me.

MM: That's a good thing.

DC: With God's grace we will imperfectly mediate the gospel. Very much so.

MM: You mentioned faith, and it made me think of something you have written about the faith of Abraham. The way that faith is described in Romans is astounding. Is this the kind of faith we need to have?

DC: I hope not. Abraham's example is used sometimes in a way that can be a little destructive and challenging, as if we are to access this reality by choosing to have faith like Abraham, which opens up the door for fellowship with God. The way Paul describes Abraham's faith is unwavering, without doubt. We need to read behind the lines there. We skip over the fact that Paul is playing with two stories; he's playing with Genesis 15 and Genesis 17 and also with Genesis 21 and 22. What's going on is the promise of a son, miraculously, to Abraham from his sterile loins. Abraham had to wait about 14 years from the age of 86ish through the age of about 100...

MM: Without ever wavering.

DC: Yeah. If that's what we have to do to become a Christian, we are all in deep trouble. But if in this unwavering trust in God we see an echo of Christ and then we see Abraham in anticipation of Christ's unwavering faithfulness to the point of death and his resurrection, then we see faith as a *gift* that we can receive in Christ, from Christ.

At that point all things become possible. If this is not something we're having to generate for ourselves, it's something that God is giving us, we're

built into, and we grow into, then it starts to make sense. It starts to make sense as an aspect of our discipleship, rather than a criterion of entry.

MM: So when Paul was telling this story, he wasn't using it as an example?

DC: I don't think he was using it as an example of how we get saved. He was using it as a story that spoke about Christ and spoke about unwavering fidelity, through suffering if necessary, until a miraculous life-creating event takes place. He was probably saying, if you go back to the start of Israel, what happened? It was a resurrecting event in which a person of great faithfulness endured for a long time and then suddenly the Spirit of God created somebody miraculously out of a situation that was basically dead. Now here we are, talking about Jesus Christ — somebody who faithfully in an unwavering way walked to death and then was raised from the dead, so life was miraculously created. So we're standing, my friends, in the presence of the very fulfillment of the nation of Israel. This is where it was always going all along.

MM: What Abraham only pre-figured.

DC: In the patriarchs we get this pre-figuration of what has come to fulfillment in the gospel.

MM: So he's not the example of what we do, but the example of what God does.

DC: Exactly — and what God does is gift us with life, life from the dead. It's an exciting promise.

7. UNDERSTANDING THE BOOK OF ROMANS

JMF: You've done a lot of work on the book of Romans, as evidenced by this huge book. It reminds me of a Harry Potter book, it's so big...

DC: Yes. I'm sorry.

JMF: And absolutely just as scintillating. You do a lot of work in the book on the book of Romans, and you tell us about the gospel as it springs out of Romans 5-8, where you spend a great deal of time.

DC: I think Romans 5-8 is where Paul tells us what really matters to him. It's where he tells us what God is really like. This happens because in those chapters he's addressing a couple of very important questions:

1. I think he's being challenged by somebody who was trying to frighten the Christians that he is looking after, and scaring and intimidating them with a future judgment scenario. Someone is trying to make them feel insecure.
2. The other question is, he's been challenged by somebody who is accusing him of libertinism. "According to your gospel, Paul, how can Christians behave in a good fashion? They seem to be out of control, riotously living, and they're pagans, they don't really know anything about behaving correctly. They're not proper Jews."

Paul pushes back on both these challenges very, very hard. At the basis of both of these pushbacks is Christology. He says, "The reason why we can be secure against the coming judgment is because the God who does not spare his only Son but gives him up for us all can be trusted to take us through any judgment process, and in the judgment he will be on our side. He won't be on the other side. You can be completely assured when you face the future.

Second, the God who has not spared his only Son but who has given him up to die for us has also transformed us so that we can behave in a way that we need to behave. He's taken us, he's entered into our condition, he's terminated, he's executed the stuff that was getting in the way. He's resurrected us into a new condition, he's joined us to that new condition not only in the Son but through the Spirit. This leads to the only sort of right behavior that is valid and authentic. Romans 5-8 is where we see the heart of the Pauline gospel.

JMF: Isn't that pretty much the opposite of the way most of us have tended to look at the gospel? The gospel is usually presented with the idea "let's make people understand there's going to be a judgment and make them afraid of that judgment." So people respond to the gospel because they're

afraid of the judgment and they want to escape it. They've got to do something to escape it, which is to have faith in somebody who is going to help them. Then we try to maintain that position of escape by trying to behave better. But the way you're describing Romans 5-8 is the opposite of that.

DC: People have got Paul very, very wrong. If what he's saying in Romans 5-8 is right, then the model that you've just described, which is widespread, has something wrong with it as a presentation of Paul. It could be that Paul was horribly muddled up, and on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays he was the good Christological thinker that we think he was and on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays he was the other guy, then on Sundays he had the day off.

But I think when you plant your flag on Romans 5-8 (That's where we need to plant our flag, because that's where he's doing all his work out of Christology. That's where he's talking about God in the light of Christ, and so that is solid information.), what you end up with is another perspective on the model that you've just outlined, which is usually articulated in relation to Romans 1-4.

JMF: That's where we're confronted with "Christ died for us while we were still sinners."

DC: Yeah, Romans 5.

JMF: And we're confronted with "if he's already done this much for you, how much more is he going to see it through the end."

DC: Exactly, yeah.

JMF: The judgment is usually thought of as something scary, like a final exam. What if I don't pass? But we're talking about the judgment being a *good* thing and something to look forward to.

DC: Yes. The judgment's already taken place in the cross. When Paul talks about Christ assuming what we are — the sinful nature, the flesh, as he calls it (the *sarx*, in the Greek), and terminating it, and cutting it off and executing it, that is a judgment. It's God's judgment that this situation cannot continue. It must stop. The hostile part of the judgment is behind us.

When we talk about any future judgment, I think there's a moment of accountability that's coming. Paul is clear that we will stand before Jesus on the last day. We may have to give some sort of account for ourselves, and that would be a potentially excoriating occasion...it could elicit some embarrassment. But I don't think it's a hostile judgment. I don't think it's a judgment where God is going to say, "You tried hard, you've been a Christian, you've done all the things you're meant to do, but..." It's not going

to be one of those sorts of judgments where our deeds are laid in the balance.

You can't get away from the argument of Romans 8, which I think is the finest chapter that he ever wrote. The God who is giving up his own Son for us, giving us the Spirit, is on our side all the way through, all the way down, right through to the end. We should be living lives of joyful assurance.

The bit that you were worried about is the bit of Paul that's coming through from Romans 2. The big problem is, what do we do with Romans 2 when we're really rooted in Romans 5-8? Are we talking about the same gospel? This is where the controversies come from. This is what I was trying to do in my book.

JMF: What is it about Romans 1, 2, 3 that seems to be in contrast with what we're reading in 5-8?

DC: Romans 1-3 is usually read in a certain way. There's a consensus — what I call the usual reading or the traditional reading. It's in most of the commentators. They tend to assume that Paul is, as we put it, thinking forwards, and he's building up a picture of the gospel from a problem. He articulates a problem and then he matches a solution to that problem. All the hard work and all the critical theological moves have taken place in the definition of the problem.

If you think that this is the way that you should be preaching the gospel, you will find that reading in Romans 1-3, because it works reasonably well. There was a guy running around there who preaches forwards, there was a guy there who has a harsh punitive understanding of God, a conditional understanding of salvation. You'll find it because it's a reasonably good fit.

JMF: You mean that the language of those chapters comes across as though there is a fear of a judgment to come in a punitive...

DC: Yeah. Something's going on that's talking about this future punitive judgment. Something, some sort of system where you are being threatened with a future evaluation. So you live in a situation of fundamental insecurity, building toward this final judgment. It's in Romans 1-3.

The question is, has the argument been understood correctly if you attribute all of that to Paul? When you have a very clear understanding of Romans 5-8, what you find when you come to Romans 1-4 is there are little hints and clues in the text that this is not what he was trying to do. He's not the person that's setting up this problem and pushing people through to a solution — he's going after somebody who talks this way. So it's almost the opposite of the way he's always been read, or almost always been read.

JMF: So in other words, in Romans 1-3 we're reading his presentation of the very argument that he's arguing against in 5-8.

DC: Exactly. Paul is setting up somebody, but he starts off setting them up in a Socratic way, which was typical in the ancient world, where he is using the assumptions of this person and driving them against one another to show how this gospel collapses.

JMF: So back and forth like a dialogue of Socrates.

DC: Right. He's pushing back on a religious person in Romans 1-3, which sounds too good to be true. I tell people, "We've misunderstood what Paul's getting at here. It's not really as negative as people think." And they go, how can you be sure? I answer, It makes better sense in the text because there are these little problems in the text that we've known about for a long time, but we haven't known what to do with them, so we've done what the scholars say, we've anesthetized them. We've passed over the top of them and pretended they're not there.

JMF: Let's look at an example or two.

DC: There's a stack of them, but let me run you through a couple of them. The first problem is that when Paul starts off his tirade, Romans 1:18-32, it's a very dense aggressive bit of prose. When you read it in the Greek, what you hear is a texture that isn't quite Paul. It's a little bit like you're reading through a Stephen King book (should you read a Stephen King book), and you hit a paragraph that's written by Jane Austen and you go, something funny is going on here. Somebody is talking in another voice. It's an aggressive voice.

Then, chapter 2, we hit somebody who's talking in this way. Who is that person? Tradition has usually said this guy is a Jew. He's not only a Jew, he's *the* Jew — Paul is attacking Judaism here. So the way we get to be a Christian is we learn first what it means to be a Jew, which is to be justified by works, and we fail, and then we sort of flip out of that into Christianity.

But when we read what Paul does with this Jew in this text, we build up a picture that isn't quite right. It's not fair. He accuses the Jew from verse 17 and onwards of being somebody who robs temples, who commits adultery, who is a thief, who is a terrible hypocrite. How many Jews do you know that rob banks, sleep with the wrong people on the wrong occasions, this sort of thing? It's a hostile exaggeration. Not all Jews do this; *most* Jews don't. So the person that Paul's going after here probably isn't your everyday Jew. It's somebody else.

If I told you the Jews were very upset about the time Paul was writing this letter because 20 years previously the Roman emperor kicked them out of Rome...imagine a decree coming down from the Governor of California saying all Christians must leave Los Angeles. This would cause quite a trauma, right? In 19 C.E. the Jews were kicked out of Rome because three Jews had

seduced a Roman noblewoman and taken money that she had promised to the Jerusalem temple...and absconded with it themselves. So they were thieving, temple-robbing, adulterous Jews. I think that explains what's going on in this text. Paul's not targeting everybody who is a Jew, he's targeting people who come to Rome who pretend to be Jewish teachers and really aren't.

This fits into the argument that he's developed here, that he's going after somebody else. Then if we read on a little bit further, we suddenly have a little to-and-fro between Paul and this other person. The first guy is going, "I believe in desert, I believe in judgment." The other guy is going, "I believe in the faithfulness and the compassion and the graciousness of God." The first guy goes, "No, even if you sin, God is not going to rescue you on the day of judgment, what you deserve must hold good." Then the guy comes back and goes, "But surely if we're sinful and we get rescued, that shows that God is a compassionate God." It goes back and forth like this.

The usual reading thinks that Paul is the guy that's insisting on judgment and desert. How can that guy, Paul, turn around in chapters 9-11 and say God loves Israel, and even though Israel is disobedient, and will rescue Israel? He will not lose faith with Israel. How can the guy saying the opposite in chapter 3 turn around and suddenly say something else in Romans 11?

My reading, it's the *other* guy who is insisting on judgment and desert. Paul is the guy who is saying, "What about the faithfulness of God? What about the compassion of God? What about the love of God for people who sin?" These little clues add up to a new understanding of this text, where Paul is attacking someone who is fundamentally religious, fundamentally conditional and contractual. I'm summarizing an awful lot of information, and you might just have to buy the book and read it and you'll find out all about it.

JMF: It's a very long book.

DC: Yeah, it is very long. I'm sorry about that. I did my best.

JMF: You must have felt that the entire argument needed to be in one volume rather than breaking it into, say, three volumes or two volumes.

DC: Right. I thought hard about breaking it into two books, but what's going on when you read Paul, even though we're often not aware of it, is we're bringing what we've been taught to the text. It's structuring the way that we read the text, even when we're not aware of it. We've been raised and taught that Paul teaches a certain sort of the gospel. And the way that we've often been taught Paul (and I'm referring to the wrong way) is a way that often also resonates with our culture and even with our politics. So the slightly harsh understanding of Paul resonates with the slightly harsh side to American culture, to American politics, to Western politics.

JMF: How would you describe this harsh side of Paul? What's a summary of that way of viewing it?

DC: It's all about compassion being directed to a limited group, who has done certain things to earn that compassion and benevolence, and everybody else on the outside being exposed to what they deserve and, if necessary, to punishment. So if you contract into the privileged group by doing certain things, then you'll be okay, but everybody else basically just has to sink or swim by themselves. If they sink, that usually means in social or cultural terms that they're going to be punished. This is how we run our politics, and it is how we run a lot of our culture, and this how we've been taught Paul.

So part of the length of the book was to show this is how we're thinking, but it's not necessarily the way that God is acting toward us in Christ. There's another way of doing things that we're getting from Christ. We're getting a God who doesn't want to leave anybody out. We're getting a God who has acted very inclusively first to reach out to everybody. It's almost the opposite way of doing things. Everybody's been included and there are people who push away and pull out of it.

So a lot of the book and its length is trying to deprogram people from their wrong way of thinking and reprogram them with this healthier way of understanding God, so that when we get to Paul, we can see that this is what he's talking about as well. He's on the same page as we are.

JMF: How do you find it being received? What kind of feedback are you getting?

DC: There's been a full spectrum of responses, from "this is absurd rubbish" to "this has changed my life forever," and pretty much everything all the way through in the middle. Quite a lot more enthusiasm than I thought I would get, and a lot more tension than I thought I would get.

When you're writing a book like this, you worry that when you finish, it will drop in a black hole and no one will talk about it. Well, a lot of people are talking about it. I get a little frustrated with what they say at times. I don't feel I'm being understood all the time. I don't feel like my arguments are being presented accurately at all times, but people are trying to break through, and I appreciate that.

There's a bit of a generational thing going on as well. There are a lot of scholars who have written equally large books on Paul and Romans, and I'm challenging what they're doing, threatening them. It's very hard for them to turn around and say, "I've been wrong about this all this time," if they have been wrong. The younger generation, the doctoral student, post-doctoral type of student, seems to be very excited about it.

JMF: What do you attribute that to?

DC: They're putting the pieces in place for the remaining creative research on Paul, so they're at a much more malleable stage of life. I remember when I was like that. There aren't too many costs involved with them saying, "What I was taught was wrong, let's run with this new paradigm." There are a lot of costs involved with the older generation turning around and seeing the paradigm that they're working with is no longer functioning. This is typical if it's a paradigm shift. This is how they always work. It just means that I have to be patient and a bit lucky.

JMF: You're not the only one who takes this perspective, though.

DC: I hope not. Certainly not on Paul as a whole. There are a lot of scholars who agree with me about the main thrust of his gospel. That is right. I'm standing in a long tradition in terms of reading Paul this way. I would hope that what I'm saying about Paul's gospel is in complete continuity with the way the Patristics have read him, the Cappadocians, the best parts of the Catholic tradition, Orthodoxy, the best parts of the Reformation, right through the modern period. I think I'm in touch with the best theology of the church. It's true, though, that there are a lot of non-scholars reading Paul who aren't quite so thrilled with what I'm up to... I don't always hear good reasons from them why that's the case.

JMF: You wouldn't attribute it entirely to their history of research and study and teaching, would you? Because there are examples of major theologians who come across a new perspective and who go with it. What is the attraction to holding on to a view of Paul that is more judgmental than grace-filled?

DC: I think you've hit the nail on the head. Whether you acknowledge it or not, theology is always in play when we're reading Paul, and it's almost being scrutinized by that, so we're very defensive about it. If we're not crystal clear on certain theological positions, we will lapse into a conditionality and a sort of a contractualism. If we're not vigilant that we don't do that, if we're not 100 percent committed to a gospel that is unconditional, a gospel of grace.

JMF: When you say conditionality and contractual, you're driving at what?

DC: Certain people present our relationship with God in a way that basically is a contract. They talk about it as a covenant, but it's a contract. A contract is something where I will do something for you if you fulfill certain conditions first. It's always an if/then structure. This is how we run our society. This is how we run our families half the time, unfortunately. This is how we run our politics, and this is how we run our theology. But it's a fundamental *mis*understanding of the way God deals with us.

JMF: “I’ll give you salvation if you do something for me.”

DC: Exactly. It seems very natural to us, it’s an easy way, it slips off the tongue, doesn’t it? But it’s a fundamental corruption of the gospel. Once you put that little word “if” in, you have destroyed the gospel of grace. It’s as simple as that.

JMF: And a covenant, by contrast ...

DC: Unfortunately, people have debased the use of the word because they’ve talked about the covenant, but then they’ve talked about it contractually, which is what it really *isn’t*. We learn about what a covenant is, *the* covenant in fact, from looking at how God has related to us in Christ. It’s as simple as that. It’s utterly unconditional. It’s benevolent, it’s loving, it’s his choice for us from the foundation of the world to be in fellowship with him and to be transformed by him. That’s what a covenant is. There are no conditions, no strings attached. There’s no “if,” there’s no “but.”

JMF: In the Old Testament, it’s full of that, isn’t it?

DC: It is and it isn’t. Depends how you read it.

JMF: The idea that “I will be faithful to my covenant regardless of what you do.”

DC: Right. Very much so.

JMF: “I change not in my covenant faithfulness, therefore you are not destroyed.”

DC: Exactly. What tends to happen is a little mistake. People shift from what God is expecting of us in the covenant relationship, and they turn those things into a condition. God lays out that which is expected of us and appropriate of us — the way we should respond to God in this relationship — and they like to turn that into a contract. We like to introduce these other conditions for all sorts of ultimately pretty sad reasons.

This is the great battle going on in the interpretation of Paul. This is the struggle that’s going on in his understanding at the moment. The stakes are so high, this is where the conflict is, at times, so strong, and people are so rooted to the conditional or contractual gospel. This is why they fight back so hard. It’s a tragedy that so many good folk in the church have been taught that God is a God of conditions. They’re defending “the true gospel” when they push back on a reading that I’m offering, which is a reading based in grace.

JMF: If you take grace unconditionally, doesn’t that level the playing field, as it were? There’s no room for me to say, “I’ve been faithful in this way and that way, and you haven’t, so I deserve *more* than you. You need to be condemned, and I need to be, I’m going to be...” You automatically think that way.

DC: I am superior here in some sense. So we need to find some way of

setting that up. We have to introduce conditions...

JMF: Yeah. It seems a rather base way of looking at it, but...

DC: It's sinful.

JMF: It's religious, as opposed to gospel.

DC: Yeah. It's religion at its heart, as opposed to gospel. That's right.

8. 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 *κοινωνία*. 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 *κοινωνία*, 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.

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

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

John's baptism was a baptism of repentance, and I never could get my mind around why Jesus went to John to be baptized. He didn't need to be baptized. He didn't have any sins to repent of. So what is this thing with Jesus going into the Jordan and being baptized?

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

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

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

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

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

What does the Spirit immediately do? Sends Jesus out into the wilderness for 40 days of agonizing temptation, and there in the garden, when the temptation gets really bad, Jesus is in absolute agony. When we see what it cost Christ to believe, repent, and obey on our behalf, I don't think it leads to a lackadaisical life – I think it leads just to the opposite. It provides us freedom to *want* to follow along in discipleship. Not because we're worried if

we don't, the shoe is going to drop, not because we're worried if our faith fails, we're actually going to sink and Christ is going to leave us there – but because we know that what he done in his life, death, and resurrection has set us free from that whole way of life. We can begin to think of it in another way.

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

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

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

In the same way, in the Incarnation, when the second person of the Trinity becomes incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth, does it in any way diminish Jesus' humanity? Does he become less human than all other human beings? He becomes *more* human. He's a character. He takes a whip of cords and drives the money changers out of the temple. I love John's Gospel. Jesus' first miracle according to John's Gospel, remember what it is? Turns water into wine at a wedding. Not simply wine but *wine* – six jugs that held like 28

gallons apiece. There was enough wine for quite a party.

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

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

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

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

That’s why being betrayed by a friend is the absolute, most heinous evil and painful event we experience. The problem often is we never get to the point where we’re close enough in relationship where we experience that kind of profound relationship. But you’re right. When I say that human beings are also persons in relations, and ought to manifest in our relationship with one another the kind of fellowship we see between the persons of the Trinity – that’s exactly the kind of thing that I mean. That illustration was great.

10. 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.

11. 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.



12. 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.

13. 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.

14. RELYING ON CHRIST FOR REPENTANCE

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

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

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

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

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

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

The story that I used a couple years ago when I did one of these interviews, about the man from California who was walking on this ice, and crawling across on his belly because he was afraid that he was going to go through, and then a truck comes with a load of logs and goes across the ice, and how they both had radically different experiences – one was absolutely scared and the other one was not afraid at all. The important point of the

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

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

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

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

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

JMF: You mean what *we* have to do...

EC: ...and what God has to do for us.

As my good friend Gary Deddo says, “Many Christians turn the relationship between divine agency and human agency in salvation into a zero-sum game.” So either God does 100 percent and we do nothing...so when I say “Christ repents on our behalf,” that means we don't have to do anything at all...we don't have to repent... or God does part and we do part, and this is where most Christians come out, secretly (even if they don't admit

it theologically), they think there's something that they've got to do in and out of themselves to contribute to their salvation, and if they don't do it right, then it's going to mess the whole thing up.

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

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

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

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

The first miracle he does is changing the water into wine. The servants say there is no more wine, and Mary, Jesus' mother, comes to him, "They have no more wine." He rolled his eyes, you know, "Why do you involve me, woman?" He ends up changing the water into wine, five or six stone containers that probably held about 30 gallons of wine. So that's maybe 120 to 150 gallons of wine. My entire seminary could get a little tipsy on that much wine. Jesus does this miracle to allow the celebration to continue. It says something about the profound character of his humanity.

So is there anything incompatible in Jesus' life, his death, and his resurrection between 100 percent human agency and 100 percent divine agency? They're completely compatible. Why would we think that any place

in the order of salvation it would be any different? God's grace, when God's grace is actively involved in our life, it doesn't in any way dehumanize us, it doesn't undermine our human agency, indeed, we become more fully human, more fully personal, more fully Mike and El than we ever were before.

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

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

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

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

The grace of God sets us at liberty to be able to respond. There isn't an incompatibility between divine and human agency. That's why it's only when the grace of God is actively involved in our life that we can repent at all, and

even when we do it imperfectly, Christ takes it and perfects it and presents it to God on our behalf. That's true of every aspect of Christian faith, whether it's faith, whether it's repentance, whether it's obedience, those are all things that are absolutely impossibilities. We do not have the human potentiality to do it apart from Christ living his life through us.

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

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

Another way to explain this relation between divine and human agencies... Torrance uses it in terms of his children; I use it in terms of my son. When my sons were first trying to learn how to walk, they would grab my finger with their hands, and I would grab their hands with my hands, and I would hold them as they walked. Now, who is really holding who? They're gripping my finger, but it's not really their grip on my finger that's the controlling issue, is it? It's my grip of their fingers. It's the same way in the relationship between divine and human agency. We really do respond in faith, but it's very imperfect and it's not the quality of our faith or any of our responses that's finally determinative, it's the quality of what Christ has already done, and God's grasp of us in Christ that never lets go.

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

EC: That's right. In my life as a pastor, my own life as a Christian, I found that almost always there's some aspect in that order of salvation, some human aspect in there where one Christian or another will attach to it – “That's what

I've got to do." That always becomes that weak link they fixate on. It's always the thing they worry about that they haven't done right.

JMF: They become obsessed with it.

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

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

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

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

One of the interesting places this plays itself out and goes back to this whole issue of how we interpret Scripture, that we can pick up maybe in another session. It's always interesting to me the scripture that Christians fasten on as the key troubling text. Almost always they're texts about what we have to do. Those are the ones that resonate with that *deus absconditus*, resonate with that human agency having to contribute something, and so they become the primary texts that blind our eyes to what the other texts say. This

is an inadequate way, this is why the concordance method of doing interpretation, just looking up what Scripture has to say about a particular theme, never works. You have to look at the entire fabric of Scripture to get it.

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

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

That’s the absolute good news of the gospel, because that means there isn’t anything in the Christian life that we ever do, have to do, ever need to do, on our own apart from what Christ has already done for us in his vicarious life, death, and resurrection. He has already done it all – not in a way that cancels our humanity, but a way that frees us. He echoes his faith, his repentance, his obedience, in us. It’s when we stop worrying about the quality of our faith, our repentance, and our obedience, guess what? It becomes easier to be able to do those things. Even then, we don’t do it perfectly, and we always have to depend upon Christ our High Priest, who is at the right hand of God.

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

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

We could learn from the 12-step groups. In some respects all the 12-step groups, when it says “I’m powerless before this habit” is basically echoing what Jesus says in John 15, “Apart from me you can do nothing.” Apart from a higher power, apart from Christ, we cannot break the holds on our things. If Christians, if every time we get in that mode where we obsess about

something and get worried about it, if we could just remember that verse and remember we are powerless apart from the grace of God in Christ, we'd be a lot better off. That's why it's not difficult to be a Christian, it's impossible. The sooner we learn it the better off we'd be.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JMF: Or to pay the bills.

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

JMF: Or "should."

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

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

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

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

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

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

15. TRUE CHURCH RENEWAL

J. Michael Fezell: 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.

16. 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 infighting 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.

17. 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.

18. 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 re-ignited 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.

19. 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.

20. 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.

21. THEOLOGY IN THE EVERYDAY

J. Michael Fezell: Cathy, thanks for being with us today.

Cathy Deddo: Thank you very much, Mike. I'm glad to be here.

JMF: When we talk about Trinitarian theology, it sounds academic to many people. What does it mean for just plain day-to-day relationships?

CD: That's a big question, but what I'm going to try to do with it is talk about my own life as a Christian minister over the years. I primarily thought that my relationships were what I did for God, and I would go out and try to minister to people and take care of what I thought they needed in the name of God and then come back and let God know how I had succeeded or failed in doing those things. When I began to understand Trinitarian theology, I began to understand that I was not taking seriously the reality, the presence, and the activity of the Triune God in the immediate circumstances of my life – that I was thinking of him as distanced. So when I began to take that more seriously – that I don't just work for Christ but he is in me, and his Spirit is always working and the Father is always already leading, then I began to realize the best way I could understand it was, do I believe that God is really here in my conversation with you and my conversation with other people? Is



he working already in your life? Am I participating in what he is doing? Too often when people are working in relationships, they do a disconnect. They can even believe God is triune, he loves me as the whole God, but as soon as they walk out of a service and they go into a

situation where they're talking with family or with friends, they pretty much think of themselves as being on their own.

What I have tried to help other people with, what I have tried to do for myself, is live as if God, the God I've come to know in Jesus, is more real than I am. He already is mediating in Christ between me and somebody else. His spirit is already at work, so when I am with somebody else, I try to listen to what God is saying. I attempt to live in his presence, abide in him, and not speak until I have a sense of what he has for me to say. It makes relationships

more dynamic and it helps me remember that my role in being with people is to remain in the peace of God, not try to fix anything, not try to answer all the questions right away, but to see what God has for me to say.

JMF: So what is it about God that helps you feel that way and to have that kind of a sense of being in relationship with other people?

CD: Primarily, God always comes to me with grace and light. God is the one who includes me in his loving circle of Father, Son, and Spirit. God's grace in Christ teaches me that God loved me and loves me before I am ever even interested in him. So when I start my day, that God has already been at work all night and he welcomes me to be a part of what he's doing. It allows me to have confidence that it is not up to me to know what the right thing is to say to somebody else, how to complete something.

Let me give you an example with my family. I was visiting my family recently and I had a certain idea of what I wanted to happen, and some of my conversations, I think we're all like that. We can go into something with an agenda of what we want to see happen, and it will be successful if I have been able to accomplish my agenda.

JMF: So we're focused on the agenda, not on the person.

CD: That's right...and not on God either. I'm focusing on my agenda, but I think I'm focusing on you because I have an agenda for how I want you to go, and I'm hoping that you hear what I have to say. Or think about times when you want to confront people. You feel like you need to have this moment of confrontation. But what we often forget is that God is living and present. He knows you better than I know you. He knows my mother better than I know her. When I go into that conversation, if I'm living, as much as possible, in the reality of the Trinitarian life, then I'm trusting that God was there before me, that he already is at work in my mother, and he has his own agenda for that time...but that his main agenda for me is to trust that he has an agenda, to listen for him, to be aware of him rather than rushing in, even with my good intentions – our agendas are oftentimes for something good for somebody else. But we stop living in his peace, we stop abiding as soon as we try to make what we want to have happen be first.

JMF: So you can actually be in the relationship, enjoy the person for who they are...

CD: Right.

JMF: ...knowing that God has an agenda before, during, and after. He'll be there with that person just as he is with you and me.

CD: Right. It makes things a lot more free, a lot more peaceful. I'm going to use an example. I have adult kids and there are times when I feel that my wisdom is exactly what they need to hear right now. I will be able to straighten

this out if they will just listen to what I say. But if I believe that God is real, that his grace isn't just a packet I was given but that he's pushing into this situation right now with his reality, he is pushing into their lives by the Spirit in Christ all the time, then if I attempt to just listen more to what he's saying and I don't have a sense that he's leading me to say anything, he's not opening a door for me (unless I try to cram something in and obviously he's not leading me). Sometimes he's leading me to be quiet and to make a nice meal for my son instead of trying to offer anything more. When we live as if God is real, then we can be at peace. We can know his rest. We can be confident that he will always be more faithful than we are. It is never up to us. It has had a radical effect on my relationships with others, on my relationships with people in the church, in my family, with my friends. If I attempt to be with them by letting God lead first.

Another example: I was talking to a friend who was on a church committee. She said, "I don't know what I'm supposed to say when I go into this. I'm not sure how to deal with it. There's going to be some conflict." I said, "Well, try to picture Jesus being with you. Try to have an image of him ...he's in the meeting with you and he's calling you to enjoy his presence while you're there. How will that change how you're in that meeting?"

JMF: When we realize he loves that other person, is involved with that other person just as much as he is with us...it makes it a lot easier to be with the person, enjoy the person for who they are, and not have to feel like, I've got to get my two-cents worth in.

CD: Right.

JMF: You can lead a horse to water, you can't make them drink. We know that about horses. But we still try to do it with each other all the time.

CD: What it comes down to is, do I really trust him enough? I think the answer ends up being no. "I'm not sure you're going to show up. I'm not sure you're going to be active. I'm not sure you're going to be present, so I'll cover those last ten yards for you. Besides, I'm a wise person. I know a lot. Trust me, God, I'm sure I can take care of this for you."

It's humbling but yes, it's also a lot easier to live as if God is the greatest reality in their life, and he's currently active. He didn't just give you a list to take care of, but he's breaking in, always ahead of you and behind you and around you. There's never a time when he's leaving you alone.

JMF: The relationship with a person is more important than some agenda you might have for that person.

CD: Right. The funny thing is, what are you trying to invite people into? You're trying to invite them into the peace that you're living in. But if you're frantically trying to get them into that, you have nothing to offer.

JMF: You don't have any peace.

CD: Right. You left the peace back here in hopes of being able to still have a message. That's the thing we're always afraid isn't going to be true. How much am I going to love somebody unless I get to say everything I think I need to say, unless they come to appreciate me the way I want them to appreciate me? But if God is holding onto that, one of the phrases I've been using recently in my Bible study is, we live suspended in the grace of God. If we are living suspended in the grace of God and the person I'm talking to, whoever they are, also does...they may be resisting that, but that's really where they live.

JMF: There's no other place to live.

CD: Exactly. Then I can trust that God is going to allow me to participate in his work as I let go of having to have things go whatever way I think they do.

JMF: And amazingly, he may be working with *you* in that setting more than he is with the other person...

CD: That's what I often find to be true. I'm sure you have found that to be true as a parent. As God allows us by his grace more and more to let go of all the ideas that we may have had when they were younger about what we were going to be able to accomplish for them, I can say that he has blessed me tremendously through them. I hope they will learn as much as I have from being their parent.

Another way to think about this in terms of Trinitarian theology has been to take more seriously his grace and his never allowing anything that he won't and can't redeem in your life and in your children's life. Taking seriously that he knows your sins, your problems, the unwise choices that you may have made, and he's going to redeem that. We participate even in our parenting with God. He is the ultimate parent and we're not. I've had to go through some things in my life where I've had to realize he never called me to be our children's parent because I was perfect, but he called me knowing that he could redeem everything, he could bring it all to his glory and he's not ashamed to call me his sister, as it says in Hebrews.

JMF: That frees our relationships up so much because we can let go. We can respect the other person in a way that we might not because we often go into conversations thinking we're superior...

CD: Yes, that brings up another good point.

JMF: Or intimidated, one or the other.

CD: We can give what we have to give in God's hands, and we can receive what the other person has to give, which we oftentimes, as you were just saying, we don't do. I won't receive something from somebody if I'm hoping

for something else from them. When I live in the peace of God it helps me to be more actually present to the other person. I can see and hear what they're saying instead of thinking ahead to okay, what's the next thing I'm going to say? What's my move in this? More like a chess game instead of an actual conversation. It's enabled me to rejoice over the little things sometimes that somebody else can give me because that may be all that they can give me right now. But in God's grace, that's enough. Too often I have worked past people instead of being present with them. So I would agree. That's what it does.

JMF: Even in interviewing, you can get into a frame of mind that you know where you want it to come out, let's say. So you want to guide it in that direction and get to that point. You see it on TV all the time, especially with pundits. They've got an angle, and so they often don't even let the other person talk. I find myself doing the same thing. I think, this is the point I want the viewers to learn from this, and so I'm going to guide it in that direction instead of letting it go the direction it needs to go and is going to go because it's the person that you're interviewing.

CD: That's right.

JMF: The reason that they're there is because you figured they must have something worthwhile to say. But aren't our kids the same way? We [should be] about the relationship and them, more than molding them into some image that we think they ought to have.

CD: Yes, and being willing to let go of that image allows us to take seriously the Triune God. A lot of times we don't take him that seriously. We take a lot of other things about our lives and what we think we should be able to do and what it means to be successful a lot more seriously than we do the presence and activity of the Triune God in our lives. It's led to a lot of surprises in my life being able to let go. It's also enabled me to be more joyful with people because my joy isn't coming from the immediate situation or the immediate relationship.

God is always there. He's always with us. He's already at work. What will that mean? It's quite an adventure. I have no idea where this might go. That enables me to be not just more peaceful but more enthusiastic about seeing where he wants to take me next. His plans will always be good and for my good even though, as you were saying, it's a little hard to let go of some of those things we thought made us who we are, and they didn't really.

JMF: Sometimes a person that we care about is doing something we think is harmful or destructive; we don't like that kind of behavior. We think we need to tell them and make it clear to them where we stand on this. It's as though we forget that God knows this too. That usually doesn't work.

CD: No.

JMF: It harms the relationship, instead of maintaining it so that a person can hear us.

CD: Right. I've had two of my children go through some difficult times. My oldest daughter went through anorexia many years ago. This was probably when I first started working through a lot of this in terms of my family and relationships. I was watching her disappear before my eyes. What can I do? What do you want me to do? We tried forcing her to eat, all kinds of things. I remember sitting in the kitchen one time and saying, "God, I don't know what... I'm feeling desperate, please. I can't do anything. What do you want me to do? I'm ready to listen. What do you want me to do?"

He said, "Make her a cup of tea and just take it back to her and say, 'I love you. You are terrific' because that's what I have to say to her, so that's the one thing I want you to say." It was amazing to me that he freed me in that moment to experience his grace in my own life and to extend his grace to her and to realize that's what she needed to hear – not all of my wisdom, not all of my fears. Because a lot of times when we're busy trying to fix things, the one thing we're forgetting to tell people is God's grace has already broken in. If that is true, what would we be saying to each other? If we were living as that were true, how would that change every comment that we make and every interaction that we have?

JMF: Isn't that scary for people, when we know somebody's doing something that we know is harmful for them and then...and then all we're going to do is say to ourselves, "I know that God loves this person and is working for their redemption, and he can do that a lot better than I can." It's hard to give them grace because we feel like we're compromising with sin or something, instead of giving them what we need. We're afraid of grace.

CD: That's right. Yet, that's where God starts and that's where he continues to go with us every day. I do not get up in the morning because I decided that I would go ahead living for another day. I just made that decision. Rather, I wake up and discover "God has given me another day. He continues to love me. He delights in me."

That is a scary thing to say to somebody else. It's a scary thing to hear because we're afraid that it means that nothing's going to change. But the gospel is God by giving us grace makes a possibility of something changing. If I want my daughter to change, I want her to change out of the sense that "this is not who you are. This is not the last word on you. I love you, and, more importantly, God loves you. The whole God is here, and he has so much more for you than this." Unfortunately, a lot of times when we're trying to correct something, we start fearing.

My son went through something far worse. I won't go into it, but the last couple years of my life have been some of the hardest I've ever had to go through as a mother and as a person. There would be times when I would get up in the morning and I would have to say, "God, help me remember..." Even my prayers could become, "Oh God, please, please, please." But that's not living in the Trinitarian reality. The reality is, I'm so glad that even now you haven't left us.

JMF: We're in your hands.

CD: Yeah. I'm grateful. Not just me but my son, my family, and that you were there all the way through all of this and you will redeem it because of who you are, not just because of some whim. This is who you are. Having said that, I could go into my day with grace. I could say, when he came out, "Oh, I love you so much. I am so glad that you're here." And I'd leave it at that. It was radical.

JMF: Even with what you just said, don't we like to try to talk them into that? In other words, we can't, like you just said, leave it at that. We have to try to talk them into, you know, God does love you, and we want to make sure they know that, and we want them to agree with us about that. We don't know how to trust God to be who he is with them and for them.

CD: Right. It's a far more radical trust. But this is the dynamic living in God that we're talking about and trusting that Jesus actually mediates our relationships. He never says, "Okay, this one's on your own. Go out there. I hope it works out okay for you." But that is the problem. We'll trust him up to a certain point, but if it meant having to give up everything in my life to be a Christian, well, I don't know about this. Does that mean that I have to give up what I think my reputation should be in terms of my mothering, in terms of other things that I do? Do I have to trust in you in all of these ways? That's what it would mean to take him at his word.

JMF: But when we do that, it actually is easier, isn't it?

CD: A lot easier.

JMF: It leaves a place, a room for the child to come to their own conclusions instead of having to circle the wagons against us all the time.

CD: And it's a lot more fun, too. My son has come home sometimes and found I'm dancing to some music with my daughter. I've danced a lot more in the last two years than I thought I would because I trust that God is at work. He's at work with me, and I don't have to justify myself. I don't have to be able to say, none of these things that have happened had to do with me. Some of them did, I'm sure. I was not a perfect mother. To be able to let go of each one of those places, I try to find my identity and know at the bottom, his hands are holding onto me. I think they like being around me

more. As wise as I was before, I think I was somewhat of a battle axe because I had to make sure my wisdom got out to everybody.

JMF: Absolutely. I think that you're far from alone. Not just mothers. Fathers often make it worse because there's the authority thing involved as well.

CD: And we can do that in church, as we come in with our agenda for a meeting. It's not bad to have an agenda, but I've noticed a lot of times, God rubber stamps our agenda instead of no, why don't we pray together and see what God wants to do. We are not in charge. If he wants to end a program in the church, let's be ready for that instead of having to keep things going because we've decided we know what should happen.

JMF: People are more important than programs, and being together is more important than getting something done.

CD: Right.

JMF: Because that's what we're trying to get done, is being together.

CD: That's the weird thing about it. That's what I was trying to say about noticing in my evangelism that I had become so uptight about trying to help people become Christians. If I could sit on the other side and see what I was looking like, I wouldn't want to become a Christian either.

22. 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 get 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.

23. 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.

24. 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.”

25. 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.

26. 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 in 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.

27. 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.

28. 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.

29. 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.

30. HOW SHOULD WE READ THE BIBLE?

J. Michael Feazell: Christians the world over look to the Bible as their guide to faith and practice. Yet from the inception of the church, there has been much disagreement over how to interpret what the Scriptures say. Our guest today, Dr. Gordon Fee, has done much work in helping Christians with basic principles of rightly understanding the Bible. Dr. Fee is a New Testament scholar and recently retired Professor Emeritus of Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia. He's considered a leading expert in the field of biblical interpretation and is author of many books, including *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors* and *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, which he co-authored with Douglas Stuart. Dr. Fee's latest book is *Revelation*, part of the New Covenant Commentary Series. Dr. Fee, thanks for joining us.

Gordon Fee: Glad to be here.

JMF: It will help all of us to hear a little of the background of how you came to write *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*.

GF: I'm a little old now, in terms of all the details, okay? But it basically came about because I used to do this in various kinds of adult Sunday school settings, churches, just trying to help people read the Gospels as Gospels, the epistles as the epistles, et cetera. I was invited to be one of the teachers during the era of the Greater Pittsburgh Charismatic Conferences in the 1970s. They had teaching sessions—morning and afternoon—and they had invited me to come. Since I did this regularly in churches and especially in my New Testament survey class, I chose to take four sessions and walk them through the Gospels, Acts, the epistles, and the Revelation.

At the end of this series, there must have been a group of about 35 people, adults who had been in the sessions, and the common denominator of their



question was, Why have we never heard this before? How come we don't know this? Why do I have to be 50 years old and never knew that I should think this way in reading the Bible?

So on the way home, I dashed out the outline for the book—13

chapters, because I was raised in Sunday school, and all the lessons are in 13 chapters for the 13 Sundays of a quarter of the year. So I thought 13 chapters, and outlined the whole thing, and then realized that I *could* do the Old Testament chapters, but Doug could do them better. So I told him what the program was...

JMF: And you had known Doug for...

GF: We were colleagues. I taught at Gordon-Conwell, and so we were good friends. That's why I went to him, because he thinks the way I do about teaching Scripture. Unfortunately, it took two years for him to get a sabbatical so he could write his chapters, but once he did, then it was sent off—and it was bad timing, because it was between the big push before the beginning of school year, and somewhere in that lull period for Zondervan.

I had chosen Zondervan as a publisher, and we had a former student who was working as an editor at Zondervan. He saw that the book was going to fall between the cracks, and he took the manuscript, got it after it was published, and sent it to everybody who teaches Bible everywhere in North America. I don't know how many hundreds of copies he sent, but within a year the sales went off the charts. The reason was: it was trying to help people to get at reading Scripture sensibly instead of “every verse a paragraph” that is so destroying. Over a million of these are now in print. This is the third edition, and there's over a half million of this edition.

JMF: This was the one I remember reading.

GF: Yeah. That's the first edition.

JMF: Now we're already in the third edition.

GF: So they went over a million. It met a need because people would like to know how to read the Bible well. Doug is responsible for the title. He's clever in these ways. I always had some dumb title — “On Understanding the Bible” or something dull like that. He sat down and wrote out a whole page in two columns of proposed titles. The third one down was this one—*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. I knew I didn't have to read any further—it was obviously the title that was going to make the book work. That's how it came about.

JMF: You mentioned paragraphs. People read the Bible—the verses appear to be paragraphs. What's wrong with that?

GF: What's wrong is they wouldn't read anything else on earth that way. The Bible wasn't written in single-verse paragraphs. The Bible was written in poetry—which is four lines, usually two, two, and in the Proverbs the same way—two or four. The narratives are narratives. You break up the narratives the way you would break up any narrative. The epistles are letters. When the

subject makes a slight change, you paragraph it there.

It's common sense to read the Bible the way you would read any other piece of literature. Yet for some reason, people think that every verse a paragraph is sacred—it came down from heaven that way or something, when in fact, it happened because Robert Estienne was riding a horse across Europe and put the numbers in, half of them in the wrong places. We get stuck with that. Notice that the title is how to *How to Read the Bible*. Studying is a different thing. My problem is that most people do not read their Bibles well. That's what this book is for.

JMF: Let's take, just case in point, you mentioned epistles and Gospels. What is different about an epistle from a Gospel, and how would you read Gospels differently from the way you would read an epistle?

GF: What's the difference between a short story and a poem? You don't read a poem the way you read a short story, or a short story the way you read a poem. That's the difference between the Psalms and a narrative. Between an epistle and a Gospel: one is a narrative about Jesus and his mighty deeds; an epistle is a letter. The epistles (letters) and Gospels aren't even in the same league in terms of kind of literature. Why anyone would ever want to level that out as if it didn't make any difference.... It makes all the difference in the world. *God* chose to do it this way. This isn't Gordon's discovery. *God* did this. We need to get in touch with what *God* did.

JMF: So if I'm going to read the Bible...let's say when I was 10 years old and I see all these chapters and verses, and I go to a Gospel—let's say Luke (I'm opening at random) chapter 7, verse 5, "For he loveth our nation and he hath built us a synagogue." Then I might look at 1 Corinthians, which is a letter, chapter 8, verse 2, "If any man think that he knoweth anything, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know."

This one sounds like it has the same...because it's got a chapter and a verse and a number by it, it has the same power and merit if I put it up on the wall as this one does, if I set it up next to it, and I could use those two without anything else around them, to come to some conclusions about what I think they mean.

GF: You would have to do that thoughtlessly – carelessly, I mean...

JMF: Any way you slice it, if there's a verse on the wall, [someone could say], "oh, that's *God's* word."

GF: Yes, it is *God's* word.

JMF: Am I going to understand it just by looking at that verse all by itself like that?

GF: Let's let *God* have the say, and he didn't give us a verse, he gave us

the Gospel. He gave us the epistle, not a verse.

JMF: If I pick up the newspaper, would I find a couple of lines in the middle of the article, pull them out and understand what the article's about?

GF: No, but I think people tend to do that all the time. (laughing)

JMF: You're right – I guess we do that with everything to some degree. (laughing)

GF: If it's a person you disagree with, you read the whole article and you take out two sentences you disagree with and post that somewhere.

JMF: With the Bible we'll take out two verses against people we disagree with and then use it as a weapon against them. But you're pointing out the importance of reading things the way they're written, and the way they're intended for the people that they're written to.

We don't get a letter from somebody we care about... let's say an email, and we don't divide it up and just take out two lines and pretend like that has the same merit and meaning and power as the two lines earlier. We read the whole thing together...the message of the whole thing.

GF: Exactly. That's the great problem.... I tell students over the years that the first thing you have to do is get rid of the numbers. You don't go through your Bible and scratch out the numbers – just get rid of them in your head. Get rid of them because they're not there. Then get rid of the paragraphs—that is, every verse a paragraph. Get a Bible that's got it right in terms of paragraphing. There will be some differences, mostly for the sake of the readership. If the Bible is being prepared for 10th graders or below, you put more paragraphs in. If it's for older folk, you can put fewer paragraphs in. The paragraphing is not sacred – it's a way of helping the people read well. None of that is divinely given – it's a translator's or an editor's choice.

JMF: The reason for verses is just to help us find a spot so we know what we're talking about.

GF: On the ancient manuscripts (which was my first specialty in New Testament studies), they didn't have any of that. They had little indications of where you were in the text, the Gospel or the epistle. In this inner column, they'd have a little Roman numeral III or an VIII or something like that, and those numbers represented where they were in the document. It goes way back to the 2nd, 3rd century, but this is a convenience for people to find things.

JMF: But it tends to break up our understanding.

GF: It intrudes. It intrudes all the time.

JMF: We typically memorize verses and spout them, and sometimes the

point is clear from the verse, just one verse, but often without the rest of the context, you can easily misunderstand what the verse is really about in the middle of the context where it belongs.

GF: There's a famous story about the person who was doing this—"Judas hanged himself" [Matthew 27:5] and then, "Go thou and do likewise" [Luke 10:37]. That's the story that is associated with that kind of reading of the text, which is not reading. It's nonsense.

JMF: Let's go to *How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*—you also worked with Douglas Stuart on that one.

GF: I wrote that book, and Doug edited the Old Testament portions. The publishers wanted us to do it. They asked us to do a combined Old Testament and New Testament survey. Neither Doug nor myself could get interested in it. We just couldn't do it.

So he sat down one day and did what is very much like the Genesis chapter in this book. It was much too long and therefore the book would have been much too long, and it was a little heavy. But the moment I saw it, I said yes! So I did a couple of New Testament books.

The sections are a slight overview of what the whole thing's about, and then a little more of what you need to know in order to read this well, and then we take the reader by the hand and say, "Look, now look, now look," and guide them through it without trying to interpret anything, just let them know what they're reading and when they need to pause... I ended up writing the whole book with Doug making sure that the Old Testament was up to speed, because this turned out to be an extremely useful book for an awful lot of Christians.

JMF: It's a wonderful follow-up to *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. It's longer because you deal with every book.

GF: Again, we're trying to help people be good readers of the Bible. I'm amazed at how few people read their Bibles well. It's the same reason a lot of people don't read their Bibles. Because they don't know how to read them well – they get bogged down and weary of it. These books are attempts to say the Bible is good, readable, material. Do it this way and see if it doesn't help.

I had surgery that put me on the shelf for several months when we were doing the second book. My wife Maudine and I read every bit of that book aloud to one another, and then all of the biblical text over a two-month period when I was recuperating from surgery. We had all day to sit around, as it were.

JMF: You would have never done that if you hadn't had the surgery.

GF: Exactly. In part, the book *reads* well because we did that. Because we're listening to one another read aloud, and when you stumble over a sentence when it goes four lines, you've got to stop and do something else. I don't want to go through the surgery again, but it was a gift, so we took it.

JMF: [In the first book] you mentioned the 13 chapters, and you have the epistles, the Old Testament narratives, Acts, the Gospels, and one chapter on parables, and one on the law. I'd like to talk about parables first. How is a parable different from a narrative?

GF: They're not terribly different, because a narrative and a parable, excuse me, there is more than one kind of parable—that's the first thing people have to hear. Often, when people hear the word *parable*, they'll think of the Good Samaritan. That's good. That's right. It's a story. The story tells the story. But the parables get listed under brief sayings, the very brief kind—the kingdom of God is like....

JMF: ...the treasure hidden in the field.

GF: Yes. So you've got that kind, and then you've got the story parable. People need to know they're both parables, but they're different kinds. One is something is like something else; the other one is also sort of like something else, but the parables are intended to "catch" a person. At the end, the people have egg in their face or whatever the parable is intended to do, particularly the one with the Good Samaritan, where the guy who asks the question gets blown away because the good guy turns out to be the people they hate, the Samaritans. That's purposeful, in your face, listen to what God is doing in the world thing.

A parable can do that in ways that straight prose can't do. Jesus could have said, love your enemies. He did say that, but he also told the story. Oh, you mean Samaritans? The story does it far better. People who can tell stories well always get their point across better than people that, like myself, would just do plain prose. I admire them, but I'm not one of them.

JMF: I've heard people say that all parables that Jesus told are true stories, but a parable doesn't have to be a so-called true story...

GF: What you mean is an actual event.

JMF: Yes, an actual event.

GF: I don't know why people feel that way—that somehow to tell a story to make a point..., an illustration, ...you tell a story to make a point. That's not lying, that's not being false. The *point* is what you're after. But there are some people who just think that that's deception or something. My wonderful in-laws, now deceased, couldn't handle me at this point because for them, if it wasn't true (meaning it didn't actually happen), then it's not

true. I had no categories for that view of what Scripture is about, so I just didn't get into those conversations.

JMF: When I was younger, there were people who felt that fiction was wrong for kids to read because it's not of true, actual events.

GF: It's not *true* (laughing). Good fiction is the best way to find truth.

JMF: Yeah, to get across a point. The stories have always been a way...

GF: They've always been useful that way. Even in the Old Testament, some of the best moments in the narratives are when somebody tells a story and a person gets zapped by the story. That's just the way it is.

JMF: Yeah. David, when Nathan the prophet came and told about the man with the sheep and [2 Sam. 12:1-10].

GF: Yes.

JMF: One of the books is this one, *How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth*. Many people don't think in terms of the variety of translations—they either have a King James or ...the New International Version is popular and widespread...

GF: Most common...

JMF: ...best selling. There isn't much thought as to the differences between translations and what makes one translation superior for whatever the particular purpose may be over another one, and this book gets into that.

GF: You'll notice it's a different co-author in this case.

JMF: Yes. Mark Strauss.

GF: I had been asked to write this book by Zondervan, and it became very clear to me early on that we didn't need Old and New at this point, we needed old and young. I'm old, and Mark is a New Testament scholar who teaches at Bethel Seminary in San Diego, and we're on the TNIV, the NIV committee together.

JMF: The TNIV being...

GF: Today's New International Version. We're on this committee together, we're good friends, and when I was asked to write this book, I realized I didn't need an Old Testament person, I needed a *younger* person. I needed somebody who knew what was going on in the world of language, and he's a marvelous linguist. So I am totally indebted to him for this book. When we go to conferences and we present the book, he's the one who does it. He's got it all on PowerPoint and the whole bit, and he's a marvelous communicator.

We had a lot of fun writing that book. The chapters are pretty evenly divided as to our specialties, but just trying to help people to recognize that if you can't read the Greek or the Hebrew, you're dependent on the people

who can, and who try to put it into English.

There's a whole group of people out there who think loyalty to the biblical language means to be as close to that language as you can possibly be, both in form and in words. No good translator would ever think that. They would never translate a German book into something that looked more like German than English. You wouldn't do that. I cannot understand why people think that so-called literal is better when, in fact, literal is not good English.

What we're after is an English version of what the Greek and Hebrew say. But we've not taken sides on translations. At one point we have a chart showing from literal to the freest of the free and indicate that the middling area is the place that people ought to be for their Bible of choice.

But for some reason, people think that some of these more so-called literal translation have better translations. Actually, they're poorer translations. They are, my term for it, Greek-lish. They're neither English nor Greek. You can understand it in English, but nobody would ever *speak* that English. So why not take the Greek and put it into English, which is what most good translations do. We have them all listed there in terms of various usefulness, and audiences for whom they're useful.

JMF: For your own reading, which translation do you like to use?

GF: We use what is currently the TNIV, but in 2011 will become revised to become the NIV altogether. The present NIV is going to be taken up into all of the changes that have been made over the years and will be the NIV.

JMF: How will it be designated?

GF: NIV updated, whatever. This happens regularly with translations. What a lot of people don't know is that the NIV they're reading is a 1978 version of something that happened much earlier and has scores of changes from the earlier expression of it. This is not a new thing for this particular tradition of translation.

Some people use just the NASB and NASU now. That's fine, but nobody would ever speak that English. You would never speak it in the pulpit. It's Greek-lish, not English. It does very nicely put the Greek into the English language, but you're reading what the Greek looks like, not what English looks like.

This is a universal view of translation. This is not one scholar's view. If you're going to translate Luther into English, you just can't keep the German sentences. It can't be done. In the old story, the American on tour in Germany and he kept asking the translator, "What's he saying? What's he saying?" He said, "I don't know, he hasn't come to the verb yet." Because the verb is the very end of [German sentences]. (laughing). You have to

translate the whole sentence.

JMF: Unfortunately, we've come to the end of our time. We appreciate very much you being here, and thanks so much on behalf of everybody who has used these books and benefited from them, as they have been such a tremendous help—*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book*, and *How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth*. Thanks for your good work and thanks for sharing your time with us.

31. LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

J. Michael Fezell: You've been preaching and writing for most of your life. What is it that you want people to know about God?

Gordon Fee: I can get at that best by telling a story. I was a freshman at Seattle Pacific College and had a remarkable encounter with God. I was there on a basketball scholarship, and it was an idolatry to me. Douglas Stuart led me to give that up to be a fully devoted follower of Jesus. That happened in early December, 1952.

Later that year we had a chapel series we called Spiritual Emphasis Week — a special speaker for each chapel in that week. Her name was Eugenia Price. She was a well-known figure in Hollywood — a writer and that kind of thing — who five years earlier had been converted in Billy Graham's first crusade in Los Angeles. She was a marvelous person and a gifted speaker.

Somewhere at the beginning she said, "You will never find a more relieved person in all the world than I, when I discovered that God is just like Jesus Christ." She admitted that wasn't theologically well-said, but her point was well-said. That's pretty much where any true believer in Jesus, any true Christian must come to terms with theology, with how one understands God.

In John's Gospel this is put on display in every imaginable way, the Son is revealing the Father. It isn't that the Son is separate from the Father; the Father and the Son and Spirit are the one God. But in the incarnation, God became present among us. My way of putting it is: He came among us, took the wraps off, and said, "Here's what I am like. Here's what God is and what God is like."

Every false theology in history has been a failure to take that seriously — that the only true understanding of God is that which comes through revelation of the Son, who is the full, perfect, absolute representation (it's hard to find language when we talk theologically, but understand...), representation of who God is and what God is like. Every false theology is steered away from what we learn about God through the revelation in the Son, because that is where the full revelation of God takes place.

The ultimate expression of that revelation is in the crucifixion. God on a cross with his creatures trying to get rid of him. And instead of getting rid of him, they got him forever. You can't get rid of him. Death followed by resurrection followed by the Holy Spirit with a total complete passion on God's part to do what was intended in the Garden of Eden, and that's to create human beings in his image.

What God has done in Christ and by the Spirit is to recreate fallen human

beings back into the image of God so that we live on this planet as the image-bearers of God, which should constantly point people to God, because we bear that image. I have a great relief that God is just like Jesus Christ.

JMF: Many Christians think of the Father being a scary God of the Old Testament.

GF: A mean old man in heaven, yes.

JMF: Jesus is the nice guy who shields us from the anger of this scary God of the Old Testament.

GF: Everybody who does this has not read the Gospel of John. “Have I been with you for so long,” Jesus asks, “and you don’t know who I am? The one who has seen me has seen the Father.” The Gospel of John takes all of that story, that Gospel, that incarnation, and raises it to the next level so that we hear the Gospel story in its theological setting of who this is.

It’s in the Synoptic Gospels as well, but John just makes it so stark that you can’t miss the point that this is not just another human being, this is God incarnate — taking off the wraps and saying, “Look, this is who God is. This is what God is like.”

JMF: John also records Jesus talking about his oneness with the Father. But he also prays that the disciples “may be one as we are one.” What is he driving at there?

GF: That’s one of the more difficult texts to spell out in detail. The concern throughout that section of the Gospel has to do with, in this case, two believers, two followers of Jesus — that they both together reflect the likeness of God that’s found in Christ in their relationship with one another. All of that had to do with how we become the bearers of the image. We do that not because we pray a lot, we do that because we love our neighbor, and our neighbor is often our enemy.

As God loved his enemies, namely you and me, and redeemed us by that love, he wants us to be his image-bearers and to be redemptive agents in a world where people not only don’t believe in him but would prefer to curse. They don’t believe in him, but they’ll use his name and curse. It’s how terribly fallen the human race has become.

JMF: When he’s saying that about the disciples, they have been at each other’s throats over who’s going to be the greatest, and he’s having to interrupt their disputes over all that, and yet he’s talking about a oneness that will transcend all of that.

GF: He does scold them a little bit here, but he’s constantly bringing them back. “Look, watch... the works that I do are the works of the Father. I am doing the Father’s work. Pay attention, this is what God is like.” People ask

me what God is like. This is not theologically well-put, but it says it. God is just like Jesus Christ.

JMF: We're not afraid of Jesus. We read about Jesus and we think, I could trust him to not surprise me with condemnation. But we are a little afraid of the Father. We're worried about what he might do next.

GF: That is understandable, because many of us have broken fathers who aren't people we would necessarily emulate. My case is different. My father was a true representation of my heavenly Father. So I never had to overcome the frailties and the difficulties and the weaknesses of my own father because I regularly saw the revelation of God and the way he treated my mother and the way that he was a pastor and the way that he created a congregation, became a professor in a Bible college, the way he treated students. He was an image-bearer, so that was never a difficulty for me.

But I wasn't long as a pastor or a teacher when I realized, that image didn't work for some people because their fathers were so bad, so brutal, that they didn't want God to be a father. In those cases they had to rethink what they would like a father to be and then come to terms with the fact that God is infinitely more than that. It's an image that in our culture does have drawbacks, but I won't leave the image, because not only is it the biblical one, but correctly expressed, it's the best one.

JMF: The Holy Spirit comes into the picture as well in John. Jesus is talking about his oneness with the Father, he's talking about "if you've seen me, you've seen the Father," he's talking about how they may be one...or how the disciples may be one as he and the Father are one. Then he starts to talk about the Comforter: "I'm going to send you a comforter. It's necessary I go away." How does the Holy Spirit fit into the relationship with Father and Son?

GF: That isn't spelled out in the text. That's where theology comes in. It's clear in John's Gospel that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit both of the Father *and* of his Son, and therefore the one Holy Spirit is the full image-bearer of the Godhead. The reason, the point, of the Holy Spirit throughout the New Testament is that the Spirit is to continue the work of the incarnation by incarnating us with God's likeness. As the Spirit, there's the fruit of the God likeness in our relationships with one another.

This is the great problem I had – in history, the solitary monk, the one who went out into the desert to get Christian perfection. That's impossible. You can't find out whether a person is a true Christian until they rub elbows with another Christian. That's when you find out whether the work of the Spirit is really taking place. The solitary hermetic monk was so unbiblical that

it doesn't have a leg to stand on, because the real test is how one responds *to another* when the other is doing things that are either distasteful, wrong, deliberately evil...how we respond to that is going to be the ultimate evidence of the Spirit's outworking, the life of Christ in us.

JMF: Christ forgives, he loves his enemies. It's good for us, but we don't like it when he's forgiving our enemies.

GF: Exactly. We don't like that part of it. We like to be Christians, but we also like to be fallen at points. Our fallen-ness can still find expression.

JMF: I'm glad he forgives his enemies, which often includes us...

GF: Yes, on the cross.

JMF: ...and our enemies. Here he is telling us that we can be one with each other, and the Holy Spirit then is continuing that incarnation...and that includes loving our enemies. It isn't just telling us something that we need to do, because we can't. We don't do that. We never have. His ministry is the doing of that which we fail in.

GF: One of the difficulties with this is the enormity of the population, and that these are spoken in basically rural contexts, where people live in small villages and they have to get along, or the village won't make it. We now live in a global village where almost no one can live in isolation anymore. The context for us is so huge that we have a hard time imagining what it's like to love our enemies, because we don't even know who our enemies are. I was a kid growing up in grammar school during World War II. How would one love Hitler? I'm sorry, Hitler was the incarnation of evil. So I quit thinking in those categories. The question is, how do I love the neighbor next door?

JMF: Our neighbor is the one we're having the problem with.

GF: Yes, so this is the person that we must love, but it's easy to overlook that person in thinking in broader people terms. I love the people in my church... I still want to have dinner with some of them. It's the one-on-one thing that Jesus is about — not that global or larger communal. How do I love somebody out of their evil? I would assume that's the basic reason for loving them.

JMF: But Jesus does that, and he's in us, therefore we can rest in his doing of that, without us having to take the burden.

GF: Here's where the Holy Spirit must come in.

JMF: It's a rest, isn't it? He does what we're unable to. He heals us.

GF: Yes. Good thing, too.

JMF: You've done a lot of work with reading the Scriptures in the context in which they were written. As you just mentioned, this is written in the

context of a village kind of thinking. It doesn't address details and specifics of our kind of world in which we live on a block where we don't even know most of the people who drive by the front of our house.

GF: Yes, exactly.

JMF: We have a different kind of relationship from any of the relationships people would have known then. They talk about a stranger... When a stranger comes to town, everybody knows that a stranger has come to town, and it's one, or one little group. Pretty soon everybody knows a whole lot about them, because they make it their business. We can't do that.

GF: Yes. How that translates for us is very difficult. I don't pretend that I would not answer that in our context. I think the greater question is, how do I love those neighbors that are closest?

JMF: The neighbors I know.

GF: Yeah, those who are around me. Maudine and I live in a ten-unit complex of individual units. We think in terms of how do we love? We are in a very good community. We're the only believers, but we get along well with everybody. They get along well with one another. There's very little of the kind of fighting that I know happens in a lot of these communities. That would be the next step for us. How do we love? How do we care for somebody if they're ill? How do we get food to them or something like that as a way of demonstrating that we're part of this community...not trying to convert them by the four spiritual laws, but trying to love them as they are and then perhaps at some point they might ask what we're all about.

JMF: Being ready to give an answer, but not cramming ...

GF: Pushing it down their throat, yes.

JMF: Isn't there some trust in the Spirit's power to work with somebody instead of taking it all on ourselves?

GF: Altogether. On the other hand, sometimes the door sits wide open and we get hesitant and don't step through the door. Part of that is a personality matter, too. Neither my wife or I are extroverts on one-on-one relationships, so...

JMF: Most people aren't.

GF: ...we have to push ourselves to move in that direction.

JMF: We tend to assume that everybody should be the same when it comes to evangelism, and yet there are so many different aspects of how we are with other people according to the way God has made us as individuals. We're not all the same.

GF: True evangelism has to stem out of good relationships. The only other evangelism is the kind that happens in church when there's a sermon

and a visitor is there and they hear it and the Spirit speaks. True evangelism is a relational thing where the relationship is secure and you hope they might ask you, “Why are you so weird?”

JMF: So it’s a good idea for Christians to make friends with unbelievers.

GF: Oh yes.

JMF: For the sake of friendship.

GF: Neither Maudine or I are good at that. But if they make the first step, we’re good at it. It has to do with our personalities.

JMF: Studies have shown that people would rather live next door to almost anybody than an evangelical Christian because of the stereotypes of evangelical Christians being so pushy and judgmental...

GF: ...and aggressive.

JMF: Yeah.

GF: The New Testament makes it clear that you love your neighbor by doing good for your neighbor. Evangelism will come out of that, and no other way.

JMF: The St. Francis quote is always interesting, “Always preach the gospel. If necessary, use words.”

GF: This comes from my wife: many years ago she was struck by how many times in Scripture it talks about doing good. Not doing works, but doing what is good. Somehow evangelicals have never caught on, it seems to me, that’s the primary biblical text on how we live in the world.

JMF: When you hear a discussion about what we’re going to do in the church, “And here are some good things we can do in the community as a church.” There’s always the “But then how do we set it up so that the good thing we’re doing gives us an opportunity to hit them with the gospel?” In other words, it’s like we don’t know how to do good without also having to say something, or else we haven’t done what we are supposed to do. The “saying something” is the most important, and the “doing good” is only a means to the end, rather than doing good being the end.

GF: Taking a casserole over to the young couple that just had a new baby. That’s what you do.

JMF: Not so that you can give them a spiel.

GF: No, just because you’re doing good! It’s the good thing to do. Many people who don’t make any profession of faith understand that better than Christians do — that we should do good. Too many evangelical Christians are more interested in evangelizing as the first matter of business rather than loving their neighbor as the first matter of business.

JMF: That’s a good point. I was listening to Jack Hayford once talking

about that some people tend to see evangelism as scalps on your belt...

GF: Oh dear me, yes.

JMF: ...rather than living with people as Christ would.

GF: Loving them for their own sake.

JMF: For their own sake because they are people.

GF: Yes, made in God's image. We need to be recreated into Christ's image.

32. THE BOOK OF REVELATION

JMF: Dr. Fee's latest book, *Revelation*, is part of the New Covenant Commentary Series published by Wipf & Stock [a.k.a. Cascade] in 2010.

Before we begin, I should mention that we had several wonderful interviews with your daughter, Cherith.

GF: She will have done better than her dad would have done.

JMF: We'd like to begin by talking about your new book, *Revelation*, which is based, as you explained to me, on your notes for your class at Regent, the last class before your retirement.

GF: Actually, it was my last class *after* retirement.

JMF: We were talking about this earlier, and you mentioned that people either tend to approach Revelation by ignoring it altogether, or by obsessing over it. What causes those two reactions?

GF: It has to do with the kind of literature (the technical word is *genre*) that it is. Most people, especially those raised in the King James Version, where every verse is a paragraph, so that every sentence, every verse, is equal to all of the rest, they don't think of it in terms of continuity or in terms of narrative or letter or parable, they just think in terms of little things called verses. The net result is, they are not understanding the *kind* of thing that Revelation is. They level it out – the whole New Testament is leveled out ... all read at the same level.

JMF: That's an interesting thought because it makes so much sense, that we look at the Bible and it's divided into chapters and verses, and as you just said, each verse is a paragraph, and so it does come across as though verse 9 has equal weight of the authority of the word of God and should be taken as important as verse 12 or verse 16, and we skip around like that... [**GF:** On its own and out of context.] but we don't read anything else like that.

GF: Nothing else. Nobody reads anything else the way we read the Bible. So the passion of my teaching life has been to get people not just to study the Bible, but to learn to read the Bible well. To do that, they have to have some sense of the differences of the materials that make up the biblical text, and the Revelation is unique in the New Testament.

The only thing else like it in the canon is several chapters at the end of Daniel. But, the Revelation is not like Daniel – it's a different kind of apocalyptic material – that is very much in keeping with other intertestamental documents of this kind, of which this is but one – but the best and the greatest, ten leagues ahead of and over all those intertestamental documents.

JMF: And intertestamental is referring to...

GF: ... between the Old and the New Testament, between Malachi and Matthew, a 200-year period where a lot of these books were written.

JMF: But Revelation is the only one that appears in the...

GF: In the New Testament. Yeah, and there is nothing quite like it in the New Testament. But it was a common kind of literature for the people who received it, so they didn't come to it with great mystery and tried to dig out all the things. John knew his readers and they knew him.

It's subversive literature. It's telling the Roman empire that their days are numbered – at the height of their glory, when Rome had reached the peak of its power and domain, here is John, exiled on a lonely island, facing Rome and saying, “God's got your number — your days are coming to an end.” It took 200 years for it to happen, but time wasn't John's big thing. It was the certainty of it. That's what the Revelation is basically about. It's about God in charge of the universe, not the Roman Empire.

JMF: So for us to try to take Revelation's symbols and act as though they're really about Mussolini, or they're really about Adolf Hitler, is to misunderstand what's going on in Revelation itself.

GF: Yeah, we wouldn't do that with one of Jesus' parables. Nor we do that with one of the letters of Paul. So why would we do that to this – which is first of all, a letter. It's to the seven churches. He writes to them individually, and everybody else is reading everybody else's mail. They're all in this together, but the document has to do with the fact that they are headed for a terrible holocaust. John recognizes that the martyrdom of Antipas of Pergamum [2:13] is the signal, the harbinger that it's going to get worse before it gets better. That martyrdom is what tipped this off... he's trying to tell the people that the days to come are going to be far worse than you imagine. The catacombs are the clear example that John was right.

JMF: Let's talk about the catacombs. How do they demonstrate...

GF: Besides being places where Christians met, the catacombs were their tombs. The burials of Christians underground in huge numbers for those days was evidence that they were an underground movement. Every time they came up above ground and lived well above ground for one emperor, another emperor comes along and wants to wipe them out so, underground they go again – literally underground. I'm curious as to if the language “underground” comes from the fact that the early Christians literally went underground. Anyway, the Revelation is subversive literature, and the people who received it understood that.

JMF: At the time John wrote, his readers would have understood

apocalyptic literature and what the symbols are about and so on, but when we read it today, what are the lessons we can learn from it, understanding that it's not written about our day in particular, but what do we draw from reading the book?

GF: The same thing that we would draw from reading the other New Testament books. What do we draw from reading Acts? Something about our history, something about what God was doing in the first century. What do we learn from Revelation? What God is about, how God is at work even in times of great distress, and that God is the victor. The book ends on the glorious note of triumph.

JMF: So we draw the same lessons they drew, but we don't have to be misreading Revelation as some kind of a book that's written *really* for us in our time as opposed to written to them, and looking for who is this beast going to be... [**GF:** Exactly. We know who the beast *was*.], who are the horns going to be and all that sort of thing. It seems that in every age, every generation of Christians, there's a big contingent that thinks that their day is the last days – that Christ is going to return in their day. They go to Revelation and find ways to manipulate the book to fit it with world events to be able to determine that their day is the end time. That's been going on from the beginning of the church. Why do we feel the need to do that?

GF: I can't answer that question because I can't get into the heads of the people who think this way. On the other hand, we are to be ready constantly – the gospel song, “We cannot see what lies before and so we cling to him the more. Trust and obey.” This is how we are to live. But “trust and obey” is how we are to live, not try to figure out all the details as to how it's all going to work out. So it's true, generation after generation went to the Revelation and claims some powerful figure like Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, as the Anti-Christ. This is not about them, this is not about our days, it's about *that* day, and where we can draw our parallels out of it like we do with everything else in Scripture. Romans wasn't written to us, but we hear it as a word for us. Revelation wasn't written to us, but we hear it as a word for us, once we understand it as a word for them, and what it was saying to them. That's a way of saying that God is in control and not the powerful empires of the world.

JMF: The tyrants are always around, and we're always safe in Christ's hands even if we die at the hands of tyrants [**GF:** right... especially if we die.] Going to the Bible in general then, probably the most well-known book in any seminary is the one that you authored with Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. You get into some of these principles of reading the

Bible, in the way that it was written, in the way that it was intended, and then looking at what sort of lessons we might draw from that. When a person sits down to read the Bible, what are the common, typical mistakes they make?

GF: There are two firsts in this, ok? First, get rid of the numbers. The numbers intrude, there are no numbers in the original text, just get rid of the numbers – **JMF:** the verse and chapter designations], the verse designations, yes. The Bible Society [Biblica] is putting out a translation, TNIV, without the numbers. It's got paragraphs that are meaningful, but the numbers are out in the margin so you know where you are... The numbers intrude and there were no numbers in the original, I can assure you, nor in any copy for 1,500 years. The numbers were inserted by Robert Estienne. He was doing it on a horse, I think, when he was traveling across Europe. The numbers are simply ways of finding things. They have nothing to do with the text. So the first thing one has to do to learn to read well is to get rid of the numbers, in one's head – not necessarily go through and scratch them out in your Bible. Once one does that, then you start thinking and reading in paragraphs, the way you read anything.

But even before that, and this is the really important thing – what kind of thing am I reading? You don't read a love letter the same way you read a court document. People *know* that, by instinct. They come to Scripture and they have all of this marvelous variety of inspired stuff, in this variety, and level it all. **JMF:** So we read everything the same way.] So it's like reading a love letter and reading a court document the same way, with no sense that these are different kinds of things. **JMF:** Or of reading a poem as though it's a headline news story in the newspaper.] Instinctively people do understand that the Psalter is poetry and that the doublets are doublets – most people do catch that. Others don't have a clue that the doublets are doublets ...

JMF: What's a doublet?

GF: In poetry, a doublet is saying the same thing twice in marvelously different language. Sometimes parallel and sometimes in antithesis... and there are some triplets as well. The Psalter is made up of these marvelous doublets. People who read a modern translation, in which the poetry is set out as poetry, instinctively recognize, "This is poetry. This is not prose." But when you read every verse a paragraph, poetry and prose are lost. So every verse a paragraph and ... my verse for the day... I don't mean to be unkind the way I'm speaking about people's habits. But they would never read anything else that way! If they were to get a love poem from their lover, they would not read it as prose. But we take the Scripture and level it out and then

put numbers in, and in that have a verse for the day.

JMF: I hear people talk about, “I read the Bible literally. I’m a Bible literalist.” By that, they mean to say, “I take it seriously, I believe what it says.” But yet they *do* take it literally. What are some problems with reading the Bible literally?

GF: I don’t have trouble with people reading the Bible literally, because most of it is to be understood literally. But they don’t read the Psalms that way, and they shouldn’t read the Revelation that way. Yes, take it literally in terms of what it is. But please, let it be its thing — don’t make it something different from what it is.

JMF: Jesus speaks of a camel going through the eye of a needle. He speaks of many things as parables, and yet these are not truths, news stories of things that actually happen. There was no prodigal son who actually... he’s telling a story, a tale, to make a point. We don’t read those things literally.

GF: Actually there are some people who do. They think if there wasn’t a true prodigal son and a father and another son, then Jesus was not telling the truth. They wouldn’t say lie... but he wouldn’t tell something if it wasn’t true. [**JMF:** So therefore there was one.] Their view of *story* is “it’s not true.” A story means “not true.” That’s not the way you read anything. That’s a mixed-up view of how to read Scripture, and I find myself not able to help people like that.

JMF: Isn’t the Bible full of metaphors as well, like any other form of language? If I say, it’s raining cats and dogs, people know what I mean. They don’t go outside and expect to find a puppy.

GF: Yeah, and there are a lot of those kinds of things (not that particular one) throughout Scripture, and especially in the teaching of Jesus. He was rich with metaphors and using ideas of all kinds of things around him to help people catch the fact that the kingdom of God was at hand.

JMF: In getting back to the book of Revelation, the chapter divisions... you’ve talked about how there are a couple of places toward the end and also chapter 14 where the chapter divisions really kind of...

GF: Yeah... To give credit where credit is due, the chapters in Revelation are basically well done. Nonetheless, the numbers have a way of separating things that should be held together. When you get to chapter 14, it’s the only place in the book where you have a series of small units, and you have to come to terms with how these work. It begins with a lamb and 144,000 on Mount Zion whom they’ll meet again. Later on, there are the three angels who fly in and make a pronouncement. Then there are these two marvelous images of the grain harvest and the trampling out of the grapes. My instincts

are that if our chapter 15 began there (as it should), everybody would read those two correctly. But at the end of chapter 14, they just hang there.

These two parables of the harvest of grain and the trampling of the grapes introduce the rest of the book — the gathering of God’s people, the gathering of the saints and the judgment on Rome and its minions. That’s sort of the intro, and then you have the final set of seven, the seven bowls of God’s wrath. “Wrath” is the right term here – “wrath” having to do with God’s final judgment, of which the final one is the overthrow and collapse of Babylon the Great, which is his language for the Roman Empire. That’s followed then by the marvelous picture of Rome as a very high-priced prostitute. (Prostitute is really the wrong word. This is a call lady of the highest order.) She is seductive, and she seduced the whole world. Rome has done that. So the very next thing is lament over Rome’s fall.

Then there are the warnings to escape, and then that’s followed by the three sets of woes, which is then followed in chapter 11:1-9 by three sets of hallelujahs... three woes, three hallelujahs, this is hardly accidental. This is carefully constructed literature. Then the final thing there is the heavenly warrior defeats the Beast.

Right after that, if we didn’t have numbers, one would see that the so-called millennium is *an insert* that is assuring the martyrs that they have a place in God’s program. The only people mentioned in this are those who, for their testimony of Jesus, have been killed by the Empire. They’re given a special role. He says, the rest of the dead, those who aren’t martyred, they’re going to have their time at the end. I don’t think you should take this literally. This means God has secured them, this is a special people, martyred because they believed in Jesus.

That’s followed by the final judgment of Satan and the dead and you end up the book finishing with the new heaven and new earth and a new Eden. He didn’t know it’s going to be the last book in the Bible. The book begins with Eden; it concludes with Eden. This is just a marvelous thing that God, by his providence, saw as our canon, so that you have a restored heaven, a restored earth, and then in this restored earth, a restored Eden.

Then the book ends. It ends with a lot of little things that are all important, but its basic story ends in 22:5. It’s a marvelous book, and I cringe whenever I see and hear people make it have to do primarily with something in our future, when the only stuff that’s in our future is chapters 21 and 22. Everything else belongs back in the near future of these seven churches and all other Christians at the beginning of the second century – wonderful reassurance.

JMF: It reminds me of the statement where Jesus talks about you're a little flock; in this world you will have...**[GF: tribulation!]** but... **[GF: but I've overcome!]** – the same message as in Revelation in a nutshell.

GF: Yeah, exactly! I'm prejudiced, I love this book. This is marvelous stuff. Don't screw it up by making it mean something different from what John intended, and the Holy Spirit intended by inspiring John to write it. It has to do basically with them and with us as we follow in their train. Just as the Gospels had to do with them and with us as we follow in their train. Once one sees that, then the glory of this book comes alive on the pages.

JMF: The dispensationalists' viewpoint tends to take the millennium and make it into the focal point of everything...

GF: Yeah, that's strange, because it's actually parenthetical. This is one place I really don't like the numbers, because if this began where it should, in 19:11, if [chapter] 20 began there... one would see that what is our 20:1-6 fits squarely as a parenthetical middle point between the heavenly warrior defeating the Beast and the judgment of Satan and the judgment of the dead. Then you have the whole new heaven and new earth.

JMF: That's a reassurance to those who will be martyred...

GF: They are reassurance to the martyrs mostly because... If it weren't the end of chapter 19, people would see this better. But the heavenly warrior defeats the Beast. So the martyrs are given a special moment, and then the final judgments. This is so marvelously done and for the most part the numbers don't intrude, but at the end of the book they intrude a bit, here in particular. I know I sound very confident, positive, but I lived with this book for years, and I experience enormous pain when I hear it used in a dispensationalist way... because, frankly, they know almost nothing about the book as John intended.

JMF: It's a shame to miss the reassurance, the peace, the joy, the comfort that can come... We read the Psalms all the time that way, in times of trial, we go to the Psalms and we find reassurance in those.

GF: Even though they were written for those people in Israel, they're reassurance to us.

JMF: All the symbols have to do with Israel in that day and age. God is not a high tower, and yet we understand what is meant by that when we are being set upon by our enemies, as it were... You brought out how this same reassurance and joy and peace, comfort, can be ours from Revelation. But instead we look at Revelation, we think, "When is the end of the world going to come?" And how do we measure the horns...

GF: A lot of our difficulties is that we're English-speaking North

Americans. Mexican Christians could understand this a little better than we. When you think of how many places on the earth, how many martyrdoms are taking place, *now*, on this planet, this book is for them. This book is telling them that your martyrdom counts for something. You're being brought into God's kingdom...

JMF: And the martyrdom of those you love.

GF: Yes, exactly. I think of the Christians in various Asian settings where this book tells them that they can still rejoice and sing hallelujah and praise our God because God is in control even though they may die. That's what Revelation is about – God is ultimately in charge. The problem of North Americans (and I speak as a dual citizen of Canada and the United States) is we think we have a special privilege with God, and that we should get all the breaks and none of the pain.

JMF: We tend to think of everything as though we're the center of ... not just of the universe but of the Christian universe as well. If there are missionaries, the mission should be going from us to these other places that don't have the great insight and wisdom. *We* should be the teachers. It's been such been an interesting phenomenon to see Asian missionaries come to the United States as though we need to hear the gospel here. We're shocked by that.

GF: As my Australian colleague would say, "Good on ya, mate."

JMF: So if there is one thing that you would like people to know about the book of Revelation, what would that be?

GF: One thing? It's about the first-century church that is headed for a terrible two-century holocaust. Read it with that in view, and then ask yourself "Where do I fit in?" God is in control — there is absolute reassurance — there's a three-fold woe over Rome, over Babylon, but there's a three-fold hallelujah to those who are God's people.

God's in control, not ourselves – our task is to bear witness to Christ. The Greek word for *bear witness* is the word that we have transliterated into the word *martyr*. It is the Greek word for *witness*. The ultimate witness was martyrdom, so the Greek word *martyr* — witness – became *martyr* – being slain for one's witness, and now we think of martyrs as those kinds of people only. But that's the word for *witness*. We bear witness to Christ and we may not live long after we do that, if we're in certain parts of the world. I happen to be among the privileged. I say that with tears, because I know that I'm among the privileged. What pains me is for the privileged to not take seriously the brothers and sisters in the world that are not as privileged as we are.

33. FAITH AND ITS CRITICS

Gary Deddo: I'd like to focus our time together on the issues that you addressed in your Gifford Lectures and published as *Faith and Its Critics*. The Gifford lectures have a certain purpose and parameters, but why did you chose that topic?

David Fergusson: The Gifford lectures are public lectures on the theme of natural theology, although that theme has been interpreted in a very latitudinarian way over the years. I was originally intending to lecture on the subject of providence. As I worked on that project, it seem to me more like a work within Christian doctrine than a study that could belong within natural theology.

I was also conscious of the onslaught upon religion taking place in the works of the so-called new atheists, and I was receiving a number of invitations from church groups to engage with this literature, and to offer an informed Christian response. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed to me that that was an appropriate, and topical theme for the Gifford lectures in 2008 (more than this other project on providence, which I'm continuing to work on), so it came about that I did six lectures in response to the new atheists in the 2008 Gifford.

GD: It certainly is a current topic. One thing that came up in the book and carried throughout is that addressing critics of religion in general, and Christianity in particular, you suggest benefits of all parties involved, rather than being a problem. You note along the way that dismissing criticism (and even sometimes attacks), or passing over them too quickly, is not a good way to go. What benefits do you see coming from this more serious engagement with critics by believing Christians?

DF: We can reach a deeper and more informed understanding of our



faith; we should not be afraid of criticism. We have to respond robustly to some of it. But there are other criticisms of faith that are not altogether invalid, and I think we can learn and move on from these. So I'm interested in promoting a conversation between

people of faith and their critics, rather than continuing what has, to some extent, been a shouting match involving people of very different positions who get involved in these sort of gladiatorial, winner-takes-all contests. I'm not interested in participating in that, so I'm looking for a more dialogical approach. There are ways in which faith can be chastened and deepened and enriched by engaging in a conversation with its critics in the contemporary world.

GD: In various debates I've witnessed, the idea is often to win the debate. But you state that your goal was not to necessarily win the debate or convince the critics of the truth or superiority of the Christian faith (either over other religions or even over atheism). You're concerned that certain approaches to apologetics are misguided and even ineffective, and I think you're trying to correct for that in how you go about it.

DF: Yes. My task was initially the more modest one of showing that Christian faith remains credible and an intellectually defensible option within the modern world. I was not attempting to, as it were, "clear the field" of all rival positions. I don't think that is possible; I'm not sure that it's the province of theological reason to do that. My intention was to defend Christian faith in the face of the attacks – but without seeking to provide a conclusive refutation of all other possibilities. I think that that's an unrealistic strategy in our pluralistic context.

GD: Would you go on to say, though, that there are times and places in which it would be appropriate for Christians to attempt to make a very strong and positive case of the truth of the Christian gospel?

DF: Yes; it is always incumbent upon us to make the best case possible for the gospel. We're enjoined by the New Testament to offer a reasoned defense for the hope that is within us. So if in the course of defending the faith, we are successful in persuading people of its credibility, then so much the better. I'm pleased about that, but on the whole, people do not come to faith as the result of a philosophical or other argument. Part of my defense of faith was to point out that faith is much more than a commitment to a set of beliefs that one can itemize in propositional form.

GD: Right. So, you were clearing the ground...

DF: Yes, it was, at least at first. Towards the end of the final lecture, I try to say that that this had been a ground-clearing exercise, and that if I were advocating or promoting the Christian form of faith, then I would be speaking more confessionally – for example, about the transforming power of Jesus and the gospel and so on – but this project was of a different sort.

GD: In your lectures and the book that resulted from that, you spend a good deal of time addressing the critiques of the new atheists, especially

Dawkins, Dennett and Hitchens. They see religion of any sort as dangerous, wrong and misleading. They claim they're harmful to humanity, and they bring in science to bolster their case. Is there a common line of argument that runs through them that we need to understand?

DF: There's a family resemblance of arguments. Dawkins is more inclined than the others to enlist science in the criticism of religion. You will find more philosophical arguments in Dennett against the reasonableness of faith, whereas Hitchens is particularly preoccupied with showing the pernicious forms that religion tends to take in the modern world. He has this mantra, "religion poisons everything" that runs throughout the book *God Is Not Great*. Hitchens is more focused on the practical effects of religion than perhaps the others are, although there are elements of that in Dawkins, too.

GD: Why do you think they latch onto that? It seems to me that over the last 20, 30 years, that's a bit of shift, that the critiques of Christianity didn't use to come from that angle, they weren't quite as vehement. Do you have any insights about that shifting? Am I right about that?

DF: I think you're right. It is in some ways a post-9/11 phenomenon. When I was a student in the 1970s I was taught by many secular intellectuals. They tended to regard religion as quaint and harmless. It was to wither on the vine. It was completely unappealing – but it was not dangerous, and they weren't angry about it. They were skeptical and dismissive, but not aggressive in the way in they dismissed it. There was a degree of condescension at times, but not the anger that we have in the new atheism.

Partly, it's borne of the realization that religion, when considered globally, is not withering on the vine – it's resurgent throughout much of the world. We see some secularization here in Western Europe. But religion is a potent force in other parts of the world. This is particularly evident in militant Islam, which is a target within the writings of the new atheists. So I see them as working in something of a post-9/11 context.

Some of them have written specifically about 9/11 and have seen this as a watershed in our life as a society. It calls for a much more radical attack on religion. They're concerned about the soft-centered pluralist nature of our Western democracies. It's time to come out and to take on religion, to subject it to rational inspection and criticism – hence the title of Dennett's book: *Breaking the Spell* – a spell over the criticism of religion that we have to break. I sense (and you know more about this than I do) that there is perhaps some greater difficulty in coming out as an atheist in the United States than there is in Europe. Part of the campaigning tenor of the literature is with a view to persuading people to come out and to self-identify as atheist or agnostic. There are some signs from the recent opinion polls that they have been

successful in doing that.

GD: It's interesting how much 9/11 has affected our lives in many ways.

DF: Some writers have suggested that the new atheism is Islamophobic in particular. Its most extreme invective is directed towards Islam (that's certainly true of some of Harris' writings). There is a case to be made for Islam as perhaps the primary target.

GD: Professor Fergusson, I think you made a very interesting and important observation in your lectures about the nature of religion, including Christianity, in which you distinguish between religion, and beliefs or belief systems. Sometimes that's all mashed together. Would you explain to us about that distinction between religion and beliefs, and why that's important?

DF: Much of the new atheist literature suggests that religion involves a set of beliefs in supernatural objects. It's about that and only that. If you are to read Richard Dawkins or some of the recent literature in the cognitive psychology of religion, you might get that impression, that that is the sum total of religion.

My argument in this book is that, while faith does involve some cognitive elements, it's not possible to strip belief from out of faith. That is only one element or set of elements within faith. It involves a wide-ranging set of practical commitments, emotional commitments, dispositions to behave in particular ways, belonging to a faith community and embracing its traditions and practices of worship and typical habits. In faith, we often find a commitment to particular diets or forms of clothing or observance of holidays and rituals, and these are important in shaping the self and in facilitating faith.

These more practical affective and communal dimensions of religion are seriously neglected in the literature, to the extent of distorting what is involved in coming to faith and then practicing faith. Part of what I had to say was to stress this more contextual communal, existential dimension of faith and its commitment. It's not like Bertrand Russell's "celestial teapot" – believing in one more object up there in the skies to add to our cognitive stock. That is seriously to misrepresent what is involved in faith.

GD: What has that done to rearrange the argument, or address the critique?

DF: It re-situates the critique insofar as it directs it towards practice (although belief is not irrelevant; there are belief commitments involved in faith); it directs the discussion more towards the significance of belonging to a faith community, of participating in its rituals and ethical practices, of getting an insider's perspective on what it is like to be a person of faith, rather than this more externalist approach that is adopted by the critics.

GD: So, to attack the rationality of a belief, or to charge an irrationality, is too narrow a view of what religion is. If they're going to evaluate what a religion is, they have to account for much more of what's going on...

DF: Yes, they have to look at what people do, how they behave, how they experience the world, the lives they lead, in a much more holistic context, rather than just asking them what they believe before breakfast each day. That is to distort the nature of faith.

GD: As you defend religion and the Christian faith, it seems to me that you have two major elements involved. First, you want to demonstrate that empirical or scientific descriptions of reality that come from neo-Darwinism (or out of a naturalistic framework) don't negate or rule out the need for a religion or theological understanding. Second, you show how such scientific views can't adequately account for human endeavors such as morality, art and religion. Could you say more about those two angles on your argument to defend the Christian faith?

DF: A central part of my thesis is this idea of the complementarity of discourses. I see science and religion as not in competition with each other, as not inhabiting the same terrain – but as offering different descriptions and forms of understanding. Once we establish the essentially complementary nature of that relationship, then we can, as people of faith, stop worrying about the incursion of science upon the domain occupied by religion. They occupy different types of terrain, and they offer different descriptions, and therefore this isn't a zero-sum game where the more that science explains, the less there is for religion to explain. The forms of understanding represented are layered rather than clashing on the same level. That was my fundamental take on the relationship between science and religion.

That's not to say there aren't, historically, points of tension or conflict, or that there isn't a possibility of creative dialogue between science and religion. But they are attempting to address different types of questions and to offer different forms of understanding. Added to that is a farther view that science and religion don't exhaust all the possibilities. In addition to religion, we have social-scientific, historical, ethical and aesthetic ways of describing the world and our experience, and these, too, are useful, and they complement what we have in science and religion.

I reject the kind of scientistic reductionism that we find in Dawkins and others by making common cause with other disciplines and forms of understanding and arguing that we need all of these. It is a mistake to see only one form of discourse as having a total explanation of everything. Science can't explain everything – that's basically my take on this. I find that many scientists share that view. Scientism is not an ideology that one finds

amongst very many scientists, in my experience.

GD: Some of these critics seem to inhabit that orientation – scientism...

DF: Right, and there's a danger: a popular perception of the power of science is that it excludes religion. As science has advanced, so religion has had to retreat in what it can seek to explain and understand. That is a category mistake. We are dealing with different forms of understanding, responses to different types of questions.

GD: So that religion has just as much to do with the natural world, with morality and art especially. You bring those out.

DF: Religion does relate closely to the types of explanation that we find in ethics, on the arts. I'm arguing in the book for a kind of a realist explanation of ethics and the arts – they point towards truths that are not of our own making, truths that we discover in our ethical activity and our artistic appreciation. These seem to be similar to what is happening in religion. It's not simply a matter of self-expression or self-projection. We are encountering truths, dimensions of reality that are not of our making. These are disclosing themselves to us in our activity, in our apprehension of whatever the object of study is.

GD: Can you give an example of that in the arts?

DF: In the arts, we often have awakened within us a sense of beauty that points towards the transcendent. We find it difficult to explain that. We have recourse to symbolic language, but it's a form of appreciation that constrains our understanding. As Iris Murdoch says, in going round the art gallery, the experience we have is not that of shopping in a supermarket, where we select whatever gives us pleasure. We are taken out of ourselves and drawn into another dimension. That's slippery language, of course.

For many people today, it's in the experience of beauty or some other disclosure that comes through a poem or painting, or piece of music, that takes them out of themselves and evokes a sense of the transcendent. To that extent, the world of the arts is close to that of religion, although it's not the same.

GD: A strictly materialistic or scientific description would not have much to say about why this is or how this is...

DF: Right. A neo-Darwinian account might explain how it is that our brains are wired in such a way that we are capable of artistic appreciation, and how we have evolved as creatures with aesthetic sensibilities. But that does not explain what it is we experience in that domain.

GD: Near the end of the book, you argue for at least maintaining or even increasing education on religion and theology in our schools and universities. What's at stake here? Why do you think that's crucial?

DF: Religion is fundamental to human culture. A study of the world today would suggest that. It's important therefore that our children have an informed understanding of religion – what it is and what it is not. We need to contest the notion that religion is somehow under attack from science. That doesn't serve science very well, either. The kind of attack that Dawkins launches upon religion is likely to dissuade many young people of faith from pursuing a career in science. It is in the interest both of science and faith that we have an informed understanding of these and of their relationship. That's a challenge for our schools and universities.

GD: We have tended to marginalize the study of religion.

DF: In our educational system here, we do well at primary school. But then it tends to get left behind as students are more absorbed with other subjects in the curriculum – although we're now seeing students taking certificate studies in religion, theology and philosophy, which is producing much better work, I would say, in science and religion.

The flip side of the Dawkins attack on religion is creation science, where we have a religious attack on certain scientific nostrums. I think that is equally misguided, for the kind of reasons that I have been advancing earlier. I would like to see more attention given to that, and to the reasons why it's misguided, in our educational curriculum.

GD: Thank you so much. I appreciate your time.

34. THE CONNECTION BETWEEN JESUS' INCARNATION AND HIS SAVING WORK

Gary Deddo: Welcome. I'm glad you could be here. You have been teaching theology for quite a number of years, at more than one school. Not a lot of people teach theology. And in churches I'd been in or other situations, sometimes people wonder, what's theology? Do we need it? What's it important for? It seems abstract to people. But you did your doctoral work in theology with James Torrance in Aberdeen and you've been teaching for many years. Could you tell us a little about why you pursued that trajectory and what you found of value of in Christian theology?



Jeannine Graham: Being a teacher was never on my radar screen. Even in elementary school, I thought I could never be a teacher because what if I'd stand before the class and say everything I knew in the first five minutes—what would I do with rest of the hour? That's never been my problem. It's been the opposite. Too much to jam into an hour. So it's been a bit of a surprise that God has led me there.

I went to Scotland not to earn a PhD, not to teach – just I heard [James Torrance] speak at an extension course (Fuller extension course) and I was so enthralled, I was mesmerized by what he was saying. After the second class, I was walking to my car and I just couldn't get to my car, because I had the strong compulsion to go back and ask him something. I said no, no, no. Time to go. He needs to go.

I was stopped dead in my tracks and I finally went back and said: Professor Torrance, where would you recommend somebody like me go to

study the line of thinking that you're talking about? Because you have brought together the philosophy that I studied in college and the theology in college and seminary. You've opened up the concept of grace in a way that is so life-giving to me. I can't NOT study it. So, where would you recommend?

I had no idea that he would say: Come to Aberdeen. And I thought, well, I happened to be in between jobs, I happened to have a little money that would enable me to do it. I happened to have an adventurous spirit. So, why not? So, I went there, again, not for the degree. Not for the end goal — that probably would have scared me, the very thought of teaching or being a professor — but I just had to learn and glean from him when I could before he retired the next year.

GD: What's teaching been like for you?

JG: Exciting, although not every aspect of teaching is riveting, but it's exciting when you see light bulbs go on for any students. And especially when I get to share things that are on my heart. They're my passion. A lot of it I learned from Professor Torrance. And a lot of it is not what many of my students have heard from the pulpit or growing up. It's easy for them to fall by default back into thinking of Jesus in a certain way and the Christian life in certain way. And it's kind of ho-hum, yeah, we believe that sort of stuff. But it's not gripping our heart. So, I want to share with them the kind of heart-gripping experience that I got from Professor Torrance. Not everybody gets it, because you have to shift paradigms a little and get out of the default mode of the way they've always heard it packaged. But it's really exciting.

GD: Right. The light bulb coming on and I can identify...

JG: Theology itself is important. Jesus told us that we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Our mind matters, and when our mind and our thinking is shaped by distorted thoughts of God that owe more to Greek philosophy than the Bible, for instance, or we import things from our culture onto the Scriptures, then it has a deadening effect and that affects how we live, whether we are living a Christian life that's liberating, that's exciting, or just ho-hum, dutiful... It matters how we think about God and how we understand what God has done for us in Christ.

GD: I've heard pastors say, well, we don't want to get theological about it... or others would say, theory has its place, and they're thinking theology is theory and after so much theory, you've got to get on to practice. There's kind of a divide there, but I think that divide is artificial. What would you say?

JG: I cringe every time I hear a pastor say that (and I've heard a lot of pastors say this) because they don't want to "turn off the audience." They

assume that if you get theological, people are going to get a glazed look over their eyes.

I had an experience once. I had graduated with a PhD and I was looking for a place to land, so I was doing some teaching for my church at the time. It was an adult education class. I was teaching on some aspect of the Bible and I happened to let the word theology leave my lips. I thought they would get all excited, like I do, because theology is an exciting thing. As soon as that word left my lips, I saw that predictable glaze come over their eyes. One person said, “We don't want to hear about theology. We just want to know what the Bible says.”

I thought to myself, “Do you realize every time you're asking questions from the Bible – what does he mean here, how does what Paul says here compare to that, what does it mean in terms of how we understand God – you're doing theology?” The question is not “no theology” or “theology is boring.” It's bad theology versus good theology — and good theology has a very eminently practical impact.

GD: Yes. I could see them thinking that, why you'd be interested and invested in it, and spend so many years teaching students. In your years of teaching students, have there been pointed questions they really wanted to wrestle with, have there been themes that have come up in the classroom that caught the students' attention?

JG: There is the predictable one: we all agree if we're Christians that Jesus died for our sins and “Okay. Next issue, we've nailed that one. Nothing more to be said.” And I say, oh there's a lot to be said – that's what sent me to Scotland.... I realized that Jesus died for our sins. But how does what happened 2000 years ago actually alter my human nature so that I'm transformed? Is it just a theoretical thing I say, that I agree theoretically to some proposition? Or is there something more dynamic going on?

When I was in high school, I was a new believer and I went to my first Bible study. They handed out 3x5 cards and they asked us to write down what is a Christian. And so I wrote (probably 10 seconds flat) I nailed it – believing that Jesus died for your sin. Okay. I saw other people take a little more time. My friend that came to the Bible study with me was writing copiously on this side and kept writing and then flipped it over and wrote and filled the other side. She told me what she wrote: “It's a moment-by-moment life relationship...” and she went on and on. My thought was, “Well, that's complicating things. Jesus died for your sins. You're in.”

I hope my understanding has been matured since then. But here are people who were raised in the church and basically, that's not too far off from

what they understand Jesus did. And why did he become human? It's because you have to have a body to die, so he had to take upon himself a human body so that he would die on the cross, and it had to be a sinless, spotless lamb, so he had to live a sinless life in order to be the spotless lamb that was acceptable. But it's all aimed at Jesus' death on the cross. And what I want to open their eyes up to is: Is that the sole significance of Jesus' life? Is having a body that can die, and it's the death that we want to emphasize?

GD: Your doctoral thesis (which turned into a book) focused on the cross of Christ, an account of the doctrine of atonement (**JG:** cross and resurrection and ascension.) Tell about that, because there is a focus on the cross and the death of Christ, but there's more to it. So, what kind of things did you explore in your doctoral thesis and in the book that fills that out more?

JG: Any time you study with Professor Torrance you're plunged into reading the early church fathers, so I was introduced to the theology of Athanasius. Athanasius says what the human dilemma is: sin is not just breaking the law. In our century we're so steeped in the legal metaphors so we think of it as breaking the law, so God pays the penalty, or we owe a debt and so Christ pays the debt – that kind of terminology. But for Athanasius, sin was more like a corrosion of our deep nature, a corrosion of our humanness. We become less human as we dabble in sin, as we traffic in sin.

So, what's the remedy? He rejects the idea of God simply forgiving us. That doesn't get to the root – the ontological root of our dilemma. We need a new heart. We need a new nature. We need a renovation, we need a re-creation of our nature. Hmm... I hadn't thought of atonement as involving God reaching into the depths of our being to change us there and to transform us. How does the incarnation flesh that out?

And then reading Barth, you realize atonement doesn't just start with Calvary. It starts with Bethlehem. Jesus takes upon himself our flesh... not just pristine flesh, but the very flesh we live in, the flesh that's fallen. He takes it. In taking it to himself, he's sanctifying it at the same time. But he takes the very thing that needed fixing so that he can fix our human nature at the ontological depths of our being – from within humanity himself. Nobody had ever explained that to me – in college (maybe in seminary, but I didn't hear it), in church. That started me looking at more of the significance of the incarnation for atonement.

GD: That's very important. A similar thing happened to me, in realizing that Jesus didn't just come down to say hello and say, “do you see me? Here I am. I'm going to do this thing on the cross.”

JG: And do a few ethical teachings and heal a few people, too.

GD: Yeah. We have to throw that in, although I didn't know exactly where that fit. But you're connecting the incarnation with the crucifixion. You mentioned the resurrection as well. How does Christ's dying on the cross connect with resurrection?

JG: Well, Jesus takes our fallen, broken humanity (I want to steer clear of the idea of a penal substitution, of pummeling Jesus, punishing Jesus, to let us off the hook. Those ideas are out there. But that seems more foreign to me as I read the Scriptures...) and you could say that Jesus absorbs the judgment of God. God wants to judge that which is dehumanizing us. Sin dehumanizes us – depersonalizes us. Jesus embraces that in order to get rid of it, to divest us of that. That gets taken to the grave, judged, put away.

And then, this new creation, this new nature that Jesus is forging through living in our flesh, taking our flesh through every stage of human existence – that is raised through his resurrection. That is enlivened for us and we get to experience that. The Holy Spirit gets to unite us with him so that we participate. We participate in this new life through the Holy Spirit.

If it just ended with death, a lot of things would happen. Take what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15: We're still in our sins, we're still enslaved. Our preaching that's mentioning that Jesus rose and is victorious over sin – that's gone. We're liars, because we said we saw the risen Christ, so there's whole sorts of reasons why the resurrection is essential. But also the transformation of our very being is realized through this new humanity, through the resurrection, that becomes accessible to us through the union with Christ that the Holy Spirit enables.

GD: The Christ who dies is the Christ who's raised. I was taught early on that (at least what I recall is) the resurrection was just to prove that he was the Son of God. I didn't really see the connection, that what he accomplished on the cross was completed in the resurrection. And that's not the end of the story, either, because the ascension has to come in here, too, right?

JG: Yes. He's sitting at the right hand of the Father. He ever lives to intercede for us, Hebrews [7:25] says something like that. We have a representative before the Father pleading our case, representing us, on our side – along with the Holy Spirit, who prays for us when we're weak. So we've got the ally of the Holy Spirit and the ally of the risen Christ with us and present with us through the Spirit, to guide the church and to empower the church.

GD: So, Jesus isn't on vacation or retired. That's what I used to.... (I don't think they taught me that, but that is what I had been assuming.) I didn't

really appreciate the significance of the ascended Christ and his continuing ministry. So, that left a gap in my thinking.

JG: Even in the Christian life, I think somewhere in my teaching, I used a football analogy... There are a lot of atonement metaphors and theories. One of the more popular ones in the 20th century and 21st century is Jesus as moral exemplar. Why did Jesus come? To show us how to do it. To show us who God is. To show us what the problem is. And if we just imitate Jesus, we too can have that same quality of life. We just imitate, we just try hard to sail over this high bar that we see Jesus [sailed over]. And so the football analogy is: Jesus runs down the field and then he comes back and he hands us the football and he sits on the sidelines... “Okay, your turn. I did my part. Now, I’ll watch you.”

That doesn't work with atonement, that doesn't work with the resurrection, that doesn't even work with the basic Christian life. Jesus is never on the sidelines. We're never done with our need for the mediator. The whole Christian life is Christ in us, the hope of glory. “I live, yet not I, but Christ in me. The life I now live, I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me” [Gal. 2:20]. Jesus has never taken a snooze, retiring.

GD: That's a good thing. The longer I live in the Christian life, the more important that becomes, not less important. And it's not theory, it's a daily thing. Even in our prayers, in our worship and all that... to call on Jesus. He's not off the scene, off somewhere else. It's a great joy and privilege.

Is there anything else you'd like to say about what you learned about the atonement that sometimes gets missed?

JG: Embedded in my book title is “representation and substitution.” That became the focal point of my doctoral dissertation, suggested to me by Professor Torrance (although my readings in the theology of Barth and all had been leading me in those directions). Substitution and representation would come up, so I was trying to figure out how those work together to make me right with God – for God to reconcile the world to himself. So that became my focus. Jesus is our substitute.

Today, as I might have mentioned, substitution often gets construed as penal substitution: God punishing Jesus, who stands in our stead. God is angry with us. God would normally punish us because we're the sinners, we're the perpetrators. But Jesus says, will you let them off if I stand in their place? And so the vengeful God takes it out on Jesus and we are the beneficiaries. That's one way of understanding substitution. That's not the only way.

Jesus does something for us that we can't do for ourselves. Jesus says the

summary of the law is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. I don't know about you, but I never do that perfectly everyday. Love God with everything you've got. I'm always loving myself in bad ways and not loving my neighbors as I should and falling short of that.

This is the concept that I learned from Torrance, I had never heard it before, but he talks about the double movement of grace. Double movement of grace? Why did no seminary professor introduced that? He said it all goes back to the all-important "who" question. Professor Torrance says, you can't understand the "what" of what Jesus did on the cross before you've answered the "who" question. If you think, well, Jesus died on the cross to take our sins away, you've already presupposed your answer to the "who" question: He was just a man. But then how does that do the job? He was just a man who inspired me to be self-sacrificial and benevolent towards people – that doesn't change my heart. If he's just God, that thing that he did on the cross doesn't really reach me. He's not in solidarity with me. It's sort of coming somewhere above, and how do I relate to that? How does that fix me?

The answer I hear from classic creeds and the Scripture is Jesus is fully God – “in him all the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form” (Colossians 1:19, 2:9). And at the same time, mysteriously, this wondrous reality, he is also fully human. Not partially, not half and half, not 80/20, 70/30. One hundred and 100% both, in the same person. Torrance says when we look at what Jesus did in his life, we have to realize that he is acting as God and he is also acting as a human being.

The covenant says that when God established the covenant with Israel – “I will be your God, you'll be my people.” That shorthand gets laced throughout Scripture. God is faithful to be their faithful provider, covenant partner. And Israel is not all that good at being faithful back as a faithful covenant partner. So, eventually God says, in Jeremiah, I'm going to make a new covenant, not because the previous iterations of the covenant are bad, but because people's hearts are broken and they can't do it. So, I'm going to change their hearts, I'm going to change their minds [Jer. 31:33].

That promise is set out there, and Jesus comes along as the true Israelite, the one who is going to do the job on both sides of that relationship. He is fully God, so he could represent the things of God to us. We know who God is. We don't have to guess, we don't have to fill in the blanks for ourselves. “Well, I like to think of God as this way.” No. When you see Jesus, you see the heart of the Father. He shows us the Father. He forgives sins. He does the progress (?) of the Father. At the same time, he is in our position, in solidarity with us, as the faithful covenant human partner, being faithful,

living a life of utter faithfulness, of loving and trusting and unbroken communion with the Father. He's doing both things at the same time. He's fulfilling the covenant from both sides.

I had never heard that before. It made so much sense and it's almost like the picture I get is looking at Jesus through binoculars and sometimes when I look through the binoculars, I close one eye or the other. And Torrance's teaching is saying, no, look through both lenses. Look at him as truly human and truly God at the same time he's doing this. That is at the heart of his representation. He represents God to us; he represents us to God. He is rendering our faithful response to the Father on our hand, on our behalf, and in our place.

That's the difficult part for my students. They get the fact that he is God with us. This is moving into Christmas. "You shall call his name Immanuel, God with us" [Matt. 1:23]. They get that, and they get that Jesus was a man. But they think of him that he showed us how to live ethically and all. They don't get Jesus as the faithful human covenant partner of God who offers, on our behalf, the perfect response to the Father that we failed to offer.

GD: Thanks for sharing with us. That gives us a picture as to why you invested so much of your life in studying Scripture and the theological synthesis of all that, and why you want others to know and appreciate and enter in and do that through your teaching. Thanks so much.

JG: You're welcome.

35. JESUS' EXCLUSIVE CONNECTION TO HUMAN NATURE

Gary Deddo: Welcome once again. (Jeannine Graham: Thank you.) It's great to have you here. I know another area of interest that you've written about is what's called "the one and the many." You wrote a journal article on this, especially James Torrance's understanding of the one and the many. But I never heard much about that when I was growing up. Tell us what your interest was. Why talk about Jesus as the one for the many?

Jeannine Graham: Well, in my upbringing I never heard that either. It wasn't until I studied with Torrance that that novel concept came. But it was related to the representation-substitution thing that I talked about earlier. He gave me a category, I guess, a lens by which to look at the Scriptures. You can see that running through numerous places. One place is when God establishes a covenant with Abraham.

When I've taught Bible survey, I usually ask my students a question after we talk about the creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2. And then things get wrecked up in Genesis 3 and all hell breaks loose and alienation abounds. And I say, "Okay. For 30 seconds, this is your chance to be God: how would you fix the situation? Go." So they talk to their neighbor and come up with all sorts of solutions. Most of them have these mega instantaneous, by fiat, God changes things just like that. But then somehow that sacrifice is freewill, and so we've got to work that in, and they never come up with a biblical solution. I said, "Those are interesting, that's not the choice that God made."

God begins to fix the solution one person at a time. One person. He identifies Abraham. He gives these promises to Abraham: "I'm going to bless you. I'm going to bless those who bless you. I'm going to make your name great. I'm going to give you many descendants." Abraham has all these promises and then God says, "I want you to pack up go to this place I'll give you." He doesn't have an itinerary. He doesn't know where God is going to lead him. It would have been an interesting conversation with Sarai. "Where are we going?" "I don't know." "Why are we going?" "I don't know, but God told us so."

That becomes the beginning of the covenant relationship. Through this one person, he's going to begin to build a people, who become the people of Israel. God chooses this people, insignificant people. He could have chosen any group, but chooses this people to be the vehicle, the vessel, through whom God is going to work his covenant purposes out – to eventually gather all nations to himself. He's not going to opt for the fiat solution. He's going

to sidle up to these people, to enter into a relationship with these people, and through their history, the world will see something at the heart of who God is, and something of the desperate need of human nature – the human condition. What a great privilege for Israel to be that vessel—but it's also a great responsibility to try to live up to that covenant partnership, to be that faithful covenant partner.

Meanwhile then, in their history, there are “one and the many” instances – the Levites are one of the 12 tribes. The 11 tribes are given land. But the Levites are not given lands because they're to be interspersed with all of the tribes to be kind of the worship coordinators of the tribe. They have a special mission as the one to bless and benefit the many.

After God delivers Israel from Egypt, there's a sacrifice that God institutes – by which God is going to redeem the firstborn sons of Israel. The last plague that forced the hand of Pharaoh to "let my people go" and let the Exodus happen was the killing of the firstborn – except that the children of Israel were protected. The Angel of Death passed over their houses, protecting their firstborn. But the sacrifice was to redeem the firstborn, on whom God had a claim. And the firstborn are representing the many people of Israel.

Probably the one that stands out the best, the most vivid to me, was one that Torrance mentions constantly in his writings and teachings. On the Day of Atonement, on one day of the year (around October or so), the Old Testament high priest is going to act on behalf of the many – the people of Israel. He washes himself, a special cleansing, to cleanse himself from his own sin, because he's a human sinner as well. He puts on certain special vestments. He sets himself apart. He sanctifies himself to do this act on behalf of the people.

Then the people come symbolically with their collective, year-long collection of sins and there's two sacrificial animals. He lays his hands on one and banishes it, with the weight of the sins of the people laid on that animal. He's identifying with the righteousness of God. We are guilty; God is right to judge us. We lay our sins symbolically on this animal and he is led into the wilderness to take the sins of the people away. The other animal is slain, and the blood is collected and taken into the Holy of Holies.

Up to this point, the high priest is acting on behalf of all the people. He is the one representative, acting on behalf of the many. He goes in with this blood sacrifice before the Holy of Holies pleading with God to remember his covenant relationship, to forgive the people, to restore them to right relationship. When he comes out of the Holy of Holies, now he's

representing God to the people. Before, he was representing the people to God. Now, he's representing God to the people with a blessing of peace, the assurance of restoration. That covenant relationship has been renewed. They don't have to drag their accumulated guilt from year to year. It's like that ball and chain is cut and they have a new start. It says (I think in Hebrews 6), all Israel entered into the Holy of Holies... (well, not literally, or there wouldn't be a place for them). They enter, in the person of their representative. And the people of God got that. This double representative relationship was patently obvious. That was at the heart of their sacrificial life, their worship life.

What Torrance did for me, besides highlighting that for me, was to say, Jesus is talked about as the High Priest, especially in the book of Hebrews, but also in John 17. In the high priestly prayer before he's arrested, Jesus prays to his Father. He says, I sanctify myself. I set myself apart, just like the high priest of old set himself apart, he sanctifies himself. He has no need to atone for his own sins because he's lived a sinless life. The high priest in the Old Testament would wear a vestment that had 12 stones representing the 12 tribes of Israel, signifying his solidarity with Israel. Jesus is representing humanity. He is going to be led to the cross. At that time he is both the high priest and the sacrificial victim all in one, fulfilling the covenant promises and taking the penalty, the judgment of sin upon himself. All of that is happening in the cross.

Then, before he leaves to ascend to heaven, he gives the blessing of peace to his disciples – the relationship is restored, and he breathed on them the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit becomes the empowerment for them to carry on his ministry. He will continue his ministry, his continuing priesthood. He doesn't hang up his priestly vestments when he goes to heaven. He doesn't even divest himself of his humanity. He continues his humanity in its glorified state after resurrection. He's still in heaven representing us and his priesthood still continues. But now he's present to us in a different sort of way through the Holy Spirit.

GD: So the idea of one for the many, which I don't think many hear about, is biblical. It's represented at many different places throughout and it finds its fulfillment in Christ, so he ends up being the one for the many...

JG: And in the New Testament: Romans 6, when he died, we died. That's one for the many. When he was baptized, we were baptized. We share in the one baptism of Jesus – that started in the waters of Jordan and culminates on the cross. He took our place, identifying with us and in solidarity with us. And when he died, Paul says, we're included in that.

GD: Other interesting things that I think are related to this: maybe you could talk a little about Jesus being, sometimes the terminology is the “federal head of humanity” and also – Pauline language – Jesus being the new Adam. How does that fit in?

JG: Well, in my book, which you could get for the low, low price of \$90, I play around with four different terminologies, and the second one speaks to that. But the first one I'd say, and it has to do with the one and the many – I used the word exclusive. He is THE one for the many. He's not just one among many prophets. He's not just one guru who had a little more clear God-consciousness than the rest of us; he was a man ahead of his time. He was not just our moral exemplar and great moral teacher we try to emulate. He is THE prophet, THE teacher, THE priest, exclusively.

Because of his exclusive identity as fully God and fully human, that exclusivity enables him to be the all-inclusive one. It's because of his unique identity he is able to do the second point – exclusivity, the one for the many inclusivity. The many in the one. He is able to do that uniquely. No other person... I can't climb inside your humanity, you know, there are barriers.

Two things tip me off in this direction: One is the language I find in Romans 5:12-21. Paul uses an Adam/Christ parallelism and he says, just as Adam, through his act of disobedience, brought condemnation and judgment and death, so another man (and we hear that referred to as second Adam in various ways; clearly a second Adam would jive with that)... Another man through his (not only one act) whole life of obedience and faithfulness brought justification and life.

You constantly see this: just as Adam started the ball rolling in a disastrous legacy (where the bottom line is that we're imprisoned in sin and can't help ourselves – as the descendants of that legacy), Jesus, in a way, reboots humanity. He takes upon himself our flesh and takes it through every stage of human existence doing right where the first Adam did wrong, obeying where the first Adam and Eve personally did wrong. Trusting with all his heart where Adam and Eve were trusting themselves and deviating from God's plan.

In a way (to use T.F. Torrance's language), God's been bending our rebellious wills back to himself. Not just in a fiat – snap of the finger sort of way – but by living through our humanity from day to day, moment to moment, responding to the Father with faithfulness, that's the faithful human covenant response that I talked about previously. And in so doing he is re-wiring, he is re-creating our humanity. That process culminates on the cross. It doesn't begin with the cross. Again, highlighting the significance of Jesus'

whole life. That's the Adam/Christ parallelism in Romans 5.

The other part takes us back to who is Jesus. When I read John 1, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning... and through him all things came into being." Through this Word... (We don't know yet – it seems like maybe it's a verbal word, until we get to verse 14 and we realize the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Oh, that's the Son of God who becomes incarnate as Jesus. So, we're not just talking about a verbal word.) This is the Word through whom all things came into being. That same idea is in Colossians 1, it's in Hebrews 1, it's replete.

The Creator Word, when he takes upon himself our flesh, he can connect with us, he has a connection with our being because it's through him our being came into existence. Our ontological existence (the fancy terminology) is linked to our Creator. (You can't do that for me; I can't do that for you.) The Creator/Word becomes flesh and so he already has this capability of affecting, transforming, impacting your humanity, my humanity. The Creator/Word alone can re-create.

That's the hard part that my students struggle with, because they're not used to thinking of Jesus... (They're used to thinking of Jesus as an individual. He's an individual, you're an individual and a great individual. He does great things.) But to think that he is the head of humanity, the Creator/Word that is connected, that my humanity is included in him, he bound himself to my humanity, that's a challenge. But that's what I hear in Scripture.

GD: That's a unique and surprising connection of Christ, the one for the many... it's surprising.

JG: And the many in the one. That's the second inclusive, in the one. Maybe this is a chance to talk about the "in Christ"?

GD: Sure.

JG: Indulge me. I get excited about this because this whole thing is not theoretical to me. This makes all the difference in how I look at the Christian life and I used to try to live a Christian life through my own efforts. I wouldn't confess to that at that time. That would be works righteousness, how dare I. But when I look back I think, yeah, I was stuck in that route. That's what sent me to Scotland, because I always had the feeling that God was disappointed in me. Somehow I wasn't measuring up. I wasn't doing enough. I wasn't jumping high enough, I wasn't running fast enough. I wasn't fill-in-the-blank enough to measure up to God's acceptable standards, so I tried harder. If you buy into that recipe, that's what you're left with – it's just trying, trying harder,

which will be exhausting after a while.

When I went to Scotland I thought “I hope there's better news that he has to tell me, that would get me off of that treadmill.” Christ is representative substitution, the one from the many, was liberating me, severing me from that tie. But also it put me on a new trajectory. And I read Ephesians 1. This is where it just jumped into stark focus. I won't read the whole chapter but...

3Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in the heavenly realm with every spiritual blessing in Christ. [in Christ] 4For he chose us in him before the creation of the world, to be holy and acceptable in his sight. 5In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons and daughters through Jesus Christ 6to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. 7In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace 8which he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, 9he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, 10to be put into effect when the times had reached their fulfillment—to bring unity of all things in heaven and on earth under Christ. 11In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, 12in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. 13And you also were included in him when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation.

Lights went on. Where is this salvation? Is not just something Jesus kind of accomplished and then he retires and here's this accomplishment that he did, that we tap into. This is so plain to me. The salvation is in him. It's nowhere else than in him. It's God doing surgery on the human life by taking humanity to himself and fixing it from within. As Calvin says, if we're not united to Jesus, we can't benefit from salvation. We have to be united with him. So, it's been wrought, this new nature, this recreated nature for us, has been wrought in the person of Jesus. You can't separate the person and the work.

We need to be united with Jesus, which happens by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit awakens us to faith. This is for you and unites us with Jesus. So now, we participate in this new life in Christ. That's how I hear Paul saying in Galatians 2:20: “I've been crucified with Christ. It's no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.” Sounds like we're kicked to the curb. “No longer I who live but Christ.” And then he goes, “and the life that I live...” oops, we're still in the picture. The life I now live is lived on a totally different basis. “I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for

me.” Jesus becomes the source of our new life.

Paul says it elsewhere: “Christ in us, the hope of glory” [Col. 1:27]. I never quite saw that. Because so much of the teaching that abounds, that I partook of was, Jesus did something. And it's not integrally related to him... he was the doer of it. But now it's done, it's like this package over here and we somehow need to unpack it and make it ours and apply it to ourselves and all that kind of stuff. No. The Christian life is day-to-day participating in union with him by faith. It's the joy of participating in his life, his accomplishments. So, inclusive.

Preclusive: the many are displaced by the one; we are divested of our illusion that we operate according to an independent source apart from our true source. No. God created us and, like it or not, we can't cut ourselves off from that source. That is our source. What Jesus wants to do is divest us of our pseudo-self, the illusion that we can pull it off, that we are our own source, that we can sever ourselves from our Creator.

And then on the last, to finish the last four... exclusive, the one for the many. Inclusive, the many in the one. Preclusive, the many displaced by the one. Conclusive, the one for the many. We are re-humanized. We are re-energized, re-personalized. Jesus' response for us doesn't mean that we don't respond. It means he enables us, he frees us from our imprisonment to sin. Paul talks about (Galatians 3:22 says), we're imprisoned in sin. Ephesians 2 even gets more stark: We are dead. If we are dead in sin, we can't enliven ourselves. Jesus comes to enliven us and enable us to offer our response to God in joyful gratitude, because it all doesn't hinge on us. That's the participation part, the enablement of the Holy Spirit to let Jesus' life be lived in us.

GD: Wonderful. You gave us a big picture, a rich and deep picture of Jesus as the one for the many. It's no wonder you wanted to write about that and teach about it. Thanks for sharing about it with us now.

JG: Thank you.

36. JESUS THE ANOINTED SON

The interviews with Dr. Habets were originally done for the video series *You're Included*. The technical quality was not sufficient for them to be included in that series, but we were able to transcribe the interviews.

Michael Morrison: We're talking today with Myk Habets, head of Carey Graduate School, part of Carey Baptist College in New Zealand. Myk, it's a pleasure to have you with us [**Myk Habets:** Thank you] – or for me to be with you, since we are in New Zealand on your turf.

MH: Welcome!

MM: Thanks. You've done a number of interesting studies and research. I was particularly interested in what you wrote in your book *The Anointed Son: A Trinitarian Spirit Christology*. You had some interesting things to say about how we understand who Jesus is. Jesus is very important to Christians. How do we go about learning who this person is?

MH: Good question. I wrote the book partly to present to the academic community, in the hope that that will filter down into classrooms, pulpits, proclamation, that when we start, we start with Jesus himself (that's a no-brainer) Jesus is risen, ascended to the right hand of the Father. So if we return to Scripture, the Gospels, the epistles, again and again, and what we see there is a number of perspectives on who Jesus is that are utterly complementary, but if we don't see them in their different perspectives (if you like, stereoscopically), then we just see them myopically, then we get a distorted view of Christ. So I wrote this book from one perspective, which I think has been eclipsed, and we need to hear that message again. Christ's relationship to the Spirit, a Christology that starts from below, these sorts of approaches.



MM: What you mean by “from below”?

MH: When we go to the Gospels, we see in John that he starts with this wonderful prologue – John 1:1-8 – “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” So it starts, if you like, up in the heavenlies. It's this insider's view. Here's the

Logos, the second person, who condescends and becomes – verse 14 – takes to himself human flesh. Brilliant – wonderful – orthodox.

But the rest of that Gospel and the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark and Luke) don't start above at all – they start with “here is a person, Jesus of Nazareth.” Here is someone born to Mary (in a particular way, nonetheless). He's walking along and he calls people to “Follow me. Leave your nets and come follow me.” They're not following God – that's not their self-consciousness – they're following a rabbi. They'd been passed over or they hadn't wanted to go into the priesthood. They were fishermen and tax collectors and various disciplines, and this Jewish rabbi, this Jewish man who they see, who they sense, they hear something (I don't know) authoritative, attractive, compelling. In some sense he's what they're looking for before they knew what they were looking for, I think that's the sense we get.

As they journey with Christ, as he teaches them, as they watch him, and they hear, as they see the conflict and the fray, both the positive and the negative, they come to realizations. So in the middle of that ministry, Peter confesses, You are the Lord. And he almost is rebuked for it. You're right, says Jesus, but you don't really know that – that was revealed to you by the Spirit. Give him at least a pass, you know! It's not until after the cross and resurrection where they fully understand, this Jesus is the Messiah.

So we think of the two disciples walking home on the road to Emmaus. Jesus has died. He's been buried, he's in the ground. They don't know of the resurrection. For them, it's finished. They had invested three years in following a rabbi who turns out to be a hoax, who turns out to say things like, Worship me. Pray to me. I and the Father are one. I share the divine identity. And they start to believe him. Jews.

MM: They said, We had *hoped* he would be the Messiah.

MH: That's right – and now he's dead. God doesn't die. Messiah's don't die. “That's it. Sorry.” I think they're walking home embarrassed, they're walking home ashamed, going back to their old communities, their old jobs, their old life, and they're looking back to a community that's going to say, “You got it wrong.” More than that, “You've probably betrayed your entire Jewish heritage. You're idolaters.” This is probably where they're starting, and they're walking back depressed, and this one journeys with them: “Why are you so sad?” I love God's irony. There is humor there. “Have you not heard? Are you the only one in Israel who doesn't know?”

Then he explains to them who he is from the Old Testament, and they come to know as they meet in the house, sort of a (many would say; I think it's right) a Communion meal, and he is revealed to them, and they come to an understanding.

That would be a Christology from below, that works its way to above. An understanding of the humanity of Jesus, and who he is as a historical person; then it quickly moves to an expression, “You are the Son of God. You are that Word that John talks about.” A Christology from below, to above, has to complement a Christology from above (John’s stuff), to below. That’s the plan.

MM: Some modern theologians also struggle with this – Christology from below and above. Scripture has both – why don’t they have both?

MH: What’s happened in modern theology from the Enlightenment, the historical-critical method kicks in, and there’s a hermeneutic, a reading that’s suspicious, so that the miracles go out the window, the supernatural is out, Rudolf Bultmann’s demythologization, trying to take the myth out. So what’s happened is a Christology that starts below never got anywhere but below. So we end up with a holy man, a great prophet, an inspired Jew, but he’s just a man.

For that reason, evangelicals, conservative Christians, orthodox Christians – Protestant, Catholic, Eastern Orthodox alike – said, “well, that’s not Christianity. That’s not the God-man.” In reaction, but an over-reaction, to throw the baby out with the bathwater, now Jesus is almost *only* divine for many people in our churches. The humanity becomes affirmed doctrinally (I’ll pass my exam – tick – he was fully human) but we don’t actually believe it in our practical day-to-day life. I think we doubt that Jesus is as human as you and I are.

MM: So we imagine a Jesus who’s going throughout life in kind of an unreal way.

MH: Not human-like, yeah. In the early church (this is just repeating early church problems), I think for a number of Western Christians (maybe in the East as well) conservative, orthodox, well-meaning (I’m not saying that they did it deliberately), but the way they preach and proclaim and read Scripture, all we are seeing is God with a meat suit on – eyebrows and legs and arms – the flesh is instrumental.

At its worst, it’s Monty Python’s *Life of Brian*. When Jesus is on the cross, he starts whistling. “It’s OK – don’t worry. I’m God. This is easy-peasy stuff.” When that happens, we go back to the Scriptures and we see Jesus is tempted in every way as we are, but [in the thinking of many people] he’s not. He’s Superman. He’s Clark Kent, he pulls his shirt back, and he’s Superman – he’s the Logos. So we have instrumentalized the human flesh.

The early church has names for that. It’s Apollinarianism, where the human mind of Christ, the human will of Christ, is gone, and in its place is

the Logos, so God directly acts on the flesh of Jesus. It's purely mechanical, instrumental. We don't teach that directly, but we teach that indirectly in many of our churches.

MM: Because we are too interested in worshipping Jesus?

MH: We get to the divinity too quickly, if I can put it that way. We should get to the divinity, but we're not holding the full humanity of Christ at the same time. The rub is: when things don't go well for me, when I'm tempted, when people around me are sinners (as I am), when stuff happens in life, and I come to God, where is my sympathetic high priest, as Hebrews talks about? "Yes, Jesus, I know you became human, but not really. It was easy for you. Yes, you were tempted, but not internally – only externally. It was easy for you."

When that starts to happen, we have a cleavage between Jesus and me, between his humanity and my humanity, and when that happens, the Father is so far behind the back of Jesus that we lose sight of him. I think that's what people are saying when they say, I lost my faith. (Not all of them, but many of them.) I would say, I'm not sure you had faith to begin with. I'm not sure it was ultimately there – I think something was missing. That could be turned into an evangelistic tool.

MM: It's like, What kind of God don't you believe in, if you lack faith?

MH: What kind of God are they believing in? They are believing in a God who is different from Jesus, a God who is so far behind the back of Jesus, as Tom Torrance might say, that they can't actually see the real God. He's a monad, he's a thing, he's – to be blunt – he's an idea [**MM:** an abstraction], an idol. And when you're tempted, when you're struggling, when you're in situations where you need God, that sort of a God cannot help.

Whereas Jesus shows, "If you've seen me, you've seen the Father." If we follow that logic, "if you have heard my pronouncement of forgiveness, you have been forgiven by God. If I love you, the Father loves you. If you are united to me, you are united to the Father – you've become his children. Our Father, our God."

MM: You're weaving themes from John in there. Earlier you said that Matthew, Mark and Luke started with a Christology from below, with an ordinary human, but John has helped in completing...

MH: Absolutely. John starts from above, but after the prologue, after verse 18, he comes back below. Because how do you speak of a real, genuine, historical Jesus unless you do the below?

MM: John is the one who tells us that, even after the resurrection, Jesus ate fish.

MH: Barbeque on the beach. Wonderful. “I’m not a ghost. I’m real.” Wonderful stuff. It’s utterly complementary; there’s no sense that from below and from above are different Christologies – they are different methodologies to get at the same thing. You can look at any thing from a multiple perspective, and it’s the same thing you’re looking at. I think that’s why we have four Gospels: multiple perspectives which are utterly complementary. I think what we’ve done in part of our wisdom tradition is that we have muted part of that discussion – the humanity part. “Yes, we’ll affirm it, we’ll affirm it.”

In the early church, Athanasius – one of the heroes of theology – who says that Jesus is *homoousios* – the same stuff, substance, essence as the Father and the Spirit, of the same stuff *homoousios* with you and I in our humanity. The great Athanasius – you read in [his book] *The Incarnation* and he comes to those texts where Jesus hungers and thirsts (and I don’t know that God eternal, the Father does), and he begins to equivocate: “This is Jesus’ humanity, it’s not Jesus’ divinity talking.” That’s Nestorian!

MM: It’s like splitting...

MH: Yeah. He wasn’t a Nestorian – he fought against them – but on a practical level, he was struggling with “Jesus is too human. It feels like we are dragging him down.” Whereas I would go to the Scriptures. We’re not dragging him down – he’s giving himself to us. The great Colossians, Philippians stuff. “Have this attitude in yourselves that was in Christ, who humbled himself, did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped.” We’re not dragging him – God is – to the point of a servant, a slave, a dead slave.

MM: We’re not doing that to him – he initiated it himself.

MH: The Father in Christ was doing it, the Spirit with Christ – it’s genuinely Trinitarian. If we know Jesus we know the Father and the Son, but we only know Jesus as this God-man – not just God, not just man, but the great God-man. And having divinity and humanity together, as the Scriptures do, gives us a holistic Christianity. I think it’s utterly practical, even though you start off abstract, highly theological, some would say esoteric, John 1:1, “in the beginning was the Word” – how does he know? Well, he does know, because that’s what Jesus reveals.

MM: Jesus’ death on the cross is very important as part of Christianity. What he did for us is very important. Is that the best focus for us to have, in thinking of what Jesus did for our salvation?

MH: In a world of sin and the fall, the cross was necessary – otherwise why did God do it? So yes it is, but the cross is not what saves us. The blood

of Christ is not what saves us. It's Christ of the cross, it's *Christ* who has blood, it's Christ who is the point. The cross makes very little sense without the incarnation, without a holy life, without a life lived up to and beyond that point. We're not diminishing the role of the cross, but as Paul said, "If Christ hasn't been resurrected, your faith is in vain."

So even though Christ says on the cross "It is finished," it is a reference to the whole work. It's not trying to atomize it, itemize it. ("It's now finished, so I don't have to die" – since he said that before he died – I've heard that from some students, who are asking good questions.) It's the whole package: the life, the death, the resurrection. The death is important, the cross is important, the payment of sins, the substitution, but if we return to our Scriptures, it's the life of this Jesus Christ – the whole life, so the incarnation itself is atoning – that's where I think we need to be.

MM: By incarnation, you don't just mean the birth?

MH: No – the whole life as a man. So if the Logos, the eternal Son, takes to himself a human nature, as Chalcedon and the other creeds affirm and as Scripture tells us, if he takes to himself a complete humanity, a humanity like yours and mine, he has human will, human mind, human emotions. He also has divine will, mind and emotions, because he is divine, but in one person. Technically we call that a hypostatic union: divine and human natures "glued" together (crudely speaking – that's not right, but it will do) existing together, but one person.

Now, if we follow that logic, from the moment of Jesus' conception, he lives the human predicament, the human life. He himself is sinless, and never sins, but he inhabits a humanity that *can* sin, that can feel sin, that can feel temptation. He inhabits a humanity can we say, post Genesis 3 – your humanity, my humanity. And step by step (in the early church the term was *prokopē* – to beat one's way against the wind, like a boat going into the wind has to tack, tack, tack, or a woodchopper chopping) – to tack, *prokopē*, to cut one's way forward – this is Jesus' incarnation. Every temptation common to man, he's felt. And what's he done? He's resisted.

I like the image that many writers will talk about in the early church where he inhabits a sin nature that has (we would say) a bias, a compulsion away from God. Genesis 3. But this is the perfect Son of God as a man. So each decision, each temptation, every moment of his existence from his conception, he's turning that will back to the Father. Right up till Gethsemane: "Not my will but yours be done."

Sweating as if drops of blood [Luke 22:44]. Is he play-acting? They wouldn't say he is, but I think many people think he is. "He's doing that for

our benefit. He's doing that to show us, This is what a human looks like, but it's not real." That's not just what we read in that narrative. For all the faults of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, it does get that right, the genuine anguish of Jesus in the Garden. But he does not give in to Satan, he does not give in to temptation. He overcomes as a human.

That's what I mean by saying that the entire life of Christ is as important as the death of Christ, because it's not Christ's death which is important – it's *Christ* that dies. So it's a matter of emphasis.

MM: Other people died on crosses, too.

MH: If there was another person, for argument's sake, who lived a holy life, but they had maybe told a lie, sinned once, their death is for themselves. At the very best, they could exchange their life for another. Our courts wouldn't allow that, but you could say, yeah, one life for another.

What makes Jesus' life and death, his sacrifice, his substitution, infinite? Something else is going on. It's not just a perfect life – here is a humanity now completely conformed to God, and then on the cross, substituting himself for us (you know, those haunting words of Paul, Christ became sin [2 Cor. 5:21] – whatever the depths of that meaning), he exchanges his righteousness for our fallenness. We get his righteousness; he gets our fallenness, and he comes and defeats it.

MM: You commented that our courts of law don't allow substitution. Why does God's "court of law" allow it?

MH: Thank goodness it does! If we take a long view, we need to approach the Old Testament: What's the role of Israel? I think this stumps many people, particularly Protestants who either never teach from the Old Testament because "it's done away with" (I think you can understand that) – we're not under the law but under grace. I think if we read the Old Testament, it's all figuring and types prefiguring the coming of Jesus Christ.

This is how Paul talks about the law is a wonderful schoolmistress to bring us to Christ. So in that sense, through Israel God has formed a community (not taken a pre-existing one and "you'll be mine"); he creates a community of people through individuals, gives them a blessing, enters into a covenant with them: "I'll be your God, you'll be my people; I'll give you blessings if you do these things, curses if you do these things."

He's forming them through giving them the law, funny handwashing, don't eat this animal, do eat that, the most religious elaborate cult the world has ever known. God is forming a people to know what it means to come into the presence of someone who is not an idol – someone who is not human – someone who is "our greatest aspirations": God. "I'm holy – take

off your shoes. I'm holy – prepare yourself. I'm holy – think different ways, act differently.”

All of that is in preparation for Jesus Christ, so that he comes, he is the fulfillment of Israel. He is all Israel. So he represents, he substitutes for all Israel. Time and time again, the Gospels are alluding to this, where Jesus re-enacts the story of Israel. Then we get the climax – not only is this for Israel, Israel (Jesus now) is the porthole through which all humanity will be saved. All humanity will have the Spirit, all humanity can have the promise, the ingrafting that Paul and others talk about.

So if we read the Old Testament, particularly Israel, as this long preparation for the coming of Christ, it makes a whole lot more sense of it.

MM: That gives us a context in which to understand this rabbi.

MH: That's right, from page 1.

MM: We see that Jesus' death was effective because of who he was. How else do we know it is effective, if we don't already start by knowing who he was.

MH: In some ways you can't. It's in some ways circular. If we return to the Gospels, the Gospels were written last, and they were written after the events, after the resurrection, they were written after, when they had full understanding. The Gospel writers come back and they write Gospels – they write the story of Christ. Not biography, but a bit of that; not history, but a bit of that – this unique genre: Gospel.

They're doing what I call a retroactive reading. It's retro – it's looking back – but it's active, because it's dynamic. They take this understanding of who Jesus is and they come back and write, theologically, his life. It's real – it's historical – it's true, but nonetheless it's a theological reading.

MM: All histories are written after the fact. We understand how the war turned out, so we can see what developed.

MH: So history is, in part, interpretation. So there is this circularity. The early church, and the medieval, would say this is faith seeking understanding. “I believe; help my unbelief.” [Mark 9:24] I understand I'm united to Christ; now I want more knowledge, more content, so I believe; now I want to understand. (It's not “I won't believe until I understand.”) It's the mode of a disciple.

MM: Or they understand a little bit, they believe that much, and now they want to understand more.

MH: Absolutely. To increase their faith.

MM: You talked about how Jesus dealt with temptation, and how his experience is somewhat similar to ours. Could you elaborate a little more on

that. We're not God. How does this work?

MH: If we follow the Scriptures and then the tradition, if we look at the early councils – Nicea and Chalcedon and Constantinople and Ephesus, etc. – they're ruling out options, largely. They're very clever, in the sense that they're not trying to say too much (it's always good to try not to say too much). They are ruling out false options: Don't think of Christ like this, like this. Through that they are building up a broad central conviction that this is how we should think about who Jesus is.

Some of the key elements of that: Jesus is one person; he's the Logos. He doesn't cease to be the Logos, doesn't cease to be God, doesn't even leave the presence of God in some sense, because he is God. So as the Trinity continues. In some sense the second person assumes to himself a human nature and is still one person, with a divine and a human nature. They say that the human nature remains intact, with all of its attributes, and so also the divine nature remains intact with all of its attributes. That's hard to get our minds around, because there's nothing else, no one else that we can say "that's like him" or "her," or "it." It's utterly unique.

To quote Athanasius, who kept saying this phrase: It's God as a man, not God *in* a man. It's God as a man who is tender, it's God as a man who forgives sins, it's God as a man who eats fish by the sea after his resurrection. It's not God in a man – it's not alien possession. So if it is generally God as a man as we read in the Scriptures, then when he's tempted, the Logos is tempted through his humanity, and that's the key, I think.

Through *what* humanity? We need to make a decision. It's either a pristine humanity out here, like nothing we've seen anywhere before (and a big part of the tradition would say that – I don't), or it's a humanity like yours and mine – my condition, with this (Paul would say) sinful nature. Now, *he's* not sinful, because he's the Logos, but he takes a human nature which is (can we say) defective – faulty – and he redeems it. He perfects it.

MM: Physically, it was faulty: he was mortal.

MH: Absolutely. We can't say a lot more about it, because it becomes rather abstract, but the fact that he was tempted, that he was like us, the fact that he is our redeemer, our substitute, that he lives the human life and he perfects it. It gives a lot of coherence to that.

The Spirit needs to come into that, which is a big theme in my work. What's the role of the Spirit alongside Christ that is in some sense similar to the role of the Spirit in the Trinity? That needs to be articulated to get a fuller sense as well.

MM: I'm glad you mentioned the Spirit. In your book, your subtitle is *A Spirit Christology*. You're looking at the relationship between the Spirit and

Christ. You commented that we often overlook the role of the Spirit. How does that happen?

MH: This is one of the exciting things if we go back to the Gospels, and we re-read them and ask this question. Let's look at each of the episodes, each of the chapters, each of the movements, the scenes. Let's ask, Where's the Holy Spirit? Whether he is expressly mentioned, or we know that the Spirit does this sort of stuff and so we can assume it rightly that he's there. So where do we see the Spirit in the life of Christ? Why don't we ask that question more often? You could say the same, Where is the Father? Let's just deal with the Son and the Spirit.

How does Jesus come into the world? The miraculous conception of Mary. The Holy Spirit overshadows Mary and she is with child. Curious fact? Not *just* curious fact – this is an indicator to a Jewish audience steeped in what we call the Old Testament, that this One has the Spirit from conception. This one was conceived by the Spirit (whatever that means), and there's a deliberate contrast in the Gospels with his cousin John the Baptist. John was unique. In utero, he is in sense baptized in the Spirit. He leaps for joy by the Spirit. That is utterly unique. Jesus calls him the greatest prophet in Israel – the greatest, and yet he's not worthy to stoop down and untie the sandals of his cousin Jesus. John, in utero, filled with the Spirit; Jesus conceived with the Spirit.

What does a Jew hear? A Jew hears, here is one that's anointed. Here's one who is saturated (smeared, literal translation of “anointed”) with the Spirit. But in the Old Testament, who has Spirit? Prophets, priests, judges, kings (and not even all of them). King David is sort of a paradigm. He is anointed with oil, a symbol of the Spirit; the Spirit of the Lord rushes upon him. And the Spirit comes upon even panelbeaters – Bezalel, early on, he's the guy that beats these big bronze shields for the tabernacle [Exodus 31]. The Spirit comes upon him. The Spirit rushes upon these people and sets them apart for ministry, for service, for something which they maybe could have done but not to the degree and not to the extent, not with the quality that God wants. A panelbeater can panelbeat, and not even be a Christian, but to produce stuff which is worthy to be in the tabernacle, you need God's Spirit upon you.

The Jews read the conception narrative of Jesus (or they should, and so should Christians) and ask: “Here is one conceived... What is this saying?” It's saying he is unlike any individual you have ever seen in history before, but we know about him. These allusions, these echoes in the Old Testament: I will give you Spirit-filled people, I will pour my Spirit out upon all flesh...

There is one coming, there is the coming one, there is one greater than Moses, there is the greatest prophet, the greatest priest, the greatest king.

We've got all these things. What are we seeing in Jesus? Is he a great prophet? Could be. Will he be a great priest? Could be. Will he be a king? Could be. That's the imagination as we go through the narrative. He's actually all three.

So there's the conception. We move to the baptism of Jesus, at the age of 30. At the age of 30, a Jewish man, if he is so trained and prepared to accept it, enters the priesthood. Here's Jesus, at the age of 30, entering public ministry. He goes to John, who says, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." He baptizes Jesus and three things happen: the heavens open. Again, this is not a weather report (you know, it was 30 degrees, it was a mild wind that blew that day and the heavens opened). In the Old Testament, the heavens opened, you have one of two choices: run for the hills – God is judging, or you fall flat on your face in worship because he is about to bless. The heavens opened, [second] the divine voice says, "This is my beloved Son," and [third] the descent of the Holy Spirit.

He already had the Spirit – he was conceived in the Spirit – so why a second pouring out? Here he's being set apart as a prophet-priest-king – all three offices in one. He's being set apart for the ministry of the Messiah, of the Anointed One. In Mark's Gospel (fantastic – short, punchy, immediate – everything's "immediately"), immediate the Spirit *ekballō*, threw Jesus into the desert to be tempted by Satan 40 days. Desert, wilderness, 40 days. This is, to a Jew, highly symbolic. This is the Exodus rule. This is the 40 years in the desert. What did God's son Israel do in the desert? Disobeyed. A two-big journey – 40 years? They disobeyed.

What's Jesus going to do? That's the tension, that's the narrative. The Spirit pushes him after the baptism into ministry and for 40 days without eating, he defeats Satan. He resists temptation. How? The narrative sets it up. By the Spirit. Not because he's the Logos, not because he's God, not because there was a default option, [as if] he's a robot with a default setting. He is a man, a God-man, who is so filled of the Spirit of God that he resists the ultimate temptation of the devil.

Mark says he comes back and in the power of the Spirit he does his ministry. His ministry is specific: he gives sight to the blind, he heals lepers, he heals paralytics. He's doing all the things which if we read when we turn to the Old Testament, they say, this is what God will do in the last days. This is what God will do in the last days through an individual person – a prophet, a priest, a king – through someone special who has the Spirit. They begin to

talk of him as the Messiah. And here Jesus does those ministries. The Gospels are telling us, by the Spirit, in the power of the Spirit, in the power of the Spirit. We are supposed to be getting the message. I think he's this person the Old Testament talks about. I think he's God's fulfillment, God's promise.

37. JESUS AND THE SPIRIT

Mike Morrison: You mentioned that Jesus was the Messiah, which means “The Anointed One.” That made me think – anointed with what? The name “Messiah” is reminding us of the role of the Spirit, the importance of the Spirit and who this person is. How does this help us in our Christian walk?

Myk Habets: It makes Jesus more real – certainly for me. I go back and read any Gospel (it doesn’t matter which one) – and I read it with this understanding that Jesus is fulfilling prophecy, fulfilling all of Israel’s promises – that there is a coming one. They couldn’t conceive of how that all jelled together until the coming of Christ – as we read, the prophets wrote, but they didn’t fully understand even what they were writing about [1 Peter 1:10]. Jesus comes, and Paul talks about the *mysterion*, the mystery. It’s not a whodunit – it’s a mystery that we now understand more than we did – it unlocks that. So in terms of practicalities – it makes Jesus more real, more human.

That makes him no less divine – in fact it makes him more divine. A God who will go to such great lengths to redeem me, when I’m not worth it. Arguably, humanity isn’t worth it. Why would God do it? That’s the question you always get: why does God love us? Why does God want to save us? There’s no answer. Why? Because that’s who he is. That’s what Jesus reveals. That’s the magnificence of it. The more human Jesus becomes, the more magnificent he becomes as the God/man. God, who knows no sin, became sin for me. God, who knows our limitations, would choose to live as a human – through human eyes, through human mind, through human will and temptations.

I can identify with that. I can relate to that – because he has first identified with me. He’s first related to me. So when I pray, we read in Hebrews [7:25] that we have one before the Father who’s interceding for us. Someone I read recently suggested that Jesus’ very presence as a human in the presence of the Father is his intercession. It’s not a pleading, “Wrathful Father, be merciful on Myk – he’s not so bad.” No, that splits God from Jesus. His very presence as a human before the Father shows that humanity is acceptable to the Father. My humanity is now found in that Jesus Christ. Now, in the already-not yet before the resurrection, I can pray and there is a listening, there is a responsiveness, there is a sympathy, an empathetic person – the second person in the Trinity – as a human.

MM: Because Jesus knows what’s it like to be human.

MH: Yeah, he's lived it, he's felt it, he has conquered it.

MM: And he is able to communicate that perfectly to the Father.

MH: He says: I will not leave you orphans in the world, I won't leave you alone [John 14:18]. I'll be with you till the end of the age [Matthew 28:20], by my Spirit. In the great Pentecost event, he doesn't just seem spirit to us. We read so much "spirit" story everywhere, it seems to be one of those plastic words, a hair spray word, you spray it everywhere, but it loses any sense of meaning. We have seen in this narrative the Spirit of the risen Christ, the Holy Spirit, the third person in the Trinity.

We receive the Spirit of his journey with the Son to the far country, to his humanity – he has accompanied him on that journey – has been the one who, with him, has been the power of his resisting temptation, the power of his obedience to the Father. Just as he is for you and for me. That's the Spirit that Christ gives us – his Spirit – the Spirit enfolded and imprinted with an obedient human life. So I now have resources within me because I'm in Christ to live this life. So when I'm tempted, I can't say, "Ah, if I stumble, the devil made me do it." That is not an option anymore. So again, I think the practical response to your question is: Jesus becomes more real, we become closer. God becomes more holy and more loving and more attractive. He's not just a fuzzy power. He's not just an energy, not just some force – he's Christ in us.

MM: He's the Spirit who has done this, and done that.

MH: Then he commits through Christ, because the first act of Christ's exaltation was to send the Spirit – to pour the Spirit on the church and on every believer to unite us to Christ, to himself by the Spirit so that we can participate in God. So by giving us his Spirit, by giving us his presence, he's giving us himself. Wherever we go, Christ is there first by the Spirit, throwing us into the situation, into this conversation, into this event, into this murky fallen existence.

So it transcends a hobby-horse of mine, "What-Would-Jesus-Do." That's okay for five minutes. But it's all external. As if I would know what Jesus would do. What would Jesus do if someone cuts in front of him on the motorway? Well, Jesus didn't drive cars, did he? So unless I could think of a donkey coming in front of them... Then it gets bizarre... So if you're a woman in certain situations... It becomes really bizarre. There's something good about it – an imitation of Christ, but the imitation is external and effectively, what happens is that Christ becomes me to the nth degree. I'm imitating myself. I'm justifying my actions.

MM: You're creating Christ in your image...

MH: Yeah, and justifying actions on that basis. Is that not what we see in

much of the “What would Jesus do” movement? It’s a good movement, with good intention, but a lot of it is simply human justification. They say, this is what Jesus would do. I’m looking it like, “You don’t even know the Scriptures – so how would you know what Jesus would do, if you don’t even know that story?”

So this is moving beyond that to participation in Christ. I think of more of Hebrews’ idea, the biblical idea, where Christ is at the right hand of the Father. He sends us his Spirit in order that we may participate in what he did and what he is also currently doing.

MM: So it’s not us imitating an external, but the external coming into us...

MH: Yep, so that we could participate with Christ by the Spirit. It’s active, it’s dynamic, it’s internal – it’s not me controlling the situation in an external way.

MM: You seem to use Christ and God and the Spirit sometimes interchangeably. I’ve often thought of God being Christ-like, but as you were talking there, it seems that you think that the Spirit is Christ-like. Is that accurate?

MH: Yeah, I think so. Over 200 times in the Pauline epistles we find “in Christ” and “in the Spirit.” Two hundred times – that is pervasive, and they seem to be utterly synonymous. If you’re in the Spirit, you’re in Christ, or if in Christ, then in the Spirit. The same dynamic, the same power – the Spirit and the risen Christ are identified. They’re not collapsed into each other (so it’s not what we would say ontological, that now Christ ceases to be and he’s just Spirit), and yet their functions now overlap. “I will not leave you as orphans, I’ll send my Spirit” [John 14:18] so it’s how you define form, conform, sanctification, etc.

MM: The Spirit represents Jesus and his ongoing presence with us.

MH: Yes, without collapsing Jesus as also being a person of the Trinity. So the Spirit is like Jesus and Jesus is like the Spirit.

MM: Jesus called him “another comforter” [John 14:16].

MH: Yea, another of the same kind, the same quality. We could add the Father into that discussion as well, and do it three ways. If you’ve seen me, you’ve seen the Father [John 14:9]. The idea is that “if you’re in me, you’re in the Father.” The great John 17 prayer, that you will be one with me, as I am with the Father [John 17:21]. Really? Now, if that’s the Logos, you’ll be one with the Father as the Logos is – that means I become God. I’m the fourth member of the Holy Trinity – so now it’s a Quadtrinity, you know. But Jesus is speaking to God as man: as I’m accepted by the Father, as I’m a beloved Son, now that you are in me, you are also accepted – it’s a relational

oneness, and that's profound.

MM: Just as Jesus is in the throne room – to use that metaphor – with God, all humanity is brought there...

MH: Yeah, you remind me of Paul: we are seated in Christ Jesus in the heavenly realm [Ephesians 2:6].

MM: Already.

MH: So this is the sense in which we are found in Christ – we come into him, we live and breathe and have our being – while at the same time there is this other reality.

MM: But then that is done by the Spirit.

MH: Absolutely: Church, communion, baptism, mission, worship, witness...

MM: The three persons of the Trinity are all together in that somehow... We can't separate, but we can distinguish...

MH: Augustine says (and theology has largely followed) that everything God does, he does as one – because he's one being: Father, Son, and Spirit. But it's appropriate to talk about the Father doing stuff, the Son doing stuff and the Spirit... As long as we're not thinking three Gods. We need to constantly remind ourselves of one and three – divine and human – all the tensions in Scripture.

MM: Jesus is our Savior, but the Spirit is also involved in our salvation.

MH: Yea, and the Father in Christ is reconciling, the Father equally. It's not the Father saying, "Look, I'll have none of these primordial pests – that's your job." And Jesus, the Logos: "What if I don't want to go," you know. "Well, too bad. I'm the Father, you're off." That would deny the one being. Thomas Torrance has the phrase, "There is no God behind the back of Jesus." I think it's a useful phrase. If Jesus loves us, the Trinity loves us. If Jesus accepts us, the Trinity accepts us. If we know Jesus, we know the Trinity.

MM: So what we see is what we get?

MH: Yeah, there's far more, but what we will get is not other than what we see in Jesus. So I will stand before the judgment seat of Christ I have an assurance that I will hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant" because that's what Jesus says now and that's what the Trinity will say then.

MM: If Jesus was of such a mind as to becoming human, to condescend to our level, then that means the Father has that kind of humility as well?

MH: Yes, because they're one being. Homouosios, of the same stuff – the Father, the Son, the Spirit equally work together in all things – for creation, for salvation, for redemption, for renewal.

MM: So the judge comes down to us.

MH: Yeah, the judge is judged our place...

There is this temptation to think of the Father as a bit of a tyrant, the Old Testament God versus the New Testament Jesus, the Law versus Sermon on the Mount. That's a false dichotomy that Christians intuitively know is false. God loves us in Christ Jesus.

MM: You say intuitively and yet some people still fear...

MH: Sure... Sunday-school child-like faith gets swamped as we get older – we start listening to voices we should not, some of the people from within the church. Doubts creep in, and we need to do good theology, good Bible reading to correct us. “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so,” is good enough for me. Now I'm adding to that understanding — what does that mean? How do you unpack that? That's not to base my salvation on. I have salvation, I have faith as a gift, it's grace; now I'm adding to that knowledge. Theology is worship, worship is theology – at least that's how it should be. When it's turned into a philosophy, well...

MM: Seeking more understanding is worship.

MH: Yeah – having the mind of Christ, following after with our entire mind, body, and soul, spirit.

MM: Whereas some even in the church, as you said, would turn that, “Jesus loves me, this I know, but the Father, I'm not so sure about...”

MH: Yeah. Christ would be horrified. “If you've seen me, you've seen the Father. You're not getting it.” The disciples come sort of mid ministry, they're following Jesus, they're seeing what he's doing, but they're Jews. “We worship Yahweh.” The Shema says, “Behold, the Lord your God the Lord is one.” They say it repeatedly, they say it every day, but here's this Jesus who's doing God stuff, Yahweh stuff. He can't be Yahweh, it's incomprehensible. Yahweh's Yahweh. You're you... So they come to him, they have that wonderful narrative of Jesus...

You can just see, you know, they're discussing who's gonna ask: “no, you ask”; “no, you ask”; “you're the one – ok, you're gonna ask.” “Ok, I'll go.” “Ah, sorry, Jesus, now look, we know we're Jewish, we know for several millennia that Yahweh's taught us how to pray, how to approach him, how to think of him, how to ready and prepare ourselves and how to worship. Uh, how do we pray?” They're asking “who can we address?” “We pray to Yahweh, is that ignoring you? Do we pray to you? Is that ignoring Yahweh? We don't want to be idolaters.” And Jesus says, “this is how you should pray.”

MM: Kind of odd, why Jews who have been praying all their life would ask how to pray.

MH: Staggering. And he says, even more staggering, “This is how you pray: Our Father...”

MM: They realize that Jesus has completely transformed (or at least that's the potential) their understanding of God and their relationship with him.

MH: So it is not other than the God of the Jews. It is the same. Richard Bauckham talks about Jesus sharing the divine identity. Jesus shows us what that identity really means. When he says, Our Father – they're thinking, "Our Father? I know with whom you [Jesus] talk about him as your Father, even at the baptism, 'This is my beloved Son' [Matthew 3:17]. Therefore he's his beloved Father. I know there's this unique and utter relationship between you two." He said you should pray, Our Father.

MM: But they have the potential to have the same kind of relationship.

MH: And so it's working that out. "Our Father" because he's your Father because I'm related to you. You're saying you are God. You're saying you are equal to the Father. You're saying, in the later language, a homoousios, a one, a perichoretic, all these terms, this is the language of prayer: Our Father, Abba. What Jesus prays, what Jesus reveals, the unique relationship Jesus has with his Father, he's saying yes you have that too. Only because of me and only in me. And you just see them with more questions, after mid ministry, and still, after that, "we really don't know who you are." After the resurrection – ah, "you were who you say you were."

MM: Several aha moments.

MH: Whether you're a Thomas, or whoever... "Ah, you are who you said you were." So we can take you at face value, we can take your word as gospel, literally. You are the way the truth and the life. Ah, you meant it.

MM: And then at Pentecost there was a deepening of their understanding.

MH: The internalization that talks about this new covenant. The Spirit of John 2:28, Ezekiel and Isaiah and all these prophecies, that in those last days you will have this Spirit, too. Well, Jesus was conceived, baptized, lived, empowered and now he gives – he's Lord of the Spirit.

MM: The same Spirit in them.

MH: But under now his lordship. So we're not messiahs, we're not individuals doing the work of Christ. We are now under his lordship, a church, a body of which he is the head corporately and collectively. We often miss that collective – in a lone-ranger Christianity. Or someone says, "I'm the Lord's anointed; you come to me for stuff." No. Jesus Christ is the Lord's anointed. We go to him for stuff and then he gives it to his church. He doesn't give it to individuals or geographical locales or holy fountains of grace. That can be translated into church hierarchies or pseudo-prophets or any other current manifestation. There's this collective church that we have to really wrestle with.

38. THE CREEDS AND THE TRINITY

MM: One of the distinctives of the Christian faith is a belief in the Trinity. The word is not found in the Bible, but it has nevertheless been an important part of Christian theology: three Persons, but only one God. The math doesn't work, but this has been an important formulation that people have been trying to wrap their heads around, trying to understand, what does this mean? Why does Christianity have such a puzzling teaching?

MH: Augustine famously wrote at the end of his big, long treatise on the Trinity something to the effect that "It would be better to say nothing, but we have to say something, so here's my something," because God is more than a human mind can ever conceive. If we could fully understand God, we would get bored with God. That's the original sin. We would turn from God to something else that is more interesting, which is the definition of idolatry.

We are all wrestling with what we rightly term a mystery, but some wrestle more than others and penetrate that mystery more. We believe that God's a Trinity because that's what God has revealed himself to be, is the blunt language. When Jesus came and identified himself with the Father as one and sends the Spirit, another Paraclete, another of exactly the same type [John 14:16] – and hundreds of other verses – we have this divine identity is shared by three... What? What's the human language? We've settled on three "Persons" – not three individuals, but three Persons who co-exist in such a unique way that they are one God.

That's difficult! It's difficult in any language, any time, and yet it's a difficulty that is a marvelous difficulty. It's an enticing difficulty. This is why we pray and worship and sing and write poetry and do theology, because we are striving after that which we already know.

I've got children, a 5-year-old and a 3-year-old, and I talk to them about God. I'm talking about the Father, I'm talking about the Son, I'm talking about the Spirit – you get the odd metaphysical question, you know: Is God one or three? But they don't have too many issues with God as one and three – they're not dealing with mathematics. They know far more than they could articulate. (Well, I'm hoping so, anyway.) They intuitively and they relationally know, because of what their parents, my wife and I, are telling them, that God – Father, Son, Spirit (we repeat these phrases – not always talking about "God," not always talking about "Father," not always talking about Son or Spirit – always talking about all of them) loves you, cares for you, has created you, has a plan for you.

My hope is that they will grow up by default knowing that this Tri-Personal God (however the metaphysics works) loves them. I hope for the

rest of their life they will tease out, What does that actually mean? Who is God? How can he be one and three? What is the philosophical-theological language for that? That philosophical-theological language isn't confirming their faith – it's merely trying to articulate what I hope as a 5 or 3-year old they already know, what me as a 6 or 7-year old (when I came to faith) implicitly knew – I'm just unpacking that in theology.

That's what the early church did. The earliest confession in Scripture is "Jesus is Lord – Yahweh." They believed in Yahweh, what we call the Father, and they also believed that Jesus is the same, but different. They were already doing it. For centuries the early church were worshipping, they're breaking bread, they're baptizing, they're doing works of ministry, alms for the poor, they're following the way, Jesus, and it's all worship of a Tri-Personal God, but they don't have that language. So they come together successively through various councils – Nicea in 325 and again in Constantinople in 381, where they devised what we call today the Nicene Creed.

There were three clauses: "We believe in God the Father, Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth; we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, very God of very God, very light of very light" – these wonderful things. The first version had "and the Holy Spirit" – a little muted. By 381 it had, "and we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord." Significant – same as Father, same as Son – "the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life." They unpack that. Their worship is primary; the theology is catching up with language about what they are doing in worship.

Same for my kids, same for me, same for (I think) every Christian who comes to faith. It's by grace, through faith – it's gift, and now we're unpacking that. We should do it in the context of worship, not philosophy. That has a place, but it's not philosophy. This is discipleship. This is sanctification. It's fun, as well.

MM: Sometimes it's difficult for us to even describe human persons, a personality. When someone calls me on the telephone, I recognize their voice. But how would I describe that voice? I cannot put it into words. There are aspects of personality even on a human level, people we know very well, and I can see that raised to a much greater level when we're dealing with divine Persons. How do I describe this? Words... [**MH:** fail.] **MM:** yeah.

MH: They do. The Holy Spirit intercedes in his own speech and language (whatever that means); the Holy Spirit picks up where we leave off. How do we describe that? I think it's a lot like a relationship of a man and wife, a marriage relationship, where analytical description is okay if you've lost your spouse and you're trying to get a policeman to find him or her – how tall,

what color eyes, what color are they wearing – it really doesn't tell anything about them. I think a lot of Christianity is analytical description of God: God is omnipresent, omniscient and omnibenevolent (if that's a word). God is these things. It's all utterly abstract.

It would be true, but it's almost meaningless, unless it becomes internalized: God is Abba, my Father. He is my Abba, Father, because I am in relationship with Jesus Christ, which he has initiated through his Holy Spirit. The tradition I have come from would be happy to talk about irresistible grace, where the Spirit irresistibly draws me to God, but it's not an irresistible force like the Star Trek tractor beam, where regardless of what you want to do, you're caught. This is the irresistible force of love.

If someone asks me, Why do you love your wife? I love her because she's kind, she's Christ-like, she's loves me, etc. But why, why, behind that? I don't know why I love her – I just do. It's inexplicable. At that level, I will turn to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, or poetry (or the odd limerick, if you like), but analytics aren't any good. It's the language of love, the language of poetry, and then beyond that, I'll just give her gifts. Not necessarily bought stuff, but gifts of service, attention, quality time, because language is a bit useless. It's necessary, but a bit useless. So I'll just give myself.

Let's put that on its head: How does God love us? He loves us through the word, but not just through giving us a Bible. Most people who read it don't get anything out of it. God doesn't just give us words – he gives us himself, through the Son incarnate, ultimately and finally, and then, through Christ, the Spirit.

So from the inside out, we know God. We know God and think of God from a center in himself, the Trinity, rather than from a center in ourselves, idolatry. Those are big terms, and those are big concepts, but I think everyone who comes to faith, that's how they come to faith. Then they look back and try to unpack: How do we know God? How do we speak of God? Well, the way God speaks to us, the way God relates to us: by self-giving.

MM: They may not have the terminology, but as long as they have the basic "God loves you." They have a relationship even if they cannot articulate it.

MH: This is where I think the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper (Eucharist, Communion, whatever terminology you want), that's why these rhythms of church life that Christ in his wisdom has given us. "You don't have the words – I know you don't." Even the best theologians (that doesn't make them the best Christians) have a lot of words, but at the end of the day, here's these rituals. "I want you to come under the preached word, I

want you to keep reciting it, keep repeating it, keep praying it. I want you to have this initiation of baptism.” Entering water, getting wet – especially as an adult, if you’re an adult convert – it’s very humbling, very humiliating. Yet this is signifying, this is symbolic, this is participating, re-enacting what Christ has done for us.

Then we gather around this table of mundane elements – simple bread and wine. We eat, we drink, we participate. This is what these rhythms are, what these sacraments are, why church becomes the focus through Scripture, from the church to the world. God is saying, “Words are good, but participation is ultimately what relationships are about.”

MM: Old Testament worship had a lot of rituals, but they were done away. The church, the New Testament has few.

MH: Two – well, maybe more than two. There’s alms-giving, good works and stuff, but yeah.

MM: There’s some puzzle there: why these? What are they conveying? You were saying they were conveying, re-enacting what Jesus has done for us...

MH: Someone said that they are acted-out parables. I like that – it works.

MM: It’s obvious how the Lord’s Supper is a re-enactment. Jesus tells us, “This is my body, this is my blood.” How would baptism be a re-enactment? Of course, Jesus was baptized...

MH: Different traditions would have different ways of articulating the details of which, that’s fine, but it’s this identification with Christ. “Believe and be baptized for the remission of your sins” [Acts 2:38]. Baptism doesn’t regenerate us. Baptism in Scripture, I would argue, is part of the one activity of coming to faith. You believe and you are baptized; they should be done close together, if at all possible. It’s two parts of one whole.

I confess with my mouth and believe in my heart that I shall be saved [cf. Romans 10:9]. It doesn’t say anything about baptism... They’re using shorthand expressions for the whole thing. I believe, and I’m baptized, and my baptism re-enacts my faith. I’m in union with Christ as I enter the water, into his death as I go down into the water, his assumption of the human flesh, his incarnation and atonement, his taking of my sins on the cross, his complete and utter identification, substitution, reconciliation, the whole dealing to the whole deal. Then coming up the other side a new creation, a new life, resurrection.

It’s this funny wet parable of the cross, of the life, the death, the resurrection of Christ. It’s saying to our community (if the world wants to watch, that’s fine), the church, the body of Christ, “I’m entering this body

through Christ – no, that’s not good enough – *in* Christ. What he’s done can only be done once, and so I’m acting that out to show that I, while I wasn’t there 2000 years ago, I was as good as there in Christ. I’m participating in that. My sins are now his sins, on the cross. My guilt is taken by him.” It’s that utter identification. Then it’s coming out of the water, it is resurrection as well. I think that’s often overlooked.

MM: Most people, when they are baptized, have very little clue on all this symbolism, and yet it becomes a point in their lives which they can be pointed back to and say, this was done to you.

MH: We have to be careful there, and some traditions will baptize infants (Presbyterian, Anglican, Roman Catholic); that has a whole theology. A Baptist like myself has a believer’s baptism, a credo-baptism. Regardless of those dynamics (we can have those debates, and they are worth having), there is a sense in which we never know fully – we’re always catching up. That’s where the symbolic acts are important.

I was saved, but not because I was baptized. I was baptized at age 16 (1986, I think it was). I know who did it and where I was. I was baptized by my father, so it was a special occasion. It is a marker, as you were saying, but it’s a marker only if we can see through it to what it represents. It represents Christ’s unfailing love for me. As long as we don’t substitute baptism for what it symbolizes (and I think that’s what a lot of Christians are doing – “Are you saved?” “Oh, let me think...” “Did you go to Sunday School?” “Yes, I did.” “Did you hear the gospel?” “I did hear the gospel.” “And did you get baptized?” “I did.” “Then you’re OK.” I don’t know if Paul would say that.

It is a strength, it is a nourishing of our faith, but only if it points through to Christ. What have you done since baptism? What is this newness of life that baptism represents? Are you living in that baptism reality? Those are the questions we should be asking.

MM: It comes back to Christ...

MH: Always. The Spirit brings us to him. If the Spirit’s bringing us anywhere or anyone other than Christ, then it isn’t the Spirit of Christ we’re talking about.

MM: You were talking earlier about how the early church developed, began to put words into the doctrine of the Trinity – trying to phrase what they can say and what they can’t say. How was Jesus’ humanity involved in that? Jesus is not just God, one of the members of the Trinity.

MH: After Nicea in 325, Constantinople in 381, after they got to the word *homoousios* – Jesus is of the same stuff, substance, essence, identity as the

Father and as human. Jesus is divine; Jesus is to be worshipped; Jesus is equal to God, and equal to human. Then they work out, What does that mean? We've got Trinity; that's who God is, that's what he has revealed himself to be. I've got a handle (only a handle) on that.

Then, what are we talking about, one person with two natures? What is that? So in 451, the Council of Chalcedon is where they knocked out what they can't say about Jesus. What we can't say is that he's two people, because that would be some sort of schizophrenia. (You see that in preaching today: When Jesus is forgiving sins, it's his divinity that's doing it. When Jesus is eating or going to the toilet, that's his humanity.) That's ruled out. No, that is not an appropriate way to speak of the one God-man, Jesus Christ. That's Nestorian. That's two persons. Or he looks like a human, but he's not really. His flesh is so different that he's actually not human at all. It's a weird Docetism, as they call it at times, and there are a lot of other heresies.

So the church is saying, that's not true. That leaves a big middle ground for how to say what is true. That's the beauty of the creeds, of early confessional theology, there is a big middle ground. You can have differences in your tradition, and that's not necessarily wrong, as long as they're not contradictory differences – you can have, for example, Arminianism and Calvinism. We can get along fine; we can have our arguments (and we should), but arguments as brothers and sisters, because there is a significant middle ground. The early church is ruling out other options: not that, not that, and it leaves this orthodox space. It's not so constricting.

The filioque controversy

MM: You mentioned several councils – Nicea, Constantinople, Chalcedon – where they were trying to create these creeds. In each of these councils the church from east and west got together and developed what they could say, what they could not say – in Greek and in Latin. But eventually, the two halves split. [**MH:** sadly] They went different ways. How did that happen? What was the issue there?

MH: The doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of love, the bond of love, as we've often called the Holy Spirit, has been the occasion of some of the most bitter divisions in the church. So in 1054, east and west go separate ways over the doctrine of the *filioque*. That's the Latin word meaning “and the Son.” The Western church started to insert it into one of the creeds without asking the east. You can't just change a creed without asking the whole church – that was the issue. But the west does. They start altering the creed, saying that the Father *and the Son* send the Holy Spirit.

If we take them in the best reading, they're trying to defend that Jesus is really God. It's not just the Father that sends the Holy Spirit – it's the Father and the Son, because the Son is really God. They're trying to uphold his divinity – a really good impulse.

The east objected, partly on political grounds: You can't change a creed without asking us – who do you think you are? The theological grounds for them is that the Father is the font of divinity – the Father is the *archē*, the chief, the head, the ruler. The Son and the Spirit are equal, but in a coordinated way. Always first the Father, then Son and Spirit. We think you're undermining the Father when you say "Father and Son." If you undermine the Father, we think you're undermining the Trinity.

It's a complete (I think) talking past each other. What they both wanted to affirm, one by having *filioque* and the other by not having it, wasn't being heard. Language was a barrier, politics was a barrier, personalities were a barrier. It's one of the more bitter splits – the Great Schism, it was called. It's still a schism today. We don't want to get into ecclesiastical politics too much, but it's complicated today by things like having a pope and a hierarchy, apostolic succession – things like that make it something of a barrier, as much as anything else.

Then there are us Protestants, who are generally stand outside of much of that today, and look on with some interest. A lot of Protestantism now is trying to speak into those situations specifically and say, Hang on, brothers and sisters. We have a shared and common sense of the Trinity, and the early church worked with Greek and Latin. They did settle on terms: this means that, etc. One being, three persons, in each of our languages, so can we get back to that Trinitarian understanding that we all share, and can we start to work backwards so that we can get behind the *filioque* to what you're trying to say, and what you're trying to say? I think you're trying to say the same thing, so can we just put the *filioque* to one side and construct a language that works and see what happens.

MM: And find some new terminology.

MH: New terminology, yeah. I would say the *filioque* is neither right nor wrong, because they're wanting to affirm what the east wanted to affirm, but they did it in a particular way. If the east is so disgruntled by the use of *filioque*, just (I think fair enough) don't use it. It's a barrier to ecumenical discourse. But what's the theology behind it – that's what we're really wrestling with, and I think east and west agree. I think Augustine and Athanasius and Basil and Jerome all agree on the core. If we get back to that core, the Trinitarian doctrine, I think it will (I'm a bit naïve) take care of itself.

MM: They haven't found the terminology that will achieve unity?

MH: No. There have been lots of suggestions. The one that I am happy to go with (I didn't create it, and it has been suggested many times – right back from the Council of Nicea onwards it has been suggested): “from the Father, *through* the Son.” I think it solves everything.

MM: Obviously not everyone takes the same view.

MH: Right. There is political stuff involved, there is personality, there is a long tradition involved. It's easier for me as a Protestant to make that conclusion than for a Roman Catholic or an Eastern Orthodox.

MM: The Roman Catholic church is one church, whereas the Eastern churches are plural. Even if you could get the Greek church to agree to this, there'd be the Russians, the Coptics.

MH: Yeah. It's been tried. In 1995, the Roman Catholic Church brought in an agreed clarification of *filioque*. It was a result of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox dialogue. I think they went out of their way to temper the language, but at base, it's the same, but it's a good effort. Earlier, in 1991, the World Alliance of Reformed Theology and Churches met with a number of Eastern Orthodox representatives (Tom Torrance was the one who initiated and led that), and they worked out an “Agreed Statement on the Holy Trinity.”

They're trying to get behind the *filioque*. As a result of that, they settled on language that those present (they weren't formally representing all those churches, but informally they were) agreed: “from Father through Son by the Spirit.” The East recognized that this safeguarded what they wanted; the West recognized that it safeguarded what they wanted, and everyone was happy. I'm happy. But because it's not an official document, it's not binding on any actual church. Sadly, I think it's been ignored since 1991.

MM: Even though it seems to have potential for agreement.

MH: Yeah. A bunch of us, myself included, any opportunity we get, we try to put that back into the discussion, the agenda: “Here's a good solution that recommends itself; it has good support. Can we reconsider that, maybe? You might be able to improve on it, but can we at least....” A few of us keep putting that on the agenda, to work towards unity. That's our job.

MM: But unity is not just in terms of formal acceptance of certain creeds; there are other things involved in church unity, too. For one, Jesus said that whether we look like it or not, we *are* one.

MH: Right. There's only one church.

MM: We are all in him, so there's a unity there.

MH: Yeah. But what it gets to on the ground, when we have our academic

inter-tradition dialogue, we do the academic stuff, the sharp end of the stick is when we come to the Eucharist. I'm a Baptist, and generally, in a Baptist theology, if one is baptized and loves the Lord, the Lord's Table is open. We don't ask if you're a Roman Catholic or an Eastern Orthodox or Presbyterian or Anglican – it does not matter. If you are baptized and you love the Lord, you may take. That's not true in other traditions and communions. I'm biased. I think Baptists are uniquely placed to have perspective on that, but so is everyone else.

On the ground, theologians can do their work and come up with some nice language, but when we come back into worship proper, around the Table, if Christians are excluded, stuff stops. That's where the challenge in ecumenical theology is, for theology to be consistent with practice, and practice consistent with theology.

George Hunsinger wrote a book recently where he unpacks a lot of that from a Reformed reading and he tries to find in the early church (before the split) common ground, common theology. He settles on this very technical term “traselementation,” which is very hard to say, let alone unpack. Whether he's right or wrong, that sort of work represents the very best of Christians working towards the “one holy, catholic, apostolic church” that exists. Even though it doesn't look like it, it does. I think we need more of that sort of stuff.

MM: That's not easy.

MH: No, it's not. You need to be in positions of authority, positions of elected representation. There's aren't many of those in the Baptist world. Other denominations are far better placed to do that sort of discussion: Presbyterians, Catholics, Orthodox. There are spokespeople who do represent them. That's what we have been seeing in the last what, 13 years of ecumenical discussions: genuinely working and striving towards agreement – not at the lowest common denominator (some of the worst World Council of Churches stuff: What can we all agree on? God loves us. Don't define God, don't define love. Let's just say “God loves us” and we're all happy.) That's thankfully not happening in ecumenical discourse much now. It's genuinely theological, robust, scriptural, looking for common belief.

MM: In some ways theology has been the source of the division; it is now being the initiator for healing that.

MH: I'd like to think so, as a theologian. But what I'm saying is, Theologians can do their work, and we should, but it needs to be translated, if you like, into priestly work – into actual people in front of congregations of believers, where it makes an actual difference. That's our job, to translate,

but it's also pastors, ministers; it's also churches' job to be interested in participating. It's a two-way thing.

The classic distinction that there are clergy and laity, that has lots of problems, lording it over, but in its best guise you have doctors – you have people separated to learn Greek and to learn Hebrew and do the history and think of this high-faluting theology, to try to unpack it, working with and for the church. But what we've ended up with are academies and the university structure (not that universities are bad), where you have a university which is independent thinking, and theology is housed there, and you have churches. That's tended to split them. We need to bring them together.

39. THEOSIS: PARTICIPATION IN THE DIVINE NATURE

MM: Myk, you wrote your dissertation that was eventually published as a book: *Theosis in the Theology of Thomas Torrance*. The title itself can be a bit intimidating – that’s the way dissertations often are. We can start with the first word, theosis. What *is* theosis?

MH: It has been an uncommon word to the West, but over the last 20 years has become almost popular. It comes from *theopoesis* – *theos*, meaning god – and *poieo* – meaning to make into. “To make one a god” is the literal translation. Theosis, to become god. In Christian discourse, from the early church onwards, it of course doesn’t mean that a human can literally become God – that’s idolatry – it’s that we become God-like. That’s probably the best definition. It becomes both a theme and a doctrine, depending on who is using it and how. As a theme, it’s a weak image; as a doctrine, it’s a robust idea that coordinates an entire theology. How’s that for a start?

MM: There’s a lot packed into there. But it sounds a bit non-Christian, that we are becoming like God. How’s this to be distinguished from, say, Indian views?

MH: Yeah, Eastern pantheism and mysticism. *Apotheosis* is a related word. It’s the making of a human into a god. The Egyptian Pharaohs, for instance, believed that they became gods – after death, for the early ones; and then the ones that followed thought, “Why should I wait until after death? In my lifetime I can be god!” There is a pagan sense to the term which we want to rule out. There’s a conception of it which is utterly not compatible with Christian attitude.

But when Christians use the term, from very early on in the tradition, they found within it an image, a metaphor, an analogy, that was profound. When we become united to Christ, we become something different – Paul talks about us being “new creations.” So they’re trying to get at a profound sense of becoming more human, not less, but nonetheless different. How are you the same but different? Theosis was one way they described it – not the only way, but it was a significant way. The term is rhetorical – it demands a reaction.

My thesis title was actually “The Danger of Vertigo,” to get at the sense that it’s too high, it’s too lofty, we get a bit dizzy when we think about it.

MM: It seems like it has some shock value.

MH: Yes. But when the early church started using it, it wasn’t simply shock value. The term was current, and they converted the term. Like the word *person* – there were definitions of *person*; they converted the term to give it Christian meaning. There were definitions of *god*; they converted the term.

They baptized the term with gospel meaning.

So here's this term *theosis* – the Greeks are using it; it has a currency, it has a history. Like the word *logos* – it has a Greek and a Jewish history, and John says, “I’m not meaning the Greek idea, I’m not simply meaning the Jewish idea – I’m going to fill it with meaning, but the idea is still there.” So *theosis* has a bit of shock value now, but it’s good value.

MM: The Greeks had this idea of *theosis*. Is it found in Scripture as well?

MH: The *idea* arguably is found in Scripture, although the term isn’t – the term comes later. Within Scripture, we can group together categories of what Scripture talks about when we become Christians, when we become united to Christ, when we become something that we were not. We don’t cease to be human. Before I was a Christian I was still Myk, and afterwards I’m still Myk. Nonetheless, we could look at least seven areas.

- There’s imitation of God: Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect, says Jesus (Matthew 5:48). Really? Does he mean that? The Sermon on the Mount says, “Your righteousness should exceed that of the Pharisees” (Matthew 5:20). Whatever else you say about the Pharisees, they were righteous. So there’s a sense in which we are to imitate, we are to be like God. That’s a weak sense.
- Then there’s taking on God’s nature. That’s 2 Peter 1:4, where the term *theosis* basically gets its name from: We are promised that we can become “partakers of the divine nature.” We can become partakers of God. What does that mean, to take part in God? It’s not to cease to be what we are, yet it is to be more than we were.
- There’s being indwelt by God,
- and being re-formed by God.
- There’s being conformed to the image of Christ, from glory to glory, having his righteousness, having his likeness.
- There’s being transformed in the resurrection into a heightened state, a state above our current one. Even our physicality, our physical bodies, will resemble that of the resurrected Christ. It’s an utter transformation. We become more like God.
- There’s the, if you like, *theosis* or the divinization of the entire cosmos. Romans 8:19-21 says that all creation waits in eager anticipation for the redemption of the sons of God. I don’t know how rocks are eagerly anticipating our redemption, but in a sense all creation is, because it, too, will be conformed and transformed into something higher – new heavens, new earth, where (whatever the language means) the new Jerusalem comes down and makes its home on earth. God’s abode will be our abode; our abode will be his. It’s

an utter transformation, but it still talks about trees, birds, and feasting, drinking. It talks about earthly things, but earthly things in a God-like way, humans in a God-like way. Theosis arguably is a good term to express that mystery and that reality.

MM: Is it just a synonym for transformation? What advantage is there in using this odd word?

MH: Many of my colleagues would say, “I agree with everything you’ve said but I don’t like the term *theosis* as a way to do that.” That’s fine, not all Christians do. Throughout the tradition, not all Christians have liked the term. I like the term because what I see in this constellation of images in Scripture, especially through the incarnation, Christ models this himself, of becoming human.

As Athanasius said in the early church, “God becomes man so that man might become god.” The early church talks about this theology of “the great exchange” – in Latin, the *mirifica commutatio*, the wonderful exchange. I get what’s God’s; God gets what’s mine, the great exchange. This is the incarnation. To me, that is profound and gets to the sense of Scripture which we’re reading throughout the Gospels and the epistles, that we are the same but we are so much different in Christ. The cosmos itself will be so much different.

I like the term because of its shock value, because of its rhetorical effect, because of the image, the metaphor, the analogy. It’s not just transformation – it’s an idea, a concept, a theology which encompasses the entire parts of salvation. I would use it as a doctrine, not simply as a theme. Some of my colleagues say, “I don’t want it as a doctrine (you’re going a bit overboard), but yeah, it can have a use.” They’ll replace being sanctified, or set apart or transformed, so *theosis* can replace that. All the normal stuff before and after, but during our transformation, they might use *theosis*. I think that undermines the term and doesn’t coordinate it with the rest of our theology. Far better to have all, or nothing.

Have you met Julie Canlis? She’s written a book, *Calvin’s Ladder*, with wonderful spiritual theology. She’s doing profound stuff. She doesn’t like *theosis*, but she likes “union and communion with God.” She likes “participation in the Trinity.” I mention her because she’s representative of a large part of the tradition. But I still think it has good value.

MM: You wrote your book on this doctrine in the theology of Thomas Torrance. Could you explain a little bit, who is Thomas Torrance? How did you become so interested in him in particular?

MH: Tom Torrance, Scottish Presbyterian, is credited as the chief interpreter, in the English-speaking world, of Barth’s theology. He studied with Barth for a couple of semesters. He was born in 1913, so next year will

be 100 years since his birth; he died a few years ago. He was a prolific author. No one's counted all of them, but the most comprehensive bibliography is over 650 published works. It's a large body of literature.

He's been described as a theologian's theologian. He described himself, apart from being a devoted Christian, as a missionary and an evangelist to academics. A large part of his work was, How do we think rightly? How do we know what we know? It's in the domain of epistemology. He's trying to clear the ground for a Christian conception of reality and truth, and it's Christ-centered. We only know reality by knowing Christ who is the real, who is the way, the truth and the life.

The rest of his work was unpacking a corollary of that – a Trinitarian theology – and teasing apart, What does the Trinity mean when we apply that to Christology, when we apply that to the Holy Spirit, to the church, when we apply that to science (it was a big fascination for him), when we apply that to creation? It's a large body of work from a profound thinker, a dense writer (not for the faint of heart). He left a body of literature that we can get our teeth into.

He had a younger brother, James, who was equally profound, and he had a younger brother, David, who was also profound, and then they in turn, each of them had sons and daughters. Thomas's son is Iain Torrance, the president of Princeton Theological Seminary and a patristics scholar. James's son is Alan Torrance, a professor of theology at St. Andrews, and the dynasty goes on.

You've got this family of thinkers profoundly affected by Mr. and Mrs. Torrance senior. Tom, James, and David all credit the mother as being the formative influence. Their father was a missionary in China; their mother, an Anglican, taught them from birth, "God loves you in Christ. God is for you in Christ Jesus. God is a Trinity." Probably not in academic language, but nonetheless in gospel language, from birth. They all testified to her witness. Then they all find Barth, and they're critical readers of Barth.

Thomas Torrance's theology is highly patristic, from the early church; he's drawing on significant early church figures like Athanasius and Gregory Nazianzus etc., and so it's rich in the tradition. He's Reformed, and I have a Reformed theology, so there's an affinity with Calvin and the tradition there, and he applies it in constructive ways. (A lot of people don't do that – they're just happy to deconstruct. But genuine, evangelical Christianity doesn't just deconstruct – it presents the good news. It reconstructs. If we're not that sort of human, what sort of human are we? We're Christ-like humans.)

He latches onto theosis because he has this abiding interest in the Eastern Orthodox Church. He was a Christian with a world vision. So while he's Presbyterian, his mother was Anglican, so he's got nice relationships going

on there; he interacts with Catholicism, and he came into contact with the Eastern Orthodox, who are also highly patristic.

What I sensed as I did my doctorate in his work was that he brings East and West together, so it's got to be good. But more than that, he brings different sorts of theologies together as well because he finds those theologies in Scripture. Instead of making them dualistic, either this or that, he manages to provide a coherent whole theology, and that's not easy. That's genius, I think.

MM: Is this where you learned about the doctrine of theosis?

MH: Yeah. I start my PhD and you have a proposal, it's sketchy, and a title, and you pretend you know what it means, but at first you don't. In the first part of that PhD, I immersed myself in Eastern Orthodox literature, reading the Philokalia and other spiritual writings of the Orthodox; Kallistos Ware and Vladimir Lossky, John Weindorf, all these key figures. (Praise the Lord that they are now translated into English. Fantastic that I didn't have to learn Russian and Egyptian, etc. We live in a privileged time.) I was immersing myself in Eastern Orthodox theology. Historically, Gregory Palamas, John of Damascus, etc. in the early church, medieval church, and then into the current times. Then re-reading Torrance's stuff in order to get my own critical reflections.

MM: Thomas Torrance spent some of his time studying patristics, the early church fathers. Is that where he picked up the idea of *theosis*? Or was this an idea that he brought to them and found in them already?

MH: Undoubtedly he picked it up *from* them, because you can't read them and not pick it up. Every single church father, I think without exaggeration, spoke of *theosis*. He's finding it there. My suspicion is that it wasn't until he came into personal contact with the Eastern Orthodox that he joined those dots and *theosis* became a theme and a doctrine that he was also interested in.

He did a study, his PhD, on grace in the apostolic fathers. Theosis is there in them, but it's really the patristics just after them which emphasize theosis. Athanasius was one of his heroes, and others. He found it there – it's pervasive throughout their works. You can't read Athanasius, for instance, and not know about that divinization, *theosis*. Or Gregory Nazianzus, or Gregory of Nyssa, or Basil of Caesarea – all these key names that Torrance draws on again and again.

So he found it in the patristics, but I think it wasn't until his interaction with actual Eastern Orthodox people and theology that that became important. That was reasonably early on in his career, where he came into dialogue with them, and I suspect that's why it became such an important theme for him, as he continually tried to broker theological agreements with other traditions. "We have this in common." What we have in common, we

celebrate, we share, because he wanted to work towards “one holy catholic apostolic church.” I think (I never had an opportunity to ask him about that) that’s why it became important.

MM: He was able to see this doctrine as useful in a practical sense in terms of relationships with Eastern Orthodox. Did he also find it useful theologically? Did he build on that?

MH: I think he did, and that’s the contention of the book.

However, the answer is debatable. There is a T. F. Torrance Theological Fellowship that has 4 or 500 members, and growing. All those who read Torrance wouldn’t agree that he has a profound doctrine of theosis. I think they’re wrong – I think it is there, and it’s there in a profound and coherent way from early on, where he first has his interaction with the Eastern Orthodox, so my book is trying to set out to prove that across this very large body of work, there is a doctrine (not just a theme) of theosis, self-consciously there. It’s not structuring everything, but it is consistent in everything. I tried to outline it through his theological method, his anthropology, Christology, soteriology, eschatology, ecclesiology, etc.

He argued that all creation is conditioned by the incarnation. So logically, the incarnation is before creation. Not chronologically, but logically. What does that mean? Adam and Eve were created very good... We should ask, “for what?” What were they created very good for? Good to become that which God has designed them to become – Christlike – which necessitates an incarnation, I would argue is Torrance’s view. He coordinates all the little pieces of his theology with this theme of theosis.

And in other doctrines, like perichoresis, Trinity, etc. – it becomes a robust theology which he works out. To take creation again – the rocks, the trees, the very stuff of creation is designed to display the glory of God. But how do rocks and dung beetles display the glory of God? They can’t without humans. So Torrance uses the language the Eastern Orthodox use, today and in history, and he picks up that humans are priests of creation. Humans represent creation – all of creation – to the Father in Christ. The creation itself will undergo transformation. It is good...to be transformed into the abode of God.

Creation – humans – everything, for Torrance, has this transcendental determination which the Fall affected, so we’re turned in on ourselves. After the fall, we become gods, idols. We’re not looking at God anymore, we’re not looking to transcend; we become turned in. With the coming of Christ, he turns us back to the Father, in him, so that in the resurrection we realize fully what we were always created to be. That’s theosis, that’s theotic language, and that’s Torrance to a T, throughout all of his work. I see it; others would disagree. They say, yea, it’s a theme, but we don’t see it that

strongly.

So you publish, and you get response and critique, and we'll see.

MM: The doctrine of theosis was used in the early church on the Greek side. How did that come across into the Western church? When Thomas Torrance was studying it, it was not common.

MH: The West has tended not to think about theosis for a long, long time, so it is shocking. I'm not recommending that you preach to the congregation on Sunday that you can become gods. That language would be misunderstood. But within the early church, the Greek-speaking early fathers, the patristics, were using this term and it was profound, and so were the Latins. They were using it in the same sorts of ways. It's embedded in their theology.

When we come into the medieval period, Thomas Aquinas was happy to use the term – in a weaker sense, but Anna Williams wrote a dissertation published with Oxford University Press comparing Gregory Palamas, the great medieval Eastern Orthodox theologian, where theosis is everything, and Thomas Aquinas. She argues that Aquinas hardly ever uses the term because it is everywhere assumed. That's a debatable thesis, but I think she does a very good job of showing the parallels in a Latin way and an Eastern way. The same sort of thing happened in the Reformation.

MM: Who in the Reformation?

MH: Luther's works are all digitized, so it makes a search a lot easier. Even if you just search for theosis and its cognates, deification, and divinization, it's often found. He interacts with it directly, he affirms it directly, in his own way – he unpacks what he wants to say. Recent Finnish scholarship, which is Lutheran, has gone back to Luther, asking these sorts of questions (rightly or wrongly, but I think more right than wrong; there might be an overstatement), they're finding this theme a doctrine in Luther. When we have Christ, we have *all* of Christ, says Luther, including his righteousness, including his identity, in a sense. We become, in a sense, small Christs. We don't replace him – we could never conceive of Luther saying that we replace him – but we do become like Christ.

I'm not saying we become God – we become God-like. We have these attributes of God. Luther is happy to pick up on *deificatio*, in Latin, the deification of the human.

MM: I was thinking of 1 Peter 2:4. There's a difference between “being partakers of the divine nature” and becoming divine.

MH: Right. The language and the meaning behind the language are very important to distinguish.

MM: Luther has the idea frequently, Calvin somewhat, but then it got lost.

MH: It became a minor key because of the problems. I think of Torrance's phrase, "the danger of vertigo." It was possibly too easy to misconstrue what was being said. Lazy communicators cut corners, saying "we become God" – but that's pantheism. So it tended to diminish, but in the Reformed tradition, if we follow that sort of line, John Owen is quite happy to use it.

Jonathan Edwards saturates his work with theotic language. He uses the term over and over again: deification, divinization. So reading someone like Jonathan Edwards in the American context – he is very happy to use this language. (But Jonathan Edwards was happy to use all sorts of language modern Reformed aren't. That's why I like him, I think.)

So it is there in a minor key, but it becomes muted because in the West, the Augustinianism, the dualism, the legal sort of stuff, forensic stuff becomes all-important. (Justification by faith alone is important, but it's not on every page of Scripture. Unlike Luther's comments, it's here and there.) The legal stuff, the forensic stuff, came to dominate in the West because that's our legal system, that's our culture, whereas the East didn't have that culture.

MM: I was wondering whether it was scientific language, that they expected language to be scientific.

MH: That picks up on the Enlightenment and modernity, that's true. But that itself would be from out of that Western, legal, dualistic view (Newton and the mechanistic universe). Deification is too mystical, too esoteric. It seems too intangible. So the term becomes associated with Eastern mysticism. For Protestants particularly, Eastern mysticism is ruled out of court. That's a mistake, though – it's not Eastern mysticism – it's robust and practical.

MM: Just because Eastern mystics used the term doesn't mean that they've got the corner on it. **[MH:** That's right.]

MM: You mentioned a couple other terms that are similar, more Latin-sounding: divinization or deification. Do you prefer theosis over them, or are they equivalent?

MH: Theosis is Greek, and then you've got deification, divinization, which derive from Latin. They're all the same – synonyms. You can use them equally. I use theosis because divinization has a sense in literature of being divinized, of literally becoming God. That's not a technical distinction, but that's often how it's used. Whereas theosis, because it's a funny word, it doesn't immediately have a sense to people today. It's like inventing a word, you know – what's a kuza? I don't know – tell me. And I'll tell them. What's theosis? And I tell them.

MM: When does theosis happen?

MH: If we take it as this Christian baptized view, then theosis happens, first of all, in the life of Christ, in a very robust sense. When Christ becomes a human, a historical person, he takes on our humanity in some sense, and he does something to it. He lives for it, dies for it, rises from the grave for it. He owns it, he possesses it, he re-creates it. This is the offer of salvation, the finished work of Christ. He's not going to do it again – he's done it. It's objective, it's once and for all.

A major question of salvation is, How can we be holy, how can we be righteous, how can we be the expressions of God, who is light? Resurrection is Jesus' answer. So, when does theosis happen? It happened in Christ Jesus for all of us – and then it's repeated in actual persons, individuals, throughout the course of our Christian life.

MM: ...as we are continually being “partakers of the divine nature.”

MH: Yeah. From glory to glory, from age to age. It begins now, at our faith, our baptism, and it works itself out now. And it doesn't stop at the resurrection – the resurrection is simply the beginning of what continues from age to age.

MM: There's more after the resurrection?

MH: Yeah. Because if God is triune, then God has always been *becoming* – as Barth and Jüngel say: “being is becoming.” God is always active, God is always love (God is love, says John.) This is an ontology: The Father loves the Son by the Spirit, the Son returns the love of the Father by the Spirit, the Spirit is the love of the Father and the Son. You keep doing that movement, that's who God is. God is dynamic, God is community, God is relational.

If we are made in that image, which Jesus Christ bears uniquely and then we are in that image of Christ who is in the image of God, then in eternity, we can never exhaust that being of God. We emulate, we imitate it, we partake of it, which means (well, I like to think of it) we are always chasing after God (but never catching him, because you can't).

I don't know what time is in the new heavens and new earth, but if we use our notions, what's the song... when we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we've only just begun. So ten thousand upon ten thousand, whatever time means, we're becoming more and more godly, God-like, Christ-like. We're partaking of him, we're relating to him, we're knowing more, feeling more, we're serving more, and that just never ends. It's dynamic, because God is dynamic. Because we are transcendent in that sense, we're always striving for that which we are not: God. And God gives us our wish: we become God-like.

MM: You were saying earlier that's what he created us for in the first place.

MH: From the first place, yeah.

MM: He gave us a desire for that.

MH: Yeah. So I'm trying to trade off the ideas that Paul talks about Christ pre-existing; he talks about Christ being crucified from the foundation of the world. Christ is prime, Christ is primary, Christ is first. So whatever it means, before creation, in God's time, God elected the Son to be Jesus Christ; God purposed that the Son would be Jesus Christ. The triune God decided that the Son would take on flesh in order to have these image-bearers that could sense God, feel God, know God, enjoy God, participate in the very best that there is – the *summum bonum* – the highest we could ever conceive or think or imagine or feel or be: God.

We can't become God. God purposed in Christ that we could have the next-best thing. We can be in Christ, who is God, and he calls us children, not slaves. We can participate. That's why I find *theosis* not just convenient, but actually an appropriate term. It is shocking. That is revolutionary. That is hard to get our minds around. That's too good to be true – and yet it is true. The word has good rhetorical force.

40. ART AND IMAGINATION IN THE CHURCH

Introduction: St. Andrews, Scotland, is known as the birthplace of golf some 600 years ago. Here also stand the 850-year-old ruins of the Cathedral of St. Andrew, three of whose 100-foot-high towers rise majestically over the east end of the city. Nearby, the esteemed University of St. Andrews, founded in 1413, is the home of St. Mary's College, the university's renowned divinity school, which still uses its 16th century buildings.

In College Hall, a room within one of those buildings, *You're Included* host J. Michael Fezell, Vice-President of Grace Communion International, interviews Dr. Trevor Hart. Dr. Hart is Professor of Divinity and Director of the Institute for Theology, Imagination, and the Arts at the University of St. Andrews. He is the author of *Faith Thinking: The Dynamics of Christian Theology, Regarding Karl Barth: Toward a Reading of His Theology*, and *Hope Against Hope*, which he co-authored with Richard Bauckham.

J. Michael Fezell: Thanks for joining us today. We'd like to ask about historical Christian art. How has it helped to shape how Christians view doctrine and practice?

Trevor Hart: Much more than many Christians often suppose and realize, art has had a central place in the church for many centuries. At the time of the Reformation, and for very good reasons, there were some questions asked about certain ways of using art in church. Those remain important. But art has always been a way in which Christians have interpreted and made sense of the gospel.

There are lots of ways in which as human beings we make sense of things. We tell stories... Art such as painting, music, drama, have all featured



centrally in the ways in which Christians have made sense of, interpreted, and represented to themselves fundamental truths of the faith, fundamental stories from Scripture. Whether we're thinking about what goes on in church, or outside

church, art has been a central vehicle for the communication of the gospel.

JMF: There are many different forms of art – often we think of painting when we think of art, but art goes everywhere, from illustrations of stories, ideas, human imagination in many ways. We’re trying to talk about things unseen and things we don’t have a clear picture of, and yet we’re trying to bring them down to our level. Doesn’t that leave room for misinterpretation?

TH: It does. But if we limit ourselves to words, we get misinterpretation as well. One of the advantages, whether we are thinking of painting or of music – or if we bring things up to date a bit, film, and the more contemporary forms that now would be recognized as among the arts – one of the advantages is that art engages us at levels and in ways that words alone can’t. I say “words alone” advisedly, because it’s important to hold together the levels at which art operates visually or through sound or action, whatever it is, engaging our emotions as well as our intellect and imagination. It’s important to hold that together with words, but words alone can only take us so far.

A lot of the more familiar ways in which we think of the Christian gospel, biblical stories being interpreted limited to words can end up being dry if we’re not careful. Most people know that when listening to a sermon or reading a Christian book — it’s when the writer or the speaker resorts to story, for example, which is an artistic form, things begin to take off and get more interesting.

There’s a place for what we might call clear-cut reasoned thought, and there will never be a context in which we can let go of that or stop doing it. But that needs to be supplemented. It needs to be brought to life. The ideas are important and they need to be clothed in flesh, we might say, and made more accessible. But I don’t want to suggest that art is simply a matter of illustration or making abstract ideas more palatable. It can do that, and we should be grateful for the fact that it can. But art can also open up depths of meaning that words alone can’t reach. In tandem with words, taken together with words, art can be a powerful force to put us in touch with realities that often go beyond the level of our understanding.

JMF: What are some examples of the depth of, let’s say, music? When you bring music to church, sometimes the music can affect us in a very negative way or a very positive way.

TH: It can. That’s a complex subject, and there are people far more expert than I am who understand how it works, but sometimes the interplay of the words, and when we’re talking about music, words set to music and the sound, whether we’re listening to it or when we’re participating in it, when

we're singing, we're doing something, making sound in a certain way which can complement and amplify the meaning of the words when it's done well.

Equally, I think a bad setting of a set of words...whether it's church music (or any other sort, for that matter)... is one where the sound, the music, doesn't work with the words, the ideas, but in some way against them. That can be hard to pin down and explain, but I think we know when it happens. Somehow it doesn't work. There's no sync between the meaning that we're articulating through the words and the meaning that is articulated in sound.

JMF: In some of our Western churches today, there seems to be a carryover from rock concerts into the church service. The volume tends to come across that way, and in my experience, many elderly people have asked if the volume could be turned down, and yet they're willing to, if it helps the young people, to have that music. Is it a historical phenomenon for what is art in contemporary life (or secular life, let's say) to be brought across into the church, and is that usually productive, or should the church have its own art that does not reflect just what is around us?

TH: There are elements of truth in both sides of that. For many centuries, while the culture was shaped by the church, much music was written and performed as church music. The church was the key patron for the arts, at least music. Someone like Bach was writing to order for church patrons, Catholic and Protestant.

The division between secular music and sacred music only arises in the 17th century and beyond, when music, among other arts, was forced to find business, as it were, outside church because there were more opportunities for it there than within the church. Since then it's usually been the case that church music has, to some extent, been willing to draw on wider currents of musicality, though not in an injudicious way.

The point of your question is good — we can't borrow anything simply because it might attract young people. We need to be careful. Music can work at deep levels which we don't always understand, so judiciousness and discernment needs to be carefully done. But, done well, done carefully, all sorts of things can be baptized and brought into the sanctuary and made good use of. There's a long history of that. Many hymn tunes and carol tunes were borrowed from the wider culture of the day. And we forget...we just claim them for our own in the church. I don't think there's anything wrong in principle with doing it, but it needs to be done carefully.

Music written within the church, for the church or from a Christian standpoint — we think not so much of music for worship now, but music composed by Christian composers — I think can have a powerful impact on

the wider culture, too.

JMF: Much of contemporary music today, or what's called (at least in the United States) contemporary Christian music (much of which was written 40 or 50 years ago in some cases) has catchy tunes, repetitive tunes, but much of the theology seems to be weak, and yet that seems to be most popular and most repeated in many evangelical churches.

TH: If I wanted to start a new theological movement or a new Christian church with peculiar doctrines, the most efficient way by far of populating such a church would be to write songs, popular choruses, hymns, call them what you will, with appropriately theologically orientated words and get people to sing them, because when people sing things, they quickly begin to believe it. We're far too careless in the way we pick up and sing things in church. We aren't really thinking. I try to make it a habit of my own to always read through a hymn that I'm not familiar with and see whether I want to sing it. We don't all need to have theology degrees and be able to analyze church hymn lyrics in a precise way, but we should be cautious about what we sing.

The flip side of that is it's incumbent upon hymn writers, writers of songs, to do a good job and to be better informed theologically, so that what they write is carefully thought through and not simply driven by the beat or by whatever. The best church music is a happy synthesis in which good words and good music complement one another. It's easy, and I suspect it happens, for bad words to arise because the music seems to drive it, just as it's possible for good words to be spoiled by bad music. We need to be judicious about what we sing and not be driven too quickly by the currents of music or fashion or what passes as popular in theological terms.

JMF: Are there other forms of Christian art that could enhance a worship service?

TH: It's a shame that in the Protestant churches and in the evangelical tradition, commonly we're still nervous about the use of visual art in church. The Reformation was careful in the direction of its criticism about the use of visual art in church. The key Reformers differed markedly on their attitude toward it. Luther was far more forgiving about visual art in church, was happy to tolerate it. Calvin was much more nervous and careful about what he thought was permissible. The key concern was idolatry. Calvin's worry was that if you put things in churches, people would tend to treat them in a way which might end up in idolatry and therefore it was far better to have them removed from churches. He was happy with art of a certain sort outside the sanctuary, not so happy with art in the sanctuary.

Luther's attitude was that idolatry is a matter of the heart. If you take away paintings, they'll simply find something else to latch onto — deal with the idolatry and then the paintings won't be a problem. There are a range of issues about which we need to be careful, therefore, about using visual arts in church. But painting and other forms of visual art can be powerful communicators of the gospel. They can enhance our church buildings in a range of ways which enrich worship, and used carefully and judiciously, so that we don't fall foul of the things which the Reformers were worried about, they could be a massive enhancement of our worship in a number of ways.

JMF: Art is a reflection of human imagination, and you've done a great deal of work on the imagination in a broader sense and how it is a reflection of faith and practice in our walk with Christ. Can you tell us about that?

TH: I got interested in this when I was asked to write an essay on imagination and the Christian hope, and I started to reflect on it, reading around, thinking hard about it. It's apparent, when one thinks about hope, that imagination is bound to be central. When you're hoping, you're picturing things that aren't yet the case and making them concrete, so hope is one example of a place in Christian faith and life where we are employing our imaginations. There are many others.

In down-to-earth terms, if you ask yourself, what are most Christians doing when they pray? Most of us, I suspect, have a picture in our minds. Perhaps to some it will be a picture of God as father or something. For others it will be Jesus. It's hard to pray to a person without picturing them in some way. So that's another context in which imagination is quite indispensable for the life of faith.

Then I got to thinking, how about Jesus himself? Weren't Jesus' teaching strategies highly imaginative? In breaking open complex and difficult ideas — the kingdom of God, whatever it might be — Jesus tends to bring things immediately into the sphere of the imaginative and say, it's a bit like this, and he would tell a story or compare something abstract to something concrete so people could get a handle on it. In all sorts of ways, in almost any area of Christian life and faith, the imagination crops up very soon and seems to have a central function to play.

One could describe Christian faith itself as a way of imagining the world. People will get nervous about that because "imagination" tends to be associated quickly with another word — imaginary. The automatic association between the two isn't helpful. There's nothing wrong with things that are imaginary, but not everything that we imagine is imaginary. Lots of things that we have to imagine, because we have no other way of picturing

them, are real. When one comes to faith, a different way of seeing, feeling, and tasting the world, slides into view. That's a matter of the imaginative. It's a way of picturing reality, picturing the world, picturing our relation to God in a new way as if someone has changed the backdrop against which we're situated. So a fundamental way in which to be imaginative seems to be basic to what we are, and in the life of faith, that has a basic role to play.

JMF: Many Christians will shy away from the idea, and yet everybody does it — we can't be alive without having some goings on in our brain that put together ideas...and that is imagination. Can Christians go too far? Is there something they should be worried about or careful about?

TH: Sure. I like to think of the imagination as whatever's going on in the mind's eye, as we might call it. That can be good and healthy, and it can be bad and unhealthy. It's reasonable that Christians might be concerned about certain things the imagination is capable of.

One thing I'm slightly cautious about is that in the 19th century, there was a rediscovery of the imagination and a tendency to associate it too quickly, almost automatically, with things of God, with the divine spirit, and so on. So I point out to my students that the imagination can be enormously dangerous. I usually say to them that there's nothing more imaginative than a torture chamber. That's one example of how we can use our imaginations to devise things, which far from being good and healthy and the things of God, are actually manifestations of evil. That tends to be the thing which underlies a lot of Christian concern of imagination, is it can be the maker of all sorts of things which are dangerous and damaging.

But imagination also lies behind most of the things which are good and life-giving and healthy. For example, knowing how to deal with somebody who is in a difficult place — an act of love, we might say, or mercy, or charity, call it what you will, is a highly imaginative thing. Knowing how to relate to another person effectively and well in any context is an imaginative activity. The imaginative is a fundamental disposition of what we are as human beings, and like most of the other things that we are as human beings, it can be used for good or ill, can be in the hands of God's Spirit, or can be a device we use to withstand God's Spirit and struggle against it.

So I don't want to automatically baptize the imagination and say that everything that's born of the imagination is necessarily good and healthy, but I want to recapture it, to reclaim it, for the kingdom of God, and say, God made us imaginative beings. We can't remember, we can't think where we've come from, without exercising our imaginations, we can't anticipate or hope for what lies in the future without using our imaginations, we can have no

sense of who we are, where we're going, where we've come from, or what we should do and who we should seek to be. The imagination is a place in our lives where if God's Spirit lays hold of it and renews and redeems it, can be a remarkable resource for good.

One way I sum that up is to say, as Christians we talk about God's Spirit being present in us and transforming us from within. We're not good at identifying the places where that happens. I have a hunch that if we talk about the imagination in that broad-brush sense of our mind's eye, the way we envisage things, the way we see ourselves and the world, then the imagination could be one place, if not the main place, where God's Spirit, present and active, works in renewing us and conforming us to Christ.

JMF: Our imagination is all we have, isn't it, as far as any kind of planning, ideas, coming up with what to do next?

TH: Anytime we move in our mind's eye beyond where we are now, then we're being imaginative. Whether we're thinking about what happened yesterday or what we might have for dinner tonight, that's imaginative. If we're thinking or planning a service for the weekend, that's imaginative. If we're expecting something to happen in life, that's... Almost anything you can think of that gets us outside of the immediacy of the here and now, this moment, involves the imagination to some extent.

JMF: As Christians we're participating in the life of Christ. As we read Scripture, that is a part of that process as Scripture becomes the witness of who Christ is with us and for us... How does imagination play into that?

TH: If we look at what God has given us as a book through which he makes himself known to us — how much of it is imaginative, and the sort of the thing that any literary critic would say oh, that's an imaginative genre? Story, poetry, parable, and so on. History (I mean history which figures God in it) is a way of patterning things, creating a pattern through a series of events over centuries. That is imaginative in terms of the content of Old and New Testaments and the pattern in which we trace through them a story leading from creation to the last things.

But it's not just the content of Scripture that's highly imaginative. The ways in which as Christians we read the text, make sense of it for ourselves, find ourselves as well as God in its pages. Here, God's speaking to us through its pages. That demands huge acts of imagination. It's not a way in which people ordinarily would see or think of themselves, but we're called to do it. God gives us these texts, calls us to read them together, and to seek his voice. Seeking and finding are highly imaginative activities. Imagination is a living and vibrant thing through which we come to see ourselves differently, and

therefore to live differently. It seems to be fundamental to the ways in which we engage with the text of Scripture as God's word.

JMF: Aren't there some principles or guidelines that Christians can bring to keeping their imaginations within some sort of reasonable boundaries when they come to the Scriptures? Often, as we read the Scriptures and bring our experiences to them, we can begin to abuse other people, and as we interpret the Scripture, assume that our view is God's view. How can a person not let their imagination lead them astray as they're going through the Scriptures?

TH: You're right. We can do all sorts of things with the Bible if we wish to. We can misuse it as well as use it well. Putting that back in terms of the question — there can be good imagining and bad imagining in relation to Scripture. We have to be guided by what we find in the text. It's not a free-for-all. We can't just do what we like with the text. We have to be guided by the patterns that we find in the text and work with those.

Christians have never thought that being faithful to the text of Scripture was simply a matter of reiterating the text. The best practitioners of the Christian faith, and the best theologians, have been those who have identified patterns within the text and then extrapolated them in a way that's faithful to the text but applies it to new situations, answers questions which the text itself perhaps doesn't answer directly but to which it's relevant, almost in the way that a jazz pianist or saxophonist might improvise on a theme or themes that are within the piece, but now there's something new and imaginative to be done on the basis of it for a new context, a new situation.

Yes, it's possible to use the imagination badly in relation to Scripture, just as it's possible to use it badly in relation to almost anything else in life. We're fallen in our imaginations, just as we're fallen in our minds, in our wills, and in our bodies — that's all the more reason then to suppose that we're also redeemed in Christ in our imaginations as well as our minds and our wills and our bodies. The other thing to say when we're talking about Scripture is that we should do it prayerfully.

JMF: Is there something to be said for doing it in the context of the body of Christ as opposed to just on our own...

TH: Absolutely. This is to some extent something that Protestants and evangelicals need to rediscover — the importance of the church for the reading of Scripture and that it's not primarily an individual exercise — it is primarily an exercise within the Body in which we have to listen to others, learn from others, as well as offer our own voice, and expect to meet Christ as we meet others and engage with them and not in isolation.

That's not to say that God doesn't speak to people — that we can't meet Christ in the privacy of our own space — but I think the more normal expectation is that that will happen as we engage with other Christians in faith, in the community of faith, and share our interpretations, voice the things that we think we discover in the text, and see whether those are resonated by what others find there and see whether they're confirmed or called into question by what others find.

JMF: I've seen a bumper sticker on cars that says something like, "God said it, I believe it, and that settles it." They're talking about specific social issues about which they have reached a conclusion in which they're condemning those who do it, and it's their way of using the Bible as a tool to get across their agenda.

TH: Yeah. We need to be cautious about that. It's always complex asking questions about issues to which the Bible itself sometimes appears to give no clear answer but which it would be easy, by using it in certain ways, to make it seem to speak. The secret is to approach the text prayerfully, to seek to be as aware as we can about our own failings, of our own tendencies to make it say what we want to find in it, but to situate our reading of it in the community — to air our readings, to hear the readings of others, and to seek truth together prayerfully, because what we're concerned with is not faithfulness to our own readings or even those of our tradition, but faithfulness to what we hear God speaking in the text as we read it together.

JMF: The fact that we have imagination and the fact that Christ is one of us and therefore shares imagination as well, but more than that, we're made in the image of God, then we have to think that God has imagination which transcends our imagination and is the source of our imagination. How would we think about God and imagination? Is that a fair question?

TH: That's a huge question. Some theologians have wanted to use the term *imagination* directly of God. Any term we use in speaking of God we're using very carefully, because as Christians have long recognized, God is not like us, as God says in Isaiah, "My ways are not as your ways," and that otherness is important. However, the Bible doesn't hesitate to use human terms of God — thinking, speaking, acting, and so on. It seems to me that imagining is a reasonable one to use. To think of God, in some sense, on the analogy of human imagination in his dealings with things, can help us get a grip, perhaps, on the ways in which God deals with things sometimes.

But we need to handle the terms carefully. We can't simply project all the features of human imagining onto the clouds and assume that they're true in some amplified sense of God — that would be a dangerous way to go. But I

wouldn't resist the term *imagination* just because it's one that we don't find on the pages of the Bible all over. The Bible does show God acting imaginatively, creatively, if you prefer the term, in response to all sorts of situations, so it seems to be reasonable to use it in that way.

JMF: The term *imagination* has to do with *image*, a created image of which we are.

TH: Yeah. Christians have sometimes wanted to use the image of the artist, coming back to artistic imagination, as a way of picturing God's creative relation to the world. We need to be careful about that, but as a picture it seems to work reasonably well in certain respects...and the idea of God taking care over something, pouring gratuitous amounts of effort into the making of it and then standing back and...

JMF: The Scripture uses the potter and the wheel as the image of God.

TH: Indeed. And I think that sense of aesthetic judgment that we get in Genesis 1, where God stands back and sees that it is good. All those things speak to the human experience of making something, doing it well, doing it as well as you can, and being pleased, satisfied, with the outcome. And, of course, caring for what you've made, putting great value on it.

41. GOD THE FATHER, REFLECTED IN JESUS CHRIST

J. Michael Feazell: How did you become acquainted with Trinitarian theology?

Trevor Hart: I was an undergraduate student at the University of Durham in England. In about the second year of my three years of study, someone introduced me to Tom Torrance's work. They lent me a copy of *Space, Time, and Incarnation*, and I confess it took a little bit of reading. But I moved quickly on and picked up some of his other books, *Theology and Reconstruction*, *Theology and Reconciliation*.

In his writing, I realized that it was possible to do hard-nosed, thorough, rigorous, systematic theology in a way that touched base on almost every page with the things that mattered to the life of faith. Sometimes I wasn't finding that in the other people I was reading. That's not to say that the theologians I was reading weren't men and women of faith – it's that the theology seemed to be doing something other than a game in which self-conscious meshing of theology with Scripture, with tradition, and with the practical concerns of Christian life and living was apparent.

I found that very encouraging, slightly daunting, because he did it so well, but also refreshing. I moved on, because when reading Tom Torrance, you don't go very far without finding allusions to other figures. One of them was Karl Barth. So I started to read Karl Barth as well, and found the same sort of thing in Barth that I found in Torrance, and both of them were casting the whole of theology in this Trinitarian way of understanding things.

Reading Karl Barth

JMF: Karl Barth has such a huge body of work that it seems that people...there's so much, that they don't even undertake to read it. And there's been a lot of misunderstanding. Do you think that that is improving? Is Karl Barth being better understood?

TH: I suspect so. I hope so. Barth is a complex figure, as you say. His work is daunting; there's an awful lot of it. In a way that is analogous to Torrance, it's not easy to get into. Part of the reason is that he has his own way of saying things, putting things. There's a huge level of overall consistency between the different parts of his work, which means that you need to have read all the others before you start any one of them. So wherever you leap in, it's going to be hard work at first. But if you stick with it, it becomes readable quickly, and you see the same themes occurring; you recognize where you are within the map, as it were, of his thought.

What struck me when I first started reading Barth, and still strikes me, is his clear dedication to the gospel, his concern that it be understood, and that its significance for life in the world be worked out and made manifest for as many people to see and to grasp as possible. He does that at huge length, with great care, but it's probably true that certain parts are less daunting than others in terms of their accessibility.

Usually I would encourage an undergraduate student wanting to start reading Barth to look at *The Doctrine of Reconciliation* [*Church Dogmatics* volume 4], where the themes are familiar: atonement, incarnation, and so on. He treats them in a way which is sometimes difficult, but sometimes just “home from home.” What students get when they read that is the sense that even if they're not understanding everything on every page, nevertheless this is someone with whose thought they can feel at home.

Not that Barth won't stretch them, not that he won't make them re-think some things, maybe fairly fundamentally. Not that on occasion (and this remains true after 30 years of reading his thought) they may not end up disagreeing with him about one or two things, but they will have grappled at a deep level with some basic themes in the gospel, in their understanding of who God is, in their understanding of what God has done in Jesus Christ, and in the way that that plays out in the wider story of life in the world. For that, it's hard to better Barth, although if I wanted to cluster theologians who do it well, Barth and Torrance would be in the first league.

JMF: There are some interesting small books by Karl Barth, *Christ and Adam* and *The Humanity of God*, and many people have found those helpful. In *Christ and Adam* he goes through Romans 5. It's short and easy to read, but so meaningful as he takes you into the love of God that is in spite of who you are and what you've done. As a taste of what can come of reading Barth, it seems different from the way we typically go to church and hear a sermon about how you should be obeying and if you don't please God you're coming under the curse and you're going back like a dog to its vomit, and you come away discouraged. But when you read Barth, you come away encouraged about who you are, the commitment toward the same way.

TH: Yeah. Barth talks about the strange new world that we find in the Bible, and many readers have a similar experience when they first pick up Barth, that here too there is a strange new world, and you might not yet be able to identify all the landmarks or pick out the horizon. But nevertheless, you know that you're in somewhere that's unfamiliar, in a sense.

I cited a couple of moments ago that Barth's theology in some ways has a familiar ring to it. But you also get the sense that even though these are familiar themes and landmarks, somehow the configuration of them is different. The difference is intriguing, and when most people read it the first

time, it's attractive. Something about it has changed. The players are the same players and the storylines are the same storylines, but something has been done to them which gives it a completely different feel.

It is that sense of the God who is from first to last *for us*, and determined to be for us, no matter who we are and no matter what we've done and no matter what we amount to, who values us not for our achievements but for who he has called us to be and who he has made us to be in his Son. That is completely foundational to Barth's thought; it colors every chapter of the story he tells. I think people catch that.

Even if they don't understand it at first and they can't see how it all plays out in the larger structure of their understanding of the Christian faith, most people I've met who have engaged with Barth at any length find that attractive immediately. It's something they want to hear more of, and that's because it is the gospel. It is the story of the God who gives all for us and is determined to be for us. Barth's got his finger on that pulse from the very first, and it's shot through the whole of his theology. There's no part of his theology where that doesn't come up again and again and shape the whole substance of what he has to say, no matter what he's talking about.

The doctrine of election

JMF: When we think of Calvinists today, we aren't necessarily thinking of John Calvin, but we're thinking of a theology that excludes people... On one side there's a declaration of assurance of salvation, but on the other side, there's a "How do you know that you're among the elect?" Well, you know by the evidence of your works, and yet that proves nothing to you. Is there a difference between John Calvin's theology and what has become of it, and what influence has Karl Barth brought to that understanding?

TH: Barth is a Reformed theologian, self-consciously so, and therefore I think his appropriation of the Reformed tradition and his reinterpretation of it at certain key points, not least in his treatment of the doctrine of election, has forced people, not least some Calvinist theologians (Reformed theologians) to go back and examine again and see whether the way in which Reformed theology has sometimes schematized that theme has been healthy, helpful, but more importantly, biblical.

What Barth saw and shows is that you can't formulate a doctrine of election, or any other doctrine, simply by lifting verses from Scripture and laying them out and putting them in a logical order. That's not how it works. It never has worked like that. You have to go further than that. You have to relate doctrines to one another. You have to ask questions about certain themes that perhaps have priority logically, theologically over others.

Barth's fundamental conviction is that while the theme of election, God's

choosing, God's deciding, ultimately the sovereignty of God, is fundamental to the way Christians should conceive of God in biblical terms, that it's in the person of Christ that the theological center of gravity falls in Scripture and, therefore, in theology too, it should be.

His thoroughgoing insistence on rethinking what it might mean to say that God chooses, concerning a person's eternal well-being, in the light of Jesus Christ and his refusal to acknowledge the meaningfulness of talking about any God who, as he puts it, is hidden *behind* Jesus Christ, forced him to a radical re-reading of the doctrine — to the fundamental conviction that it's not in the text of the Bible as some work of literature that God reveals himself, finally it's in a human life lived, a death died and raised to life again that God has made himself known fully and finally. All the rest needs to be worked out in the light of what that means and the significance of that fact.

As Barth sees it, the significance of that fact is that this is who God wills to be, and what he has done for each of us. Whatever we say about election or any other theme theologically has to reckon with that fact. That can't be something we come to after we've worked out the other things. That has to be where we start — that God's purpose eternally was to be the man Jesus Christ and to do what he does in Christ for us. That forces us to rethink some themes. So Barth has caused some rethinking of that doctrine, but for some people that's problematic, and some people find him difficult to cope with theologically because they're convinced that the traditional version of that doctrine is non-negotiable.

Jesus as God

JMF: Why is it significant when Jesus said, “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father”? What is important about that?

TH: One way of answering that is pastorally rather than theologically, differentiating between those two for the moment. (I wouldn't want to drive a wedge between them, incidentally, but let's look at it pastorally.) Most people, if they think of God at all, have a question mark about what sort of God it is they're dealing with. Luther had the question, “How can I get a gracious God?” Christians sometimes live with this lurking suspicion that God may turn out to be rather unpleasant, or to have a grudge against them or a good case against them.

What Barth says so clearly is that Christian life ought to be based solidly on the God we see, and the face of God that we see in Jesus, that we can be sure that God turns out, finally, to be like Jesus, like his Son. That provides a huge ground for assurance, because what do we see in Jesus? We see God forgiving sins, we see God loving the sinner, rehabilitating the sinner. Once we realize the Father is no different in that from the Son he sends into the

world to do it, then it banishes any specters we might have of a God who, even though Jesus is like that, may turn out to be rather different.

On a pastoral level, in terms of the God we pray to day and night, or the God we hope to meet at the end of our lives beyond life, if we live with a question mark, it seems to me we're going to live finally with fear and guilt and a suspicion, and possibly be driven to some form of seeking to secure ourselves by earning salvation through good works or some form of that. It's hard to shake that off completely when you don't think you know the answer to the question "What is God like?"

Once you've come to the realization that God is no different to Jesus, on this level at least, he's like Jesus. God's character, the Father's character, is fully reflected in the face of his Son. That sets you free from all those fears and guilts and suspicions and enables you to live in a liberated way, in a way that is born out of gratitude and joy rather than fear and guilt. So, on a pastoral level, quite apart from the theological niceties of it all, it seems to be fundamental that we can say, when it comes down to it, there isn't anyone (when we come to talk about God), there's no one there who isn't fully reflected in the face of Jesus and Jesus' dealings with us.

Jesus as a human

JMF: The theological term "vicarious humanity of Christ" – what are we talking about?

TH: It's something which most Christians, most evangelical Christians anyway, will be familiar with as a category in one respect – most evangelical Christians would be happy to think that Jesus did something in their stead. Most of them will think that that thing he did for them in their place, in their stead, is die on the cross. That's absolutely right.

The phrase "vicarious humanity" captures the realization that it doesn't stop there. In Jesus, God stands in for us at almost *every* point of our relationship with him, because we fail him at almost every point in our lives. No matter how hard we struggle and strive (and most of us are good at struggling and striving, even though we know we shouldn't), we fail. To use a biblical category, we're not very good covenant partners for God most of the time. "Vicarious humanity" picks up on the idea that in Jesus, God stands in for us in all aspects of life. It's not simply in his death that he takes our place and does what we can't do – it's in his faith, too, in his obedience, in his responses to the Father. At each point God, as it were, looks at us through him and in him and together with him, and not standing isolated on our own.

I suppose this is a Pauline image, but I like to think of it as God being like a parent who puts his kids on their way to school in a set of clothes... (We

have school uniforms in the U.K. – I don't know whether you have those... [JMF: Some schools do.] Often a parent will buy a uniform several sizes too big because that way it lasts longer. You don't fit the clothes – they're way too big for you – but eventually you grow into them, or begin to. As an image, that works nicely. We're clothed with Christ. Every aspect of us is covered with him. When the Father looks, he sees Christ, Christ's response, Christ's obedience, Christ's prayer, Christ's faith.

The biblical term isn't "vicarious humanity." That's a technical term. The biblical category is *priesthood*. Jesus is the great high priest who mediates our human responses to God through himself to the Father. Jesus stands in our place and does for us what we can't do properly for ourselves.

But the flip-side of that, and it's a vital flip-side, is that that sets us free *to do it for ourselves*. It sets us free to do it because we're not afraid of falling. We're not afraid of any wrong. Why? Because our eternity doesn't hang on whether we get it wrong or not. Our eternity rests on his response made for us. So we can get on and do it, and if we fall he'll pick us up.

In the meanwhile, we grow into the uniform. We never quite fill it out, but nevertheless we begin to grow more like him, so that our faith becomes more adequate, our prayer becomes more appropriate, our obedience becomes more identifiable as the Spirit gradually makes us more like Jesus. But our relationship with God doesn't rest on any of that. Our relationship with God rests on what he has done once for all, not just on the cross, but at every point from his birth through to his death and resurrection.

What are people afraid of?

JMF: That's so radical in terms of the way most people think. Why is something that good difficult to accept? Why are we afraid of it? It's as though we think, "If I believe that and I accept it, then it's like saying that I don't have to do anything, Christ has done it all, so if I accept that, God won't like me because I'm assuming on his kindness or something." Some preachers even get angry about it and say, "Don't listen to that kind of nonsense because God calls you to obedience."

TH: One reason why someone might be uncomfortable with it might be that it could be seen to encourage an approach that says: "If Jesus has done it all for me, then I don't have to do it for myself, do I?"

JMF: "I can go out and live any way I want."

TH: Exactly. In theological terms we call that antinomianism, or something like it. That's a worry. We can do almost anything with grace, can't we? We can reject it, we can turn it to what we think is our advantage. But that's not proper to the reality itself. That's why I said that Jesus does it for

us precisely so that we can do it for ourselves, and the work of the Spirit draws us into the Son's work and brings it to fulfillment in individual lives. That's one reason why I can imagine a preacher being nervous, because "maybe my people won't try so hard anymore." Well, maybe they're trying too hard in the first place. Maybe *trying* is not what it's about.

JMF: Isn't it an irrational fear? Those who believe don't really do that.

TH: That's right – it probably is an irrational fear. I wonder how much it isn't a bit of resurgence of sinful pride in us, whether as preachers or as individual Christian men and women. Grace has a massive advantage which is also a bit galling – it says, "God isn't taking your responses as the most important responses." It devalues the things we like to think we can take to God to deal with him. You know, I bring my little bit of righteousness to God and say, "God, I have something for you."

Don't get me wrong – I think God delights when we bring righteousness to him. What he doesn't like is when we try to make it the basis of a trade, as if we have something to give to him, and now he can give something back to us. The message of grace, the gospel of grace understood in this way, in terms of this category of "vicarious humanity," robs us of that, because it gives us nothing. There's nothing left that we can give to God and say, "God, you need this, and I'm giving it to you, so now you give me something that I need."

That's wrong. Everything has to be predicated on the idea that God gives everything freely. I'm sorry, that devalues the currency that you're working with. In our heart of hearts we, even those of us who believe this gospel, still, on occasion, find ourselves, I suspect, thinking, "I'd rather like it if I had something to give back to God." Well, you can give it, but now you have to give it freely and joyfully, not as the basis of some sort of trade.

JMF: That reminds me of how you have to give your five-year-old some money so they can get you a gift.

TH: Absolutely. And when they get to 15, it becomes more expensive (laughing).

JMF: It all comes from God in the first place, and so anything we offer back isn't ours to begin with.

TH: But it doesn't kill the dynamic of giving. The unfounded fear is that somehow the idea that God gives everything and we're only here to receive is going to deny the capacity, or simply not provide a context in which we can offer back to God. On the contrary: I think the complement of "vicarious humanity" is a life lived from first to last in (if I can use the term) a Eucharistic manner, and that's to say, thanksgiving.

Everything, because it's freely given to us, we can now freely offer back to God without fear that our offering won't be adequate and therefore will

come back to haunt us because we did it badly. It sets you free to give and to offer back rather than killing it. But there's always that little bit of sin which wants something of its own to give to God.

Why confess our sins?

JMF: Some people ask, "Since we're already forgiven and we stand in the forgiveness of God, why are we asked to confess our sins?" How does that work together?

TH: I've moved a long way on this one. When I first came to faith and was part of an evangelical congregation, I confessed my sins every day with the sense that my eternal well-being depended on doing it well. There's a benefit to that, because everything was intense, and I knew that this matters.

I was liberated from that by discovering the gospel of grace and God's grace in the life of Jesus lived in my place, so if I didn't confess all my sins, I wasn't on an immediate slippery slope that evening. There is a slight risk that the immediacy and urgency of confessing sins gets lost. It does have an important place – this constant recognition that we are sinners. It's just as well that our salvation doesn't rest on our shoulders, because we continue to get it wrong.

With that mechanism, with gratitude, with thanksgiving, goes also a sense of penitence, that God has given so much to us and continues to do so and yet we fall so far short. No matter what we seek to do in and of ourselves, we continue to betray him, to hurt him, to act in ways that deny who he would have us be. It's vital for the health and well-being of our lives as Christians that we keep that firmly in our sights precisely so that we also keep firmly in our sights the importance of turning to Christ and having him stand in our place.

It's like two blades of a pair of scissors. If we lose either of them, it becomes useless. If there's going to be a means of achieving something, then what God has done for us in Christ needs to be constantly being applied by the Spirit in our Christian day-to-day living.

JMF: That was my experience when I was a legalist. In confession, I couldn't be quite sure that I had done it well enough to feel like I'd been forgiven, so I had to do it over. Then I had to do it with more intensity...

TH: That's a small-style version of what Tom Torrance talks about, and his brother James (who is a great hero of mine and a colleague of mine at one point) used to talk about. I've seen it in my own experience as a preacher in small churches, often evangelical congregations, where, at the end of the Sunday evening service there will be an altar call of some form, and often the same people, not necessarily every week, but on a regular pattern will get up and go forward. If someone were to ask them why, they would say, "Because

I'm not really sure I had a real experience of repentance last time." That seems to have got things wrong because it puts the focus on you and your faith, on the quality of your response.

I'd want to go at them and say, you don't have to repent harder. If you've repented at all, if you've opened yourself and turned to Christ and seek to lay hold of him, then *his* repentance is the one that counts. You can be thankful for that. That doesn't mean that repentance and penitence doesn't continue to be important, but your eternal destiny doesn't rest on your response, which is just as well, otherwise we'd all be up there every Sunday, week in and week out.

JMF: It brings such comfort and relief. It's like a participation in the assurance of the forgiveness that's already ours.

TH: Yeah. In my own tradition (Episcopalian), for good or ill we have a weekly celebration of the supper, the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist. That is a tangible way of reminding one's self and constantly putting one's self in the way of the priesthood of Christ and saying, I eat and drink the body and blood of Christ in taking the bread and wine, and I'm symbolically identifying myself with Christ's response to the Father for me and realizing that that's what matters. It's not my response. It's only as I eat and drink of him that I'm drawn into the presence of God. That shifts the gaze away from the individual's own spiritual response to the Father. There shouldn't be such a thing. We don't have an isolated spiritual response to the Father. We have an indirect one that goes through the Son.

42. ZOOMING IN ON SALVATION

J. Michael Fezell: Let's talk about salvation. Christ has saved us, we want salvation, salvation is good. What is it we're being saved from? Are we being saved from something, for something, what is salvation all about?

Trevor Hart: That's a huge question. Scripture and Christian theology use lots of different *pictures*, we can call them, in order to answer that question. Some of them have more prominence in the Bible than others, some of them are more prominent in certain strands of Christian tradition than others, but there are a number of them. For example, we're being saved from something which is like being (in terms of the court of law) guilty. We're being delivered from the dangers hanging over us of guilt. When you think in those terms, then you use the language of the law court to explain what it is that God has done to deliver us from that...so the language is of judgment, of the execution of justice and so on.

But there are other ways of describing it, too, so the Bible will talk equally of us being in bondage to some sort of slavery, whether it's personified in terms of Satan and evil spirits or whether it's left more abstract than that. In some sense we're struggling with something that we can't break out of ourselves. The language of salvation is cast in terms of deliverance, of being set free, redemption, the liberation of the slave in the marketplace, being bought with a price, all that sort of imagery comes into play. There are others — disease and healing is another. Victory over forces that we're struggling with. Someone is victorious over them for us, because we can't defeat them ourselves, and so on.

That leads us to realize that salvation is multi-faceted. Whatever it is, it involves something way beyond our understanding. It's complex.

Correspondingly, the human situation — that which we're being rescued from — also needs all these different pictures and probably plenty of others to help us articulate it. One that I haven't alluded to yet and probably should, given its contemporary relevance, is debt. We have this huge debt that we can't possibly pay. So what are we going to do? We're crushed by it, we have no resources to pay it. The corresponding picture of salvation is, someone steps in and pays the price for us. All these pictures help us to get some partial understanding on the mystery which is salvation, and therefore helps us see the scale of the problem that confronts us.

If there is an overarching answer to "What is the problem?", it has to be answered at a high level, and say, "It's the consequence of being in a broken relationship with our Maker. It's the consequence of being out of kilter in

terms of our relationship with God, for fellowship with whom we were created.” That’s the fundamental premise, that we were created, we were made to be in fellowship with God as Father.

Once we get that out of alignment, once we become alienated from God as our Father, then things go wrong in all sorts of departments of life, and we need all these different ways of thinking and speaking to make some sense of what’s going on, because frankly, we don’t know what’s going on anymore — we’ve lost the plot. We’re in a mess and we need someone to get us out of it. That’s the other *leitmotif* [or theme] that moves along with the story of salvation: we can’t fix it. We may have got ourselves into the mess, but we certainly can’t fix it, so salvation is God doing what needs to be done for our sakes to get us out of the mess and to put us where we were always meant to be — back in fellowship with himself.

JMF: There’s a sense in which we’re already saved, and yet in another sense we’re saved in the future. The one blossoms into the other...

TH: If we’re going to take the whole of what the Bible has to tell us seriously, then we have to reckon with some things that seem to run into conflict, but actually need to be held in tension. There’s a sense in which the most important thing has already happened, and the Bible leads us to say that God came in his Son Jesus and did what needs to be done. C. S. Lewis uses a military metaphor — the decisive battle has been won, but there are lots of skirmishes still to be carried out before the war is over.

What happened for you and me has happened. Nothing can undo it. But we still live in an age where that remains to be worked out through whatever is left of human history. That is the Spirit’s work applying what God has done for us in Jesus Christ — living his life, being crucified, then risen in our individual lives. Paul used the imagery of crucifixion and resurrection for what goes on daily in a Christian’s walk with God.

It’s important to see it not just as, “God’s done the most important thing, and now there’s this inconvenient time where we’re not one thing or the other and we just have to hang on and eventually it will all come right and God will bring it all to a close.” God doesn’t do things without reason, and I suspect there’s something important... what he has done for us needs yet to be worked out in us — it’s important that this happens to you and me through the threescore years and ten or whatever it proves to be of our lives — that application and working out, in and through the particular circumstances of your life and mine, matters for who we shall be when finally, we’re raised anew and brought into God’s presence in the kingdom.

What about other people?

JMF: Yet, some people come to faith and then die very soon afterwards. How do we equate the two?

TH: That's a huge question — difficult to answer with any clarity. It suggests that we don't all need to have a certain amount of time in order for things to be worked out in this life for salvation to occur. Salvation, in some sense, as we've already said, has been done. It's a done deal, once and for all, in Christ. And God deals with individuals individually.

It matters that you or I continue in faith for several decades or whatever it is. Perhaps in God's purposes it doesn't matter that someone else doesn't. We have to trust that their salvation will be worked out in full (as it were) in some other way, so that they are who they are called to be in the kingdom. I don't think the process of working it out in life is, in that sense, *necessary* to our salvation, but it seems to be important nonetheless when it occurs.

JMF: In the *Narnia Chronicles*, sometimes one of the kids asks Aslan about somebody, "Why is this happening to him and not to me (or vice versa)?" Aslan always says, "That's his story. I'm talking to you about your story."

TH: Exactly. God calls us to be who we are. Karl Barth says in his discussion of this that God grants each of us our time. We don't know how long our time will be, but that's the time God calls us to be faithful in. Our salvation, in a sense, doesn't depend on it. Our salvation depends wholly on Christ and what he has done. But for now, this is who God calls us to be, and our task is not to ask about others and the brevity of their appearance on the stage. It's to get on and live faithfully the part he's called us to play so that when the judgment comes we can say, "I tried to be faithful to what you called me to be." That's what will matter. Salvation won't rest on it, but it matters that we do it, that we're faithful and not unfaithful.

JMF: Which raises the question, what about people we care about and love who didn't hear the gospel? Is there anything wrong with thinking that the heart of God toward such people is more full of love than we can have for them?

TH: I think we have to believe that. It's such a powerful question and a painful question. It ought to be painful for any Christian because Christian faith is driven, or should be, by the realization that that is precisely who God is — that God is a Father whose heart beats with love for all those he's made — that he created them to call them into fellowship with himself, that's the reason for their being, that's the calling to which they're called, and his greatest desire is that they should fulfill that calling. That has to be the context in which we ask questions.

It also has to be the theological context in which we interpret passages of Scripture that seem to point to the possibility of that not happening. We can't treat those passages lightly. We can't ignore their teaching, but we have to interpret them in the light of that fundamental conviction. That makes it more difficult, and far more uncomfortable than Christians have sometimes been, to consign people to some wherever other than in an eternity in communion with the Father.

Any consideration of that question has to be with fear and trembling. It has to be undergirded by that fundamental conviction that who God is, is who we see him to be in the face of his Son for everyone — not simply for us. We can do no more than commit people to the God who we know in that way, rather than speculate about their eternal destiny. We should be concerned about it, we should pray for them, we should do everything we can to bring them to know the Father if they don't already know the Father. But finally, it's in his hands and not ours. As you said a moment ago, God calls each of us to be concerned with our story, not theirs, at a certain point.

JMF: In the Inquisition the idea was supposedly (apart from the political considerations and so on) that in doing everything we can, we have to get somebody to come to a confession of faith, because torturing them is worth preserving them from the alternative and so on. What is wrong with that thinking?

TH: It raises the question about what the confession of faith is, doesn't it? If we're agreed that faith is about gratitude — it's not simply about discovering who God is, discovering him to be our Father, but discovering that and receiving it joyfully, and with gratitude — then extracting intellectual assent or apparent intellectual assent from somebody under the pain of torture or worse seems to me to be an absolute nonsense in terms of bringing someone to faith — it simply has nothing to do with it.

Thomas Erskine, the Scots theologian from the 19th century, says somewhere that you can't frighten people into love. Even if we're not forcing them to confess with the use of pain, another version of that has been to extract confession from people by frightening them. Again, that seems to have little to do with the true nature of faith and response to the gospel. The thing that's the most wrong with it, is that it misunderstands completely the nature of faith as a response to the good news.

The other thing to say is that the good news for Christians is not simply good news for Christians — it's good news for all. That's the message, that this is who God is. It's not simply who God is for some, it's not simply who God chooses to be on certain days of the week, it's who God is. That has to

set the boundaries and the context in which we reflect on what it means to bring others into a saving knowledge of this God. Until they discover that that's who God is, they can't respond in an appropriate way. Getting them to tick boxes or make verbal confessions has got nothing to do with it. It's a fundamental shift of disposition, to discovering that this is who God is, that the universe is God's creation, and this is who I am as God's creature, and I'm responding joyfully to that. That's in God's hands, not ours.

The fear of hell

JMF: Much of evangelism is still done with the idea of fear, of avoiding hell. It seems that knowing God as the God who is for us, for humanity, changes the face of evangelism – the approach – turning it around.

TH: Yes. I don't think it means that we lose sight of the language of hell, or the sense of urgency about accepting the gospel. But it's a different sort of urgency. Who, knowing if this were true, would not want to respond to it quickly? You're missing out on something good. It completely recasts it, because it's now a message of genuine good news, unalloyed good news, not a threat with a salvage hatch provided. It's news which changes everything, changes the way I see the whole of life, my own purpose and existence, and to which there can only be a response of gratitude.

When that's not forthcoming, that is, as Barth somewhere else says, the ultimate mystery: why would someone hear the good news, understand it as good news, and then say no to it? He characterizes that as the most mysterious of all things. He leaves it open as a possibility, but he sees it as a denial of all that we are as human beings. That means that if we are going to talk about danger of loss of salvation or hell, then it has to be cast in terms of the shadow cast by the light.

The fundamental thing about the gospel is that it's light, it's good. That is who God is. God is not someone who is out there to get us, or waiting for an excuse to get us — some Dirty Harry character that's waiting for us to make his day, just itching for an excuse to judge us. God, on the contrary, desires nothing more than our salvation and goes to whatever lengths necessary to secure it. But there remains that colorfully illustrated inference that if people, notwithstanding all that, and for whatever reason finally identify themselves so thoroughly with that which is incompatible with God and his purposes for us, that then they will finally isolate themselves from that.

That's hard to reckon with theologically. It's a very odd circumstance. If God is this good and all-powerful and loving Father who seeks our salvation,

it makes that problematic. But I think Scripture compels us at least to reckon with the possibility that if someone so identifies themselves with evil, and the things of evil, to cease even to want anymore to respond to that goodness, then that's where the language and the imagery of hell starts to come back into play. I don't think we can ignore it. We have to take it very seriously. I'd rather people found that problematic, and got a grasp of the good news as good news.

JMF: It was strange, in terms of the gospel, after the terrorist attacks in 2001. We had the images and descriptions of firemen who saw the building was in distress, but went back in to try to pull out as many as they could, and were killed. Then on the following Sunday, many preachers, rather than calling them heroes as everyone else had, consigned some of them to hell because they had not become Christians before the building fell on them.

It was a message of “something like that could happen to you at any moment, and if you don't want to be like them, then you need to accept the gospel while you're still alive.” It presented God and the gospel as kind of inept, in one sense, because he doesn't care about the selflessness of the people who went in to save others — that amounted to nothing and was no reflection of him and he really didn't care, or, conversely, maybe he was wringing his hands and saying, “I wish somebody had gotten to them with the gospel before that.” It doesn't make sense, that sort of preaching. At least it doesn't seem to square with the...

TH: It's very problematic. The temptation is for us to slip into thinking, “Of course they'll be saved because they did what they did.” I don't think that's relevant. It's hugely to their credit that they did what they did, but that's not really where the stakes are in terms of salvation or loss of salvation. They proved themselves to be brave and worthy human beings, and that's what needs to be said, and they gave up their lives for others. Whether they are saved will not rest on that.

Does God rely on the ability or inability or the timing of human beings, does he get caught out by something like 9/11? That brings in a whole raft of problems that we could go around in circles on for a while. What we *do* know is that God loved each of those people in the towers, each of those people who went into the towers to get people out and themselves gave up their lives — he made them to exist eternally in fellowship with himself, he sent his Son to die for their sins, and he desires nothing more than their salvation. When we've said that, we've said the most important things.

At some stage we have to hand it over to God and say, “God, in your mercy, you deal with these people, because you know whether any of them

had made in their heart of hearts some sort of a decision in life which distanced them so much from God as to exclude themselves from that.” It is up to him to know, not for us to know.

Dealing with that extreme instance seems to be unhelpful because it puts the issues in the wrong place and suggests that it’s in those extreme circumstances rather than in the everyday life, where these life and death, in a sense, decisions confront us day in and day out. That’s where what matters really occurs in life. The thing that matters is what God has done for us, not the decisions we make day in and day out. Although they may seem to be vital decisions, they’re overshadowed by that one big decision.

Eternal life

JMF: Let’s talk about eternal life for a moment. The Bible says that we’ve already entered eternal life. The Bible has us already seated with Christ at the right hand of the Father. How should we understand eternal life in that context as something that’s already taken place, and yet we want to think of it as something that takes place after the return of Christ?

TH: It is, in a sense, a matter of things which we believe will be the case after the return of Christ already breaking in and shaping, reshaping, the quality of life in here and now. Maybe the word *eternal* is a bit misleading, because we tend to think of it in terms of temporality, that something eternal goes on and on, like a dreary lecture or sermon, whereas the temporal aspect of it is difficult to picture, and we don’t know what temporality or non-temporality will be like after the return of Christ.

It’s more important to picture it as a *quality* of existence — it is life with a capital L, as John talks about — “and this life is in his Son.” If we think about it like that, then perhaps we can see how, in a sense, we both look forward to having that quality of life in the hereafter — when history has reached its close, when God has judged the world and wrapped everything up and handed it over to his Son — and that already breaks in *now*.

The way it breaks in now is that we already have communion with the Father. When people say, “I can’t picture what the quality of eternal life is going to be like,” I want to say, “No, in a sense you can’t picture what it’s like, but you’re not left wholly without some indication.” Probably the most obvious indication is those moments of intimate communion with God that we have in prayer and in worship and so on, because that is relationship with the Father though the Son in the power of the Spirit. That is going to characterize the whole of our experience in eternity.

That qualitative aspect is helpful in making sense of the idea of eternal

life, because we do have that now. We only have it partially, we only have it on an occasional basis. We're probably not conscious of it, most of us, for much of the time. But we get glimpses of it, we can anticipate it, and we can enjoy it in part already. So rather than thinking about it in terms of a temporal model of eternity, what we might be doing for all that time, we think about it in those qualitative terms, of enjoying God's fellowship, and that's probably a more helpful way.

JMF: In the time we have left, if there's one thing you would like for people to know about God, what would it be?

TH: If I haven't already got it, I think it is that God made them to enjoy being in his presence — that was in his mind's eye from the very first. It shapes everything he does and who he is, and he has done all that is necessary for them to enjoy that. That's who he's calling them to be. He has not waited for them to decide that it's a good idea, he's already decided it's a good idea, and now he offers it freely for them to lay hold of and make their own, and enjoy in this life and then in the life to come, too. God isn't a problem — God calls us to enjoy being his children in the Spirit.

43. WHAT CHRIST DID WAS EFFECTIVE FOR ALL

J. Michael Fezell: Our guest today is George Hunsinger, Princeton Theological Seminary’s Hazel Thompson McCord Professor of Systematic Theology. Dr. Hunsinger is an ordained Presbyterian minister and a major contributor to the new Presbyterian Catechism. He is author of several books, including *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology*, and *The Eucharist and Ecumenism*.

Thanks for being with us today.

George Hunsinger: I’m very glad to be here. Thank you.

JMF: You’re part of the Reformed tradition as a Presbyterian minister. Could you tell our viewers something about the Reformed tradition and the role it has played in the history of Christianity?

GH: The Reformed tradition developed in the 16th century at the same time as the Lutheran Reformation. The Reformed tradition originally was based in Switzerland and southern Germany and eventually came to be associated with the name of John Calvin, but there were many different theologians who were founders, so to speak, of the Reformed tradition, and that’s why we don’t usually hear about “Calvinistic” churches. You hear about Reformed churches or Presbyterian churches.

Then it spread to places like Holland and Hungary and then, in its English language versions, England and Scotland, and eventually to the United States. Our most prominent theologian historically is John Calvin. The Continental version of the Reformed tradition used the Heidelberg Catechism as its basis of instruction, whereas in the Anglo-American version and then coming into the United States, the catechisms and confessions came out of the



Westminster Assembly that was held in the 17th century. The

Westminster Catechisms were the English language catechisms, as opposed to the Heidelberg that was used on the Continent.

JMF: You’re also

president of the Karl Barth Society of North America and you're active in the T.F. Torrance Theological Fellowship. Can you give us some perspective on how Calvin, Barth, and Torrance fit into major theological themes today?

GH: Karl Barth has been described as the most important theologian since Thomas Aquinas—those were the words of Pope Pius XII. He was a larger-than-life figure who wrote a massive amount. His great work is called *Church Dogmatics*, but he wrote much more than that. Like Luther and Calvin, he was also a person of affairs. He played a leadership role in church and society in the course of his life. He was born in 1886 and died in 1968.

Barth is often remembered for the role he played in the confessing church, which was that element of the German Protestant Church that stood up to Hitler. Barth was the principal author of the Barmen Declaration, which now has a kind of confessional status in my own church, the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. We include that in our book of confessions.

Thomas Torrance was Karl Barth's most important English-speaking student. Torrance went from Scotland to Basel to study with Karl Barth, and when Barth was about to retire, he hoped that Torrance would become his successor. But Torrance wanted to stay in Edinburgh and continue there, so that didn't happen. There are at least three Thomas Torrances. There's Torrance the dogmatic or systemic theologian, there's Torrance the figure who did groundbreaking work in the dialogue of theology and science, and Torrance the historical theologian. He's the one who's least well known, but the one I profit the most from, I think.

Along with being a historical theologian (there's not a single major theologian in the history of the Christian tradition about whom he hasn't written at some length—these things are scattered in journals and anthologies and so on), Torrance was also an ecumenical scholar and devoted a great deal of his career... especially to dialogue set up between the Reformed churches and Eastern Orthodoxy. That's also a part of the Torrance legacy that I try to follow in.

JMF: One of the books that you have written is *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology*. I wanted to talk about a few things in here. On page 106 you make this comment, "Two points above all seemed essential to Barth about salvation. First, what took place in Jesus Christ for our salvation avails for all. Second, no one actively participates in him, and therefore in his righteousness, apart from faith." Could you elaborate on that?

GH: That's a very deep aspect of how Karl Barth understands salvation. It's a little simple, but it makes the point...sometimes a distinction is made between the objective pole of salvation and the subjective pole. So the first

part of the statement that you read has to do with the objective pole—what God has done for us in Christ apart from us before we know about it, before we receive it, before we make any response to it.

Here, Barth started with the central conviction of the Reformation based on Christ alone and the significance of Christ alone as the exclusive Savior of the human race. He started from there and tried to think it through in a way that had little precedent in the West. In some degree he ended up thinking himself into the Eastern Orthodox and Greek wing of the church. So (and Torrance has written about this) in many ways, Barth is closer to Athanasius, a great figure in the history of the [Eastern] church, than he is to Augustine, who was formative for the Latin West.

It's not as uncommon in the Eastern Orthodox traditions to give more centrality to the idea of the universal significance of Christ's saving work—especially in its objective pole so that...when the New Testament says all, A-L-L, which it does quite a lot, that shouldn't be marginalized. That has an important place in our understanding of Christ and his saving significance.

But in the West, Augustine started from the bottom up and thought about whether we love God more than ourselves or ourselves more than God. The self-love and love for God were seen as competing with one another, and apart from conversion to Christ, self-love trumps everything and therefore you have the two loves, the two cities. The city of God is composed of people who order their loves properly by subjecting self-love to the control of love for God, if not eliminating self-love completely in its selfish forms. You have the city of God, and you have the earthly city. Augustine, in this bottom-up approach, thought it back into the reality of God. The two loves and the two cities had their eternal foundation in God's eternal predestination of the human race. So this division is thought to be ultimate—it has the last word.

It's not how Athanasius thought about these things. If you go to the great St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome, it's a huge structure. They have markers showing where other cathedrals would fit in. You know, Cologne and so on would end here. It's filled with magnificent art. Way toward the front, there are huge statues of four figures of importance to the whole church, and even to the Roman Catholic Church. On the one hand it's Augustine and Ambrose. They're all bishops – Ambrose was important in bringing Augustine to the faith, and Augustine is more the theologian and Ambrose is more the administrative Bishop of Milan.

Then they have two Greek-speaking theologians. One of them is Chrysostom, which means he was a golden-tongued orator, and the fourth statue is Athanasius. If you flee from Augustine to Athanasius, it's not like

fleeing from the clutches of the bear into the jaws of the lion—you're going from one great world historical theologian to another.

Athanasius, and the Greeks in general back in the 3rd, 4th, 5th centuries, thought about these matters not so much in a bottom-up way as in a top-down way. Athanasius thought about election beginning with the Trinity and the Incarnation. When you do that, you don't have to marginalize the passages that say that Christ died for all. Second Corinthians 5:14 was a seminal verse for Athanasius, and then later for Karl Barth and Tom Torrance. It says, "One has died for all. Therefore, all have died." It goes on that "those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who for their sake died and was raised."

That first part, that one has died for all, therefore all have died. That's interesting because it doesn't follow. It's a non-sequitur. It's not logically the case that just because one died for all, all died. That's what the death of Christ means according to Paul in that important passage of 2 Corinthians 5. I've looked this up—it's the same verb tense both times—died is aorist in the Greek, which means a completed event. I thought it would be in the perfect tense, which has some kind of ongoing consequences, but it's the stronger sense. One died for all, therefore all died.

Even though it's aorist both times, the death of all can't be exactly the same as the death of the one. But somehow the all are included, not just potentially. This is how Barth read it, this is how Athanasius read it. It's not *potentially* that all died, or that it's *sufficient* for all but efficacious only for those who respond in faith. No. In some mysterious way, *all* are included in the death of Christ. That's the objective pole of salvation.

It means that if someone comes to faith, it's not a transition from being an outsider to being an insider. We're all insiders, whether we know it or not. Christians are those who are brought to the point of awakening, of realizing that Christ has already accepted them, has already embraced them, that they may have been resisting their salvation. They may have been resisting their election, but their decision of coming to faith or their being awakened to faith, however that happens, doesn't bring about the transition from being an outsider to being an insider. That has been accomplished by the grace of God apart from us.

That's the objective pole of salvation, that has this strong universalistic element. But it's not fulfilled. It doesn't reach its goal until each person comes to acknowledge and recognize Jesus Christ for who he is. The way Barth thought this through...is something like that story many of us have heard about the pair of footprints on the beach: at first there are two pairs of footprints and then there was only one pair, and then there are two pair, and

where there are only one pair of footprints, that was the most difficult period in my life, and where were you while I was alone? Christ was absent somehow, and the Lord says, “That’s when I was carrying you.”

The Lord is somehow, in an incognito way, carrying all of us whether we know it or not. There comes that point at the end of all things when who Christ has been for us is disclosed to each one. No one, whether before Christ or after Christ, as Barth understood it, isn’t included in the grace of God and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to whom Christ is not present in mysterious and imperceptible ways that will only be made fully known at the end.

But on the subjective side, it’s essential that Christ be acknowledged as Lord for who he is. We have the great verse, for example, in the hymn in Philippians 2, that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow. Again, it’s an “all” passage—*every* knee whether in heaven or on earth or under the earth. I don’t quite know what those distinctions are about, heaven or earth and under the earth. It’s not crystal clear how to interpret that, but it’s perhaps hopefully that even under the earth, Jesus is acknowledged for who he is.

If there’s a difference between faith and sight, that final transition from faith to sight, there’s also a transition from lack of faith to sight for those who don’t come to know Christ and acknowledge him and love him and serve him in this life. At some point, everyone will see him and know him for who he is. His identity will no longer be hidden—he’ll be revealed in glory. That’s at the end. But here and now, some are called to faith and called to be Christ’s witnesses, called to be Christ’s servants, called to be the people who know and proclaim him through word and deed here and now. That’s the subjective side, and that’s what Barth is getting at in that passage.

This is not exactly what Athanasius would have said, but the longest single quotation from any theologian in the *Church Dogmatics*, which is a 10,000 page argument, is from Athanasius. Barth wrote large-print sections and then he wrote fine-print sections where he went into historical matters, like long footnotes or digressions, so they’re little essays on their own. In a fine-print section, when he’s talking about election and taking this Trinitarian, Christocentric, top-down approach, he goes into a long quotation from Athanasius. It’s the longest quotation from any single author, another theologian, in Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*, and it’s on this point.

I think what Barth discovered there was that Athanasius anticipated what he wanted to say and Barth took himself 150 pages to do it whereas this is about 3 pages in Athanasius. Athanasius’s view is Barth’s view in a nutshell. But in the West we are conditioned to think that the Augustinian way of reading the New Testament on these matters is the only way.

There's a rule of biblical interpretation that says that the clear passages should interpret the obscure passages, or the less-clear passages. That's great, that's a good rule, but it presupposes that you know what the clear passages are and what the obscure passages are. Augustine decided that Matthew 25 was the clear passage. It had the separation of the sheep and the goats. He made that the controlling idea for anything else, and that's why the "all" passages got marginalized in Western biblical interpretation.

Whereas you might think the statement "one has died for all" is clear, but in the West, and this is true of the Reformed tradition also, Calvin and Luther included, it was thought that these "all" passages always had to be read with some kind of mental reservation because the clear passages told us that "all" was not true or it might be too good to be true.

Because of the emphasis on the universal efficacy of Christ's saving death in the theology of Karl Barth, people have thought he's a universalist. He's preaching universal salvation, and if you're a universalist, what does it matter if you come to faith—as if the only reason to come to faith is to save your own skin, there's a kind of the self-serving reason... "you need to turn to Christ to escape some sort of terrible outcome," which is not the best way of preaching the gospel, but it's the Western tradition.

One of the wisest things I ever heard said about Karl Barth's theology...and he's known for representing what's called dialectical theology, which means that you create tensions and you don't resolve them. Somebody once said, "It's amazing how many wheels within wheels Barth's dialectical engine can keep spinning." So you might read him up to a certain point and then stop and say okay, he's a universalist. But no, there's a wheel within a wheel there. The dialectical engine goes on.

Almost all mistakes in interpreting Barth's theology, of which there are many, come down to not thinking dialectically enough with him and not seeing how he doesn't always stop and say, okay, there's a tension here and now I'm going to develop one side of it. No. He just develops one side of it and it might not be for several hundred pages later that you get the wheel within the wheel. It takes a long time to get the overall sweep of it.

Barth takes a position that I call reverent agnosticism. That is, he leaves the question open in hope. He doesn't give up hope for anyone. He thinks we don't have to give up hope for anyone. Think of all the anguish that devout Christians have gone through if a loved one or a parent or a child or someone close to them dies without coming to faith in Christ. It means the only alternative is that they are lost eternally. They're in eternal damnation, eternally cut off from the love and joy of God.

Barth says, "We're human beings, we're not God. We have to leave the

outcome to God.” He leaves the question open in hope. So if the option is not all are saved (the Augustinian option), or all are saved (which goes back to the theologian Origen and some others in the East, Gregory of Nyssa and so on, although it’s not the standard Eastern view. They don’t embrace universalism outright either, but it’s more prominent in some of the historical sources in the East than in the West). Barth rejects that forced alternative. He won’t say all are saved, he won’t say not all are saved. All are saved *in some sense*, but how that will work out he leaves open.

There’s a wonderful line at one point where he’s talking about that sort of last judgment that each of us will face. We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. It’s like that ultimate interview situation, where you’re confronted with Christ and you find out about the footprints in the sand and so on. Barth says, “Perhaps the Holy Spirit will have a little less trouble with the others than he had with us.”

JMF: (laughing). How does Torrance build off of those concepts of Barth?

GH: Torrance seems to position himself somewhere between Calvin and Barth. He doesn’t go as far in the direction of universal hope as Barth does, but he doesn’t retreat from it either. He feels the tug of the historic Reformed tradition a little more strongly—not a lot, but a little more than Barth did. Barth is fascinated and delighted by the passages in the New Testament which use the word “all.” Barth wants to take those passages seriously.

The biblical literalists as we know them in the U.S. and in the English-speaking world, can’t take the word “all” seriously or literally because of this Augustinian... They know that that’s not true, so wherever it says *all* it can’t quite mean *all*. It has to mean all in some qualified sense. Even Aquinas takes that view. Aquinas says that the death of Christ is sufficient for all, but efficacious only for some. It has saving power only for some. That’s the standard distinction. You find that in Calvin, too. Torrance stays a little ambiguous on this point. He doesn’t reject Barth, but he doesn’t depart as much from Calvin and the Latin West as dramatically as Barth did.

JMF: Going back to the statement that Barth made... maybe the Holy Spirit won’t have as much trouble with them... Can you elaborate on that?

GH: Barth was a Reformational theologian. He saw his task as trying to go back to the Reformation and rethink it from the ground up, because there’s a sense in which the Reformation was unfinished and didn’t fully break from, according to its deepest insights, from the penitential way of thinking about salvation that was established in the medieval church. This medieval penitential view was one of the reasons the Roman Catholic tradition (and I don’t think this is a terrible thing, but everything has its

downsides) always has Christ on the cross. The Reformed traditions, the Protestant traditions, have an empty cross.

The Greek church doesn't have Christ hanging on a cross, either, but it's a church of splendor and magnificence—usually they've got a gilded cross, with jewels and so on, but not Christ hanging on the cross. That man of sorrows, that sense that Christ sacrificed himself and shed his blood for us, that focus on the moment of the cross, that negative, sorrowful moment, has its place. But it tended to eclipse other aspects of the gospel that are equally, if not more, important.

Barth felt that the East was more correct by putting the accent on joy and resurrection than on the cross, keeping them in tension. No matter how seriously you take the cross, you have to take Christ's resurrection even more seriously—something like that.

JMF: Romans 5.

GH: Exactly. Barth liked the 18th century for its optimism. Even though he thought its optimism at the surface level was off, in a hidden way, it had some insight into Christ's resurrection whether it knew it or not. By going back to the Reformation and trying to think it through again from the bottom up, to get outside this dominance of the medieval penitential tradition and introspection, and having to do penance for your sins, and worrying that your salvation is constantly at stake because if you have a terrible misstep, if you commit a mortal sin in the penitential tradition and in Roman Catholicism to this day, you lose your salvation. So you're the weak link in the chain. You can blow it all no matter what has gone before.

This is not Luther, this is not the Reformation. Part of what it meant for Barth to go back and try to rethink the Reformation on its own terms was to pick up on Luther's insight that all sin is mortal sin. That's what Christ saves us from. It doesn't mean that some sins are not worse than others. They are. But it does mean that sin is categorical first before it's a matter of degree. You can drown in a few inches of water, or you can drown at the bottom of the ocean, but if your head is not above the water line, you can't breathe. Sin is like that—it's like death. You're either dead or you're not dead. Or pregnancy—you're not a little bit pregnant, you're either pregnant or you're not pregnant. You're either a sinner or you're not a sinner.

Some people like Mother Teresa may be close to the top of the water, and others, like theologians, are down near the bottom of the ocean, and there's a whole gradation in between. But all sin is mortal sin, and therefore when Christ saves us from our sins (Luther says this explicitly in his great commentary on Galatians), it's *all* our sins—past, present, and future.

So the idea that the Holy Spirit might have a little less trouble with *them*

than he has with us, is kind of a wry way of saying we're all sinners. It's connected not only to sin being mortal sin, but being *simul justus et peccator*, Luther's great insight that to be a Christian is simultaneously to be sinful and justified, saved, at one and the same time. That's a dialectical or a paradoxical...I think it's a really liberating idea.

We see the consequences of the Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox churches not having fully grasped or accepted what this is about, because they have to be too holy, they can't allow criticism and divine judgment beyond a certain point. They have to make these sort of qualifications. Even for Protestants, you either have to sort of delude yourself that you're not as sinful as you are, or you fall into despair and you're so sinful that you've blown everything.

This is the great liberating aspect of putting the primary weight on the objective pole of salvation—that Christ's love for us and grace toward us comes to us as lost sinners. This is Luther. Grace always comes to lost sinners and only to lost sinners. When that is known and understood, that's the liberation of the gospel. This is true even for those who do not *yet* (that's how Barth puts it), know and acknowledge Christ for who he is.

JMF: Like the woman Jesus spoke to—who loves God more? The one who is forgiven more? She knows her sinfulness, everyone sitting around the table...

GH: And is she going to have smooth sailing from then on? No lapses? No, of course not. There's always more grace in God than there is sin in us.

44. OUR LIVES ARE HIDDEN IN CHRIST

JMF: I'd like to ask you to comment on something from your book *How to Read Karl Barth*, page 124: "Salvation is not a process imminent within us in any sense that we can observe or perceive directly from our own experience," and then further down, "The truth of our being in Christ as Barth understood it is not only real and hidden, it is also yet to come."

Then you go on to discuss how we're not only included in his being, and in his humanity, in his history, in his transition from shameful death to glorious resurrection — it is transformation of the old creation into the new. "We're also confronted by his being here and now as the real but hidden future of our own being," and so on. Could you comment on that?

GH: Last time, I began with a verse from the New Testament. I find it helpful to try to peg these difficult and complicated theological ideas to certain verses from the New Testament. So I talked last time about 2 Corinthians 5:14, the first part, "One died for all, therefore all died," as a way of suggesting those parts of the New Testament would seem to lift up some sort of universal hope. Other verses that I didn't mention that we could cluster in like, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son," one of the most beloved verses in the New Testament, John 3:16. It's the *world* that's the object of God's love, and it's the world in 2 Corinthians 5 that is reconciled to God in Christ. Part of the genius of Barth's theology is to make those ideas more central to theological teaching than they have been, by putting the verses that suggest some sort of ultimate division between the sheep and the goats, not excluding them, but capping them by this more inclusive hope.

For the passages you began with out of my book, the verse that I think of is Colossians 3:3. I learned to appreciate the significance of this verse from a comment that Karl Barth makes somewhere near the beginning of the *Church Dogmatics*. He says that this verse is decisive not just for Colossians but for the entire New Testament. I had never thought about it that way before, but it turns out that yes, Colossians 3:3, if you watch for it, is really important for Luther, Calvin, and the Reformation.

Colossians 3:3 says, "You have died, yet your life is hid with Christ in God." Where does that link, in a way, with 2 Corinthians 5:14? People who are alive are spoken of, and here addressed, as those who have died. There is some sense in which by the grace of God they have died, because they are already included in the death of Christ.

This is profoundly mysterious, but it is one of the ways in which

throughout the New Testament that ordinary patterns of thought about time where things happen one after another in sequence — that’s all presupposed, it’s never denied, but it’s not the whole story. There’s another level, there’s a higher level, there’s another dimension. These sequences are real for God. But God’s apprehension of time as we experience it is not limited to these sequences. There’s a sense in which — and this is mysterious and there’s no way to see *how* this can be the case, but *that* it is the case is affirmed — these sequences are seen by God somehow also as being simultaneous.

You get all that strange language in the New Testament about things having happened “from before the foundation of the world.” In Matthew 25 when Jesus says, “Enter the kingdom that has been prepared to you...,” he says to the sheep, “...from before the foundation of the world.” Or, in Ephesians 1, we are elected in him “from before the foundation of the world,” and then that extraordinary verse in Revelation, Revelation 13:8, “The lamb being slain from before the foundation of the world.”

What’s being suggested here? What’s being gestured at with this phrase? What kind of intuition? It’s the intuition that time doesn’t mean the same thing for God as it means for us, or more precisely, it’s not perceived by God in exactly the same way as it is for us. Things that are only sequential for us are held together in a kind of simultaneity for God.

I think, and this is sort of Barthian, there’s a sense in which the last judgment, the cross of Christ, and pretemporal election from one perspective (not every perspective) are not three different events. They’re three different forms of one and the same event. So you get the lamb slain from before the foundation of the world or you get the last judgment occurring on Calvary, which is also a Johannine-type affirmation.

Colossians 3:3 fits into this general pattern of intuitions — that you have died, you’re alive, but in this deeper sense, from God’s standpoint, God sees you (it’s actually plural here, each one individually also) — you have died, and God sees you in and with the death of Christ, as being included in it. Your life is hid with Christ in God. That hidden-ness is from our standpoint. It’s not hidden to God, but we don’t see ourselves as having died. We don’t grasp the full sense of that already.

What has taken place objectively by grace? First, we participate in Christ and his obedience and his saving significance. We participate in him by grace whether we know it or not. Eventually, whether by faith or by sight or eventually both, it becomes subjective. It becomes a matter of our direct apprehension. But for the time being — the time between the times, as it’s sometimes talked about in theology, between the already and the not yet,

between what has already taken place in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ for the sake of the world (that's the already) and the not yet (when it is fully revealed and actualized and fulfilled) — we live in the time between the times. There's a lot that's hidden to us here and now. But our true selves, our reality, is not what we see and apprehend even by faith directly; it's who we are in Christ in God's sight. God does not look on us except as we are in him because he has embraced us by his grace in Christ already.

So Colossians 3:3 has three aspects. Our life is real (that means eternal life), it's hidden — we don't see it directly, we might get glimpses of it, but the point about not having any direct apprehension of it which you quoted from what I wrote, we don't know about that life — and about our inclusion in it, and about its really belonging to us on the basis of inferences that we can make about what we see in our own lives or on the basis of judgments that we can make in our own case or anyone else's case.

We know about it from the gospel. Where else would you learn Colossians 3:3 except you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in death? This is proclaimed to us, and it's proclaimed to us not necessarily because of the spiritual progress we might think we're making, but very often in *spite* of the progress that we're not making or in spite of the setbacks and falls and the disasters that we're making out of lives. It's real, it's hidden, and it's yet to come. It's a matter of hope.

In order to make this more intelligible, people will sometimes say, "It's just a matter of hope. It's not yet real." But the way Barth reads that verse, and I think this is correct, it's already true in one sense, and it's yet to come as a matter of promise and fulfillment in another sense. Just because it's yet to come doesn't mean it's not already real. Just because it's hidden doesn't mean that it's not already real. We need those three aspects together — real, hidden, and yet to come. You died and your life is hid with Christ in God.

The same thing is true for Luther and Calvin when they're talking about our righteousness. Your righteousness is hid with Christ in God. For Luther, the great summary of the gospel was Christ is our righteousness and our life. Both of those are hid with Christ in God. They're real, they're hidden... We have to take it by faith and not expect to see too much or at least not base our understanding of ourselves on what we can observe or judge about ourselves. That's the main thing.

There's that hidden element, but it's still a promise that will be brought to its fulfillment either with us or against us or both. Grace works against us as much as it works for us and with us. It has to work against us insofar as we still remain fallen and still remain hostile to the grace of God.

JMF: Which is exactly why we need grace.

GH: Yes. Exactly how grace works is a...there's a great German word, *trotzdem*, in spite of everything. That's the Protestant word "nevertheless." "Nevertheless I am with you always, until the end of the age." I may have fallen into sin — "depart from me Lord, for I am a sinful human being." In and of myself I still remain a sinner. Baptism is supposed to have drowned the old Adam, and a joke that Barth liked to make is, "It turns out the rascal can swim." There's a certain sense in which Adam is drowned in baptism, but in the time between the times, Adam is trying to pull us back under, and it's a matter of hiddenness and tension that sin and grace exist in us in an ambiguous and complicated way until that final resolution.

JMF: Doesn't that give us a sense of rest and peace with our brokenness and our struggle with sin, to know that we have been made new in Christ already and that that is real even though we don't see it?

GH: That's right. The objection coming out of the old Latin theology is "Then it doesn't matter what you do with your life, or there is no necessity for good works." It's taking everything out of the realm of necessity and translating it into the realm of freedom. I like to think of that great hymn by Isaac Watts, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." (I think Charles Wesley was the greatest hymn writer in the English language, but Wesley said...this was very moving to me...he would have given every hymn he had ever written if he could have written "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.")

It says in there, and this is exactly right, "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all." That's the transition from freedom to freedom. The free grace of God, love so amazing, so divine, eliciting the free response of total self giving back to God. This is how much God has loved you. This is what God has done on your behalf. Look to Christ on the cross to see the depth of the love and grace and mercy of God.

It's not what you have to do, what do I have to do... What do you *want* to do? It goes from the indicative to the imperative [from a statement to a command], whereas the other way is, "If you do the right thing, you'll have a good outcome." That's conditional. The hymn is not putting the indicative in the conclusion — it's in the premise. This is what God has done for you, therefore act accordingly. Therefore, make the proper response — and what response could there be, but a life of total love and self-giving to God in return for so great a love that God has bestowed on us?

JMF: Going back to the earlier comment about the universality of inclusion of humanity in Christ and the idea of everyone participating in Christ because that's the nature of human existence, to be in Christ, how

does that work? What does that look like for someone who is not yet a believer? In other words, how does a non-believer participate in Christ?

GH: There are no formulas. There's just no one way. That's hidden with Christ in God, I think. But Nietzsche for example said, "Why don't the redeemed look more redeemed?" That's a good question. Sometimes people who are not redeemed look more redeemed than the redeemed do, and they set a standard that the redeemed would do well to live up to.

Sometimes there are incognito ways in which the grace of God seems to be at work, and if we have this concept of the church militant... sometimes the Holy Spirit is more militant than the church, and if the church is not ready to move, the Holy Spirit will move somewhere else... I think in general this is true of the Enlightenment. There are ways in which the Enlightenment has taught the church to be more truly the church than was happening out of the church's own traditions. Many of the things that the Enlightenment stood for have their proper grounding in the gospel.

The Enlightenment sometimes had trouble hanging onto them indefinitely. But there are ways in which grace is operative outside the church. How do we know that? We know it when it seems to be at least compatible with the gospel — an expression of things we wish the church were doing, if the church isn't doing it.

Bonhoeffer once went to a student evening... Karl Barth used to have gatherings of students in his home from time to time, and they would talk about some theological text or events of the day. It was called an open evening. Dietrich Bonhoeffer never had Barth formally as a teacher, but he was visiting, and went there. He caught Barth's attention by quoting from Luther when Luther said, "There are times when the curse of the godless is more pleasing to the ears of God than the hallelujahs of the pious." The grace of God will work outside the walls of the church in ways where people who are not yet Christians will recognize injustices and try to do something about it, or will raise a cry of protest that also needs to be incorporated by the people of God. Sometimes their piety is really a form of unbelief, a form of evading the grace of God.

Barth liked to say that Christians go to church to make their last stand against God. This is what was at stake in the idea of "the religion" as sin. The religion becomes a form of self-justification. It becomes a way of defending ourselves against the threatening apprehension that we are sinners deserving to be rejected by God — that God's love takes the form of wrath whenever it's resisted, whether in subtle ways or blatant ways, and certainly including religious ways. God doesn't compromise with sin. God doesn't call sin good.

God does not turn a blind eye toward it. The wrath of God is a very important part of the gospel, but it's not split off from his love. It's the form that God's love takes. It's the wrath of God's love when God's love is resisted, and God's wrath overcomes all forms of resistance, but finally in such a way that the sin is removed and God's purposes are fulfilled even for the sinner in spite of the sin.

JMF: The only source of anything good is God. So anytime we see good things in anybody, whether it's any form of love, any form of courage or sacrifice, or self-sacrifice, every good virtue and every good thing can only have one source, which is God, and it seems that they would be God's love and grace working itself out in humanity even though a person may be an unbeliever and may not know the source of every good thing. But every good thing does come from God.

GH: How could it be otherwise? Yeah. Hegel has this wonderful phrase about the divine cunning that is at work in history. These unexpected moments of goodness or grace in unexpected places, this is the divine cunning in history. The difference between believers and unbelievers at this point might be that believers are equipped to see it for what it is.

JMF: At least a little better.

GH: A little better sometimes than the others. They have the key because they have Christ. Whenever it's Christ-like, we know that somehow this... You wouldn't preach it, but you could perceive it and hope and pray that this seems to be some sort of work of God. It could be in ways that don't make sense from more worldly ways of thinking. Somebody who thinks that mercy toward a wrongdoer is preferable and more God-like than vengeance and exacting retribution. I would see that, and it happens sometimes, as a Christ-like occurrence, whereas other people might feel that no, that's not what justice requires, no, that will jeopardize our security somehow and we can't take those kinds of risks, it's naive to try to implement the concerns and values of the gospel in a hostile world. God and God's grace have a way of prevailing even when it doesn't always seem immediately to make rational sense.

JMF: On page 154 in *How to Read Karl Barth* you write, "In Jesus Christ we see that God does not exist without humanity and that humanity does not exist without God." It's a great quote, and I'd like you to expand on it.

GH: There is such a thing as a godless human being — that is, a human being who tries to live as if God does not exist, and in that sense God is not real for them or acknowledged by them. It's one of the great quotations from Barth, and it's difficult to put into English. But if you're a godless human

being it would be *Gottlosigkeit*, godlessness of the human being.

Barth says there's no humanity-less-ness of God, no *menschenlosigkeit*. English would require us to say something...there's no such a thing as a God without humanity. Even though there are human beings who are godless, there's no human-less God, because God has made the world, and God has made humanity his own in the Incarnation. God has made the sufferings of the world and the sin of the world his own, irrevocably, in and with the Incarnation as it reaches its fulfillment in the cross and the resurrection. God has committed himself to being God with us, and therefore there's no such thing as a God who does not have humanity by the grace of God. This is God's free decision; there's no human-less-ness of God.

JMF: Just as there's no Father without the Son and the Holy Spirit, and no Holy Spirit without the Father and the Son.

GH: But that's true by nature, but this is true by grace.

JMF: Yes. So we can't think of God in any other way except as the God who has included humanity in himself.

GH: Right, and that means we can't think about God except in terms of the covenant as it reaches its fulfillment in the Incarnation and death and resurrection of Christ.

JMF: I think Tom Torrance said something similar to that when he said in *The Mediation of Christ*, "God has bound himself to us in such a way he will never let us go."

45. FOCUS ON CHRIST

JMF: I'd like to talk about one of the subjects you brought up in your book, *How to Read Karl Barth*, and that is *ordo salutis*, and how that plays out. Could you begin by talking about or by telling us what it means in English, and then about the history and...

GH: *Ordo salutis* means order of salvation. This term comes from the 17th century. I tend to think about these things more from the standpoint of Calvin and Luther and the original Reformers, and not what the later more scholastic theologians did 75 to 100 years later. Is there a temporal sequence in which things have to fall, or, if not, are there ways in which one thing necessarily presupposes something else first? Like, can I have faith without having first repented? That might be temporal, but it might also be logical. The very idea of faith presupposes that I have repented. Calvin thought repentance, for example, was a lifelong process.

Sometimes it's related to how justification and sanctification are related. First you would be justified in point of time and then that would kick off a process of sanctification. But it might be not temporal, but logical. You couldn't be in the process of sanctification if you had not logically already been justified. And where does adoption fit in? Do you have to be adopted first in order to be justified and then sanctified?

One that is pretty important and is (not always but sometimes) brought out in this idea of ordering is: when do you enter into union with Christ? Calvin's idea was that the person is brought into union with Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit who creates faith. So Calvin taught that faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit and faith joins us to Christ. Then Calvin would use the word *simul*, and then simultaneously out of union with Christ, there's a "double grace" he put it, *duplex gratia dea*, a two-fold grace of God, justification and sanctification. Calvin did not make sanctification dependent upon justification. He made justification and sanctification dependent upon union with Christ. That's the order that I would hold to.

There's another order in some later Lutheran theologians, that you have to be justified first in order to enter into union with Christ and to participate in Christ. That almost seems contrary to Luther to me, insofar as I understand it, because of Luther's emphasis that grace comes to lost sinners. Grace brings us into union with Christ, Christ enters into us, we enter into Christ, there's a kind of mutual indwelling. You don't have to be made holy or righteous in order to have union with Christ. Union with Christ brings about justification and sanctification, righteousness and life. That is one way

the question of the order of salvation is still important.

Does union with Christ depend upon repentance or justification or some other thing, or is it the foundation of everything else? Calvin and Barth, and also Luther, all believed that union with Christ was bedrock and was given by grace through faith. Every other aspect of salvation, whatever it might be, comes out of that. But from that point, on it's a kind of a hodgepodge. There's no clear order. There's no logical set of ordering principles, no temporal order.

The important thing is union and communion with Christ by grace through faith. After that, the idea of *ordo salutis* becomes a kind of a distraction. It directs your attention to how you're doing when living out the Christian life, as opposed to keeping your focus on Christ alone. It's almost like Peter being out there on the water, and he's looking at Christ, but all of a sudden the question of *ordo salutis* arises and he looks to himself and starts sinking. There's a way in which Christian piety can become too preoccupied with itself, and the *ordo salutis* concept is perhaps one way in which that is fostered. The important thing is to keep our focus on Christ.

JMF: In your recent book, *The Eucharist and Ecumenism*, you have a passion for unity in Christ between churches and the ability to take communion together. What triggered that? What lays behind your interest in the topic and the development of it?

GH: It's profoundly disordered that we should have so many separate churches and denominations. Jesus came that we might all be one. If we have reached the point where some Christians are excluded from the Lord's Supper or the Eucharistic celebrations of other Christians, this is not only wrong in itself, but it's a terrible testimony to the world. I read a story recently about a man in India who was a Dalit, a member of the untouchables, and he became a Christian. He had been a leader among the Dalits, and he said, "Christianity recognizes the dignity and the full humanity of all human beings and therefore of the untouchables. We should all become Christians."

The response he got was, "We can't become Christians because if we did we would lose our unity as Dalits." A lot of them have become Christians anyway, but it's a sign of how the missionary movement imported the divisions that had grown up in Europe to the rest of the world by reproducing those divisions in the mission field. The ecumenical movement in recent times has come out of the missionary movement in the great conference that took place in Edinburgh in 1910. It was missionaries gathering together to see what could be done to try to recover some more robust expression of Christianity so that it wouldn't be undermining the efforts that they were

engaged in around the world.

It seems profoundly wrong to me that Christians have allowed things to get to the point that there's not Eucharistic sharing. This is something that is perceived in some sectors of all Christian traditions and communions. Vatican II has a very strong decree on ecumenism, the Vatican has been very dedicated in doing what it can, within limits, to overcome the divisions, especially in the outreach to Eastern Orthodox Christians. There's a new openness on their part to trying to work together to see if we can't live more faithfully in accord with Christ and the gospel, because there's this perception that there are true Christians in all the different denominations and traditions, and yet we're divided at the point where we ought to be the most united. So it's a matter of faithfulness to Christ and obedience to the gospel that we should all strive to do what we can from our side to make sure that we are all one. There's a scandal to this wound, around the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

JMF: In the book *The Eucharist and Ecumenism*, you say this, "The Christian community is called to attest, mediate, and anticipate the unity of Christ in the Eucharistic assembly." Can you expand on that?

GH: We talked once before about Colossians 3:3, "You have died and your life is hid with Christ in God." There's a sense in which that's true of our unity in Christ. It's hid with Christ in God. We are one, and we need to become one — we need to become what we are. Attesting that unity means attesting it in its reality as it exists in Christ with God. That can't be undone, even by our divisions. But it also needs to be anticipated. There will be a day when these divisions will be made to seem ridiculous and indefensible, but they won't be in force anymore.

I like to think of the promised future in terms of a meal, in terms of the Messianic Banquet or the Marriage Feast of the Lamb. I think the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist is the present tense form of that final meal. It's the presence of that future here and now. I've talked before about the last judgment, the cross of Christ, and pretemporal election as being three forms of one and the same event, the Messianic Banquet, the Last Supper, and Calvary together in a complex unity — these are three forms of one and the same event. So the Lord's Supper also mediates that unity.

The present tense form of that unity is most significantly and intensively expressed when the church gathers together around the table in order to celebrate the Lord's Supper together. That's bringing you Christ in his saving significance into the present from the past where his once-for-all sacrifice was accomplished, and it's also anticipating that which is yet to come. We are

attesting something, something that has taken place in its perfect and definitive sense, the finished saving work of Christ, that once-for-all aspect of it. The only thing we can do in that respect is to attest it.

We can't add to it, it doesn't need to be added to. We can't possibly add to it, it's a finished and perfect work, but we're called to be witnesses to Christ and his once-for-all obedience and saving sacrifice. We attest it, we anticipate that future form that it will take in the kingdom of God, and it should be mediated here and now, which means that we shouldn't be excluding one another from our individual denominational celebrations of the Lord's Supper. If we're doing that, we need to dig into the roots of what's behind these divisions and ask what can be reasonably and faithfully done to overcome them, so that that invisible unity which already exists can be made more fully visible for what it is here and now.

JMF: So, ironically, for a church that doesn't have communion with other churches or share communion with other churches, when they partake of communion, they're actually attesting and anticipating the day when that very attitude and exclusion will not exist anymore.

GH: I think so. But the people who have these exclusions think that they're the only true church and that the ecumenical solution is that we should all join *their* church. Every denomination has people like this. It just can't be true. There are real Christians spread throughout the churches, and it needs to be worked out that these sinful divisions are suffered and overcome and not just tolerated and written off as if they're insignificant.

Another thing to keep in mind is the shape of world Christianity. There are about 6 billion people in the world, roughly. How many of them are Christians? A third of them are Christians. So there are about 2 billion Christians in the world. Let's just stick with that, and that's a pie-shaped graph. How many of those 2 billion are Roman Catholic? About half of them. Half of the pie-shaped graph are Roman Catholic.

What about Eastern Orthodox churches? It's hard to find out. I wrote to some Eastern Orthodox scholars, and it depends on how you define Eastern Orthodox churches and are you talking about active members or people just on the rolls, and you get these kind of problems with statistics, but as a ballpark figure, 15 to 17 percent more. So we're looking at almost 70 percent of the world's Christians that have this high sacramental understanding of the church and the Christian life.

What about Protestants? Protestants as a whole, including Anglicans and Episcopalians, they might be another 20 percent. But they're fragmented among themselves. There are more Anglicans than there are Lutherans,

they're within this little piece of the pie, and there are more Lutherans than there are Reform. I'm a Reformed theologian, I'm a Presbyterian minister, but I represent one sliver of world Christianity, maybe leaving one or two percent in there, and then, where things are burgeoning is with the Pentecostal and the charismatic churches.

But the Roman Catholic Church also is growing rapidly in the global south. My little sliver there is (where I have my home, so I think about that), you know how many different Reform denominations there are? The World Council of Churches and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches did a study. They were shocked. There are 750 Reformed denominations. So it's like we've got this little sliver of pie...you have to be like a Japanese chef, you've got to divide that little sliver up into 750 pieces.

From a Catholic standpoint and an Orthodox standpoint, that's what they would expect. They thought, "you get rid of bishops, you get rid of any institutionalized form of authority, you're going to fragment, you're going to disintegrate." We're not in the 16th century anymore. The evidence is in. Protestantism is fissiparous, as they say. It breaks up into parts.

You may know the little book by C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*. Lewis's idea of hell is that nobody can get along with anybody else, so they're constantly moving away from one another. This is almost an image for Protestantism. Every time somebody does something that you think is wrong, you do what's right in your own eyes, and you form your own little new denomination. There's something wrong with this picture. We need to give serious thought to what it would take to bring the church into some sort of tolerable unity. To me, that means Eucharistic sharing. It doesn't mean one monolithic church structure, but the Catholics and the Orthodox, they have their own set of criteria about what would be necessary if the divisions in the church were to be healed and overcome.

Here I have to be pragmatic as well as principled, because I'm thinking we've got 70 percent of the world's Christians that we need to bring into some sort of reconciliation along with all these Protestants. I don't know what to do in my book about Pentecostals and Anabaptists traditions, so I just sort of factor them out for the time being (and finally that will be a work of the Spirit and not the work of the theologians, so I figure I'll just leave that to one side). We're not going to achieve consensus.

In the ecumenical movement, it's understood that visible unity in the form of a single church structure is not only not going to be achieved, it's not necessary. One of the terms that is used is "reconciled diversity." The project in my book, in part, is how can we widen the circle of acceptable diversity?

I've tried to go back to some little-known developments from the time of the Reformation that I think would be fruitful for the Reformed tradition to adopt, and that might have some appeal across the board.

I've gotten favorable reviews so far from Roman Catholic writers. The Orthodox are a question unto themselves. They think they have the true church and they won't... When I would talk to people about my book and I'd say, "I think the divisions about the Lord's Supper as they developed in the West have a lot to do with the absence of an Eastern Orthodox voice. At the time of the Reformation things split apart and polarized in the history of the Western churches that the Orthodox have had together."

I thought they would say, "This is great, you want to make ecumenical progress and you want to draw upon the Orthodox traditions." No, it's like, "So what?" My words fall to the ground. The average view is they don't need us, we're very problematic, and the solution is that we should all become Orthodox. Even when the Orthodox participate in the World Council of Churches events, that's kind of the underlying attitude. They're waiting for the rest of us to find our way back to Eastern Orthodox. I don't think that that's the solution. I think the Catholics will actually bear the burden of achieving that reconciliation with the Orthodox.

But meanwhile, in my hope of expanding the circle of acceptable diversity, I had to figure out some way of determining what views are church-dividing, that's the way they talk ecumenically. What views are church-dividing, and what views aren't? How do you know what views are church-dividing and what aren't? Vatican II decided, so this is an official Roman Catholic position. Vatican II decided that there are no obstacles...

JMF: Vatican II being the church council.

GH: Of the Roman Catholic Church in the 1960s. Vatican II decided that there are no obstacles in principle (you have to state this carefully) from the Roman Catholic side to Eucharistic sharing with the Orthodox, but the Orthodox hold views that are different from Roman Catholic teaching. If there are places, as there are, where Eastern Orthodox views are more possible for Protestants than Roman Catholic views as we're familiar with them, then if we can adopt those views without compromise, as I think we often can, there's an ecumenical imperative that we ought to move in that direction for the sake of achieving unity and Eucharistic sharing.

So I argue that nobody has to give up anything that is essential to them, but everybody has to stretch to accept some things that they thought they had to reject. The history of the Eucharistic controversies has largely been the history of false contrasts, and an important part of the argument in my

book is trying to show that things can be held together that were split apart.

I'll give you a simple example, not a terribly complicated one. In my tradition we talk about the Lord's Table. There was a professor in a previous generation at Princeton Seminary who used to tell his students it's a table and not an altar, and it's not a table unless you can put your feet under it. So "table" is good and "altar" is bad, and if you read Luther's catechisms and so on, he's constantly using the phrase "the sacrament of the altar." He gets this phrase from Augustine; to me there's nothing wrong with it. But when Luther starts using it and then as the Lutheran tradition developed, there's a kind of hardening. It's not just a rhetorical term anymore, it becomes more of a semi-technical term. It's an altar.

Altar has its metaphorical home in priestly and cultic activities. *Table* has its home in thinking about the royal office of Christ — Christ as the Messiah, the Messianic Banquet. The priestly office of Christ and the royal office of Christ can't exclude one another. These are two different ways of talking about one and the same Jesus Christ and his work of salvation. It's not like a pie where you divide them up into parts — these are two ways of looking at Christ as a whole.

There is a term in the tradition, and I learned about it from reading an Eastern Orthodox writer, Alexander Schmemmann, who has this wonderful book called *The Eucharist*. In that book, even though he primarily talks about the sacrament of the kingdom, and he uses table imagery and so on, so royal. In a way, the Eastern Orthodox ethos (even though it doesn't exclude the priestly), is oriented toward the splendor of the kingdom of God. The goal, the icons and the precious gems and so on...there's something royal about this. Schmemmann uses the term "altar table."

I was at a conference, I was asked to speak in Strasbourg...all these ecumenical figures from across Europe were there. I said Schmemmann has this great phrase that he uses that shows how we bring things together that in other places have been split apart. So my tradition will say table, but it won't say altar, Lutherans tend to say altar but maybe not so much table. It's a false contrast. You don't have to polarize around this. So Schmemmann has this great term.

The next day the Eastern Orthodox speaker from Romania got up and said, "I have to correct one thing that Professor Hunsinger said the other day. It's not just Schmemmann who talks about altar table. We all talk this way." This was simultaneous translation; he was speaking in German and he had a German text and photographs of Eastern Orthodox liturgies and so on. Right there in the German text was "*altar tisch*," there it was.

So I started watching for it. This term has deep historic roots. I've seen it in some Roman Catholic writings, and in the Reformation there was a figure named Martin Bucer who was the reformer of Strasbourg. There was a period when Calvin had been called to Geneva and then he ran into conflict with the city fathers and he had to leave Geneva. He went to Strasbourg. Martin Bucer became Calvin's mentor, and later Calvin went back to Geneva. Bucer is an important figure, that's what I'm getting at. He was also very ecumenically-minded and even in that period was striving to do what he could to hold the Reformation together and to make sure that there weren't these divisions about the Lord's Table. Bucer also knew the term "altar table."

So there's no good reason, it seems to me, why Reformed Christianity or Protestants in general can't develop this vision that we need both the priestly and the royal aspects. This perception has a lot of implications that we might want to talk about, but the priestly side has been lost by much of Protestantism. We have an atrophied understanding of the priestly elements of worship and of the Eucharistic liturgy.

The Catholics have priests, the Orthodox have priests, the Episcopalians have priests, but we don't have priests anymore. We have ministers and the priesthood of all believers, which is great, I think that's important, but what does that mean? It's almost a priest without a portfolio. It doesn't have a great deal of meaning, and while each person is a priest to every other person, fine, we intercede for one another, fine. But it doesn't have a lot of development and currency. Recovering that priestly side of things... it's not just the Messianic Banquet, which would be royal, it's the Marriage Feast of the Lamb, which is priestly and cultic. These are two different...

In the book of Revelation, what's happening? It's the lamb who is sitting on the throne...well, who is beside... The royal aspects, the royal activities and offices are somehow assimilated to the lamb. To me this suggests that there's something central to this priestly complex of images that we need to recover. Liberal Protestantism had an aversion to all things priestly. I read something recently by H. Richard Niebuhr (who I have a lot of respect for); he talked about sacrifice and love, and these "primitive" ideas. They thought they could move beyond all that... Expiation and propitiation, and who needs that?

We need to find a responsible way of recovering these ideas without theological compromise, because they're essential to reestablishing the Eucharistic unity of the church. So I'm looking for ways in which we can stretch to accept things we thought we had to reject without theological

compromise. We're going to have to tolerate a fair amount in other traditions and communions that we're not entirely comfortable with. But if we can just reach the point where we're not excluding one another from our celebrations of the Eucharist, that would be huge. That would be the correct thing to do in its own right, but it would also have great implications for the church's witness to Christ in the world.

46. THE EUCHARIST AND ECUMENISM

JMF: I'd like to talk about a couple of terms that our viewers might be familiar with, but maybe you could define them and then move on to a third term that you put forward in your book, *The Eucharist and Ecumenism*. Many of our viewers are familiar with "transubstantiation" and "consubstantiation" and that there has been controversy, but they may not remember what the controversy was, and what the definitions are. You introduced the concept of "tranelementation," so could you describe those and move on to tranelementation and the potential you see for that term?

GH: Thank you. There are three main issues that need to be addressed if we are to get beyond the impasse in ecumenical discussion about the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist. One has to do with the real presence of Christ. That's where your question about those terms comes in. Then there's the question of the Eucharistic sacrifice, and finally there's the question of the ordained ministry. I address all three of those areas in my book.

The churches have divided historically over the question about how are we to understand the idea of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper. It has to be given a special formulation. It can't just be that Christ is somehow really present with the Lord's Supper. It has to do with the bread and the wine as consecrated elements, and in what sense are the body and blood of Christ present *in* and *through* and *with* the elements of bread and wine.

The historic Roman Catholic answer to that is *transubstantiation*. This term has been defined by a church council for them. The Council of Trent gave a technical definition to transubstantiation, so that's the one we have to look at. The word was around much longer than that, but it didn't have a technical definition prior to the 16th century. The Reformation forced the Catholic Church to come up with a more careful definition of what they meant. That then divided the Protestant churches from the Roman Catholic Church. The Council of Trent drew largely upon the definition that Thomas Aquinas had developed in the 13th century.

Transubstantiation involves conversion and containment. The bread and the wine are somehow converted so that they become the body and blood of Christ in a particular form, and the body and blood are then contained in the bread and the wine, respectively. So transubstantiation is, in a sense, a theory of descent and containment. The grace of God descends from heaven, and when the priest or the bishop presiding at the Eucharist says the words of consecration, the words that Jesus is recorded as having said at the last

supper, “This is my body, given for you, this cup (in the New Testament) is my blood, shed for you.”

When the priest says that in the Catholic liturgy, a bell is rung, because that’s where you’re supposed to pay attention — that’s where the miracle and the wonder takes place that the bread is no longer merely bread, the wine is no longer merely wine, but is the body and blood of Christ. But the outward form, called the *accidents*, remains. This distinction about substance and accidents comes from Aristotle, was used by Aquinas, and the Council of Trent changed it just slightly and instead of talking about accidents, they used the word *species*, but it was the same thing. It’s form and content.

The outward form remains the form of bread, and the outward form remains the form of wine. But the inner content, the inner substance, has been converted and transformed into the body and blood of Christ, which are then contained by the elements. The Reformation felt that this was a terrible idea, and it made no sense, so they didn’t want to have anything to do with it. Whether they had a suitable alternative or not is another matter. The Lutherans and the Reformed within the Reformation split apart over this question. In the first generation of Reformers, the Reformed were from Switzerland and southern Germany, but especially Switzerland, led by the Zürich Reformer Ulrich Zwingli. The Lutherans were led by Martin Luther from Wittenberg.

Zwingli had what is thought of as a very low understanding of how the bread and the wine function in the Lord’s Supper. They are merely symbols of something that is not necessarily present. There’s more than one way to work this out. What happened in the past, in Christ’s once-for-all saving work, that is symbolized and remembered in the Lord’s Supper — that was Zwingli’s basic view. What the Reformed tradition was especially concerned to protect was the integrity of Christ’s human body after his resurrection and ascension. They thought if Christ was somehow substantially present in the Lord’s Supper, it was impossible to maintain the full integrity of his human body in heaven.

Calvin, who modified Zwingli’s views considerably, still had that as a primary concern. One reason they had that conviction was that they believed salvation was at stake. If Jesus’ humanity ceased to be real humanity in its full integrity as a human body, as a part of his humanity, then the ideal of our salvation was destroyed. He had to remain a real human being, even after the ascension.

The Lutheran view is sometimes called the *consubstantiation*, the term you mentioned, and some Lutherans are okay with that term, but some aren’t. Some Lutheran documents from the 16th and 17th century deny that this

describes the Lutheran position. Some still use the term. Partly it's a matter of definitions. Consubstantiation can mean more than one thing. If it means that you just have two substances together — the substance of the bread and the substance of the body of Christ (whatever “substance” means... even for Catholics this substance/ accidents scheme is perplexing today; nobody quite knows what to make of these Aristotelian terms).

A dictionary definition view of consubstantiation has the two substances coexisting together. The bread remains bread, but the body of Christ is joined to it mysteriously. Maybe it's not taken any further, but you get the impression sometimes that they're externally related — they're coexisting side by side. I don't think that was Luther's view, but it is a view that is ascribed to Luther and accepted by some Lutherans.

Luther said different things in different writings. He's not an easy theologian to pin down, because he's so situational and he'll say one thing here and another thing there – it's like a bell-shaped curve, one or two standard deviations... In his treatise of 1520 called *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, one of his most widely read treatises, he takes a position that was somewhat neglected, or put to one side, in the heat of Reformational controversies between Luther and Zwingli and their colleagues. In *Babylonian Captivity*, Luther focuses on the verse 1 Corinthians 10:16. That verse says “the bread that we break, is it not a (blank) in the body of Christ.” In English the word that I left blank is often translated as “participation.” Luther knew it in the Greek – *koinonia*. One way of interpreting the verse (there's more than one way) is to say that the relationship between the bread that we break and the body of Christ is a *koinonia* relation. It's some kind of participation of the one in the other. The idea of participation is not always kept in mind when the term consubstantiation is used. But consubstantiation can be used to cover this other case where there's a more intimate kind of indwelling, at least of the body in the bread.

The Eastern Orthodox view that I have found to be helpful as a way of moving beyond the impasse ecumenically...it's not called consubstantiation by them, but Luther's view in the *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, based on 1 Corinthians 10:16 and other verses, is not far from that ancient Orthodox view. The Orthodox have several terms that they will use, and it makes it hard to find out what they actually think, but if you read long enough, you can see that there's one term that stands out among the rest. That is what I put forth in my book as transelementation, *metastoicheisis*. It's a deep interpretation of 1 Corinthians 10:16.

What is a *koinonia* relation? There's more than one way to work that out, but it can be a relationship of mutual indwelling. If you take that view, then

the bread can remain bread (without any loss of its definition as bread — it's not substance and accidents), and it somehow participates in the body of Christ. It's not just that the body of Christ participates in the bread, but there's a relationship of each being in the other.

For the Catholics and for the Orthodox, and for this view that Luther espoused, it's not just the body and blood of Christ that are thought of in detachment from the rest of his person, this is the form in which he's present to us — this sacrificial form...in and with the sacramental form of his body and blood, the whole person of Christ is present. He offers himself to us under the sacramental form of his body and blood. He gives himself to the church in that form, and in the same way he unites the church to himself.

As in the incarnation, he assumed human flesh, he made himself one with us...even though he was God, he emptied himself and took the form of a servant even to death on a cross, as we read in Philippians 2. He took that flesh, he made himself one with us in order to bear our sins and bear them away — the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He makes us one with himself through that same body and blood, that same sacrificial death. There's only one body of Christ, it is definitively present in Christ's life and death there and then, but then it becomes sacramentally present. It's here and now under the forms of bread and wine.

The image that was used in the ancient church to bring out this idea of transelementation was the image of the iron in the fire. They used that image both for the incarnation and for the relationship between the bread and the wine and Christ's life-giving flesh. There's an important incarnational analogy here. In the council decision at Chalcedon in 451, the fifth-century decision defining the person of Christ (this is a decision that's definitive for Catholics, for Orthodox, and for Reformation Protestants), they had to give some account of how Christ's deity and humanity were related. They said that they were related “without separation or division.”

That meant there was, to put it more positively, an inseparable unity between them... “without confusion or change.” The deity of Christ in the union remains deity, the humanity of Christ in the union remains humanity. How can they be together in one person? That's the mystery of the incarnation. If God by nature is immortal, how can the immortal God assume mortal flesh? Questions like that. That's the mystery of the incarnation.

There's a third element here that's implied, a kind of a symmetry... Deity and humanity are not on a par with one another. They wouldn't balance the scales if you could put them on some kind of scales. None of these images would be perfect then. Let me use another one that has real limitations: Gregory of Nyssa, the great Cappadocian theologian from the fourth century,

said that deity and humanity in Christ were something like a drop of water in the ocean. The deity of Christ has this immensity to it and the humanity has a kind of smallness, and, relative to his deity, a kind of insignificance. The problem with that image is that it loses the idea of “without confusion or change.” If you put a drop of blood into the ocean, it disappears. But in the scale that we’re talking, or the *incommensurability*, the absolute difference between deity and humanity — it helps us imagine that.

We need three things to think about the person of Christ, and this carries over by analogy to thinking about the bread and the wine. You need asymmetry. You need the priority of one over the other. You need unity, you need an inseparable unity of these two that would not otherwise come together except for the miracle of grace, and in that unity, you need an abiding distinction. This is the model that the Orthodox have used for thinking not only about the incarnation, which is true of all Nicene Christians and Chalcedonian Christians, but they use this incarnational analogy to think about how Christ’s life-giving flesh is related to the Eucharistic gift of bread and wine without separation or division, without confusion or change.

This is what’s missing from transubstantiation, this element of asymmetry which gives the precedence to Christ and his body. It’s not just that the body is contained in the bread, it’s that Christ in the power of the Spirit takes these Eucharistic gifts and joins himself to them in a certain respect so that he, not the priest, is the acting subject in the working of this sacramental miracle in order to offer himself through the priest to the people in these sacramental forms.

Transubstantiation involves an explicit place also for the work of the Holy Spirit. The Orthodox have this wonderful idea, in the Greek it’s called *epiklesis*, invocation, the Spirit is invoked while celebrating the Eucharistic liturgy. But the Orthodox don’t pin it down to a particular moment in the liturgy. There’s no bell that is rung when the transformation takes place. In a sense, the whole liturgy is one long *epiklesis*, one long invocation of the Spirit. The Spirit is thought to take the bread and the wine into the presence of Christ, who then joins himself to the elements and offers himself in a sacramental form through the bread and the wine to the faithful.

So the bread remains bread, and the body of Christ remains the body of Christ, but that iron in the fire image is something like that Chalcedonian pattern that I was laying out. It’s an impersonal image, it has its limits, but the iron remains iron. It doesn’t cease to be iron. It doesn’t lose anything of what defines it as iron. It doesn’t lose its substance. The fire remains fire, and yet the two become one. As long as the iron is in the fire, there’s this inseparable unity, so there’s an abiding distinction and an inseparable unity.

If you push the analogy a little bit, there's also that asymmetry. There's a way in which the iron is in the fire in a different sense than the fire is in the iron, because there's more to the fire (if you think of a campfire situation) than the iron itself. So you get that sense of something larger entering into the iron, the fire being like the deity or being like the glorified body of Christ joining itself to this more ordinary element, as it were, of Christ's flesh in the incarnation or the bread and the wine in the Eucharist.

The image that illustrates this mutual indwelling in the idea of trans-ementation is the iron in the fire. But it turns out that not only did Luther essentially have this idea (without making it as explicit as I make it), but he actually had the image of the iron in the fire. I don't know where he got it, but maybe he got it from reading ancient theology.

The Orthodox are out of the picture. The church split apart in the 11th century and the East and West had gone their separate ways. One of the reasons things polarized so badly in the West is because the Orthodox were absent. They didn't have a voice at the table. They managed to hold some things together that entered into one of those either-ors, one of those false decisions that have characterized Eucharistic controversy in the West.

But there are some Protestant Reformers, not just Luther, who knew about this idea, and for my purposes the important thing in my book is not that they took this idea of the iron in the fire or the idea of transelementation and made it central to what they wanted to teach about the Lord's Supper. The important thing is that they knew about it and didn't reject it. They didn't see anything problematic with it. That's all I need in order to make my argument that we need to take every step we can toward achieving unity in the church around these divisive issues as long as it doesn't involve us in theological compromise.

So here's a view that's different from the Roman Catholic view but that the Roman Catholics don't reject. The Roman Catholics, at Vatican II, the official church council in the 1960s called by Pope John the 23rd, decided that from the Catholic side there's no reason not to enter into Eucharistic fellowship with the Orthodox. The Orthodox don't, as a rule, subscribe to the technical definition of transubstantiation that is official Roman Catholic teaching. They have the iron in the fire idea, transelementation, and there were Reformed theologians, not just Lutherans, who knew of this image and this idea and talked about it, sometimes used it in argument, and they didn't reject it. They didn't see anything problematic with it.

The important figure here is not very well known; his name is Peter Martyr Vermigli. He was an associate of John Calvin. He is one of the few Reformers with whom, as far as I know, Calvin never entered into any serious

disagreement. They were not in the same place at the same time; they just had a correspondence. Calvin said once, “Nobody has a better understanding of the Lord’s Supper than Peter Vermigli.” Vermigli discovered this idea of transelementation, which is how I learned about it. But I didn’t know what it was until I was able to connect it with the image of iron in the fire. Vermigli found it in an Eastern Orthodox theologian from the 11th century (because in those days the Reformers wanted to show that their ideas were not coming out of nowhere, that they had backing in the tradition. The patristic theologians often said things...or theologians in the church wanted to say that the Catholics were the ones that had gone off the rails and the Reformers were recovering the authentic traditions).

Vermigli, more than any of them, because he wasn’t a Reformer who had a city and church to superintend, was a scholar (this is my supposition) ...he had time to dig around in the library, and we now have a fair number of his writings in English in the last decade or so because there’s a Vermigli industry that has sprung up centered in Orlando, Florida, and all these people are busily translating Vermigli and putting his works out there. One of them is called the *Oxford Disputation on the Eucharist*. Vermigli is debating a high-powered Roman Catholic theologian, and he needs all the ammunition he can find. So I imagine him having the time that Calvin didn’t have, or that Martin Bucer didn’t have, or that even Thomas Cranmer in England didn’t have, to find out about these precedents. He’s the one who gave this term “transelementation” prominence.

Then it shows up in the most important, the most lengthy and important writing on the Lord’s Supper by Thomas Cranmer. People have had trouble figuring out where Cranmer finally comes down. Some think he’s close to Zwingli, which would give him a low view — others try to see him in a different light. In Cranmer’s treatise, there’s not a page where he’s discussing the same figure... I think it was Vermigli who must have discovered... it’s an enigma wrapped in a mystery again and again.

This guy I had never heard of named Theophylact from the 11th century was a distinguished theologian, kind of on a par with Anselm in the West. He became the Archbishop of Bulgaria and was in exile there. He was constantly longing for the society and the theological conversations and the libraries of Constantinople, but his bishop made him go to Bulgaria, so he lived out his days in Bulgaria. He wrote commentaries on Scripture. Vermigli found in Theophylact the term transelementation, so he used it. He didn’t know that it went all the way back to Gregory of Nazianzus, Cyril of Alexandria and the most seminal and important patristic theologians on the Greek-speaking side of things. It has a heritage, a lineage that even the Reformers didn’t appreciate

when they embraced this idea.

Here's Cranmer, writing this treatise, which some people think is basically Zwingli, but he'd come to Theophylact. He has Theophylact by name, he has the image of the iron in the fire, he says the bread and the wine become infused with the body and blood of Christ so that they are the presence of the body and blood of Christ in sacramental form. This might look like transubstantiation, says Cranmer, but it isn't. It might look like a problem, but it isn't, he says.

Calvin's mentor Martin Bucer also has the term transelementation. So here's Vermigli, Cranmer and Bucer, each of whom is making use of this idea that has its roots in the Greek Church and in Greek-speaking theologians that go back to very ancient times, and they don't find anything wrong with it.

There's even one little passage in Calvin's *Institutes*, not very explicit, it doesn't have the image of the iron in the fire and it's an overlooked passage, but Calvin says the ancients... (every time I read that, until I started working on this book, I thought he must mean the Latin theologians, but I think he means the Greeks). The ancients had the idea that the bread and the wine are elevated into a different domain. This is (I'm being a little more explicit than Calvin was) so that they don't cease to become bread and wine, but they're converted. He has the idea of conversion. They're converted into the body and blood of Christ. This is not an idea that Calvin does anything with, but he says, explicitly, of this, "to this, we have no objection."

So insofar as this Eastern Orthodox understanding was known by the Protestant Reformers, it was embraced in various ways and not rejected. I think this is a way that we could reach convergence on this historically divisive issue. I find it to be a very deep and rich idea that Christ's body and blood, without ceasing to be definitive in their historical enactment in his life and death on earth, can assume a sacramental form. It means that Christ is not separable from his saving significance or from his work and benefits. If he's present, his work is present, his benefits are present. And in the Lord's Supper, they're present in this unique and miraculous way that the bread and the wine, without ceasing to be bread and wine, come to enter into an inseparable unity with his body and blood so that he gives himself to us under the forms of bread and wine.

George Herbert, the 17th-century Anglican minister and poet, has a line that says, "Love is that liquor, sweet and most divine, which my God feels as blood and I as wine." That's compatible with transelementation.

So it's not descent and replacement, which is what you get in transubstantiation – it's elevation and enhancement, where the bread and the

wine are enhanced by being joined into a mystical union with the body and blood of Christ. (It's odd to do all this focusing on the elements and so on, but it's necessary, because that's where the divisions have arisen.) The mystical union with Christ with the bread and the wine becomes the means by which we enter into mystical union with Christ. He gives himself to us and we enter into union with him through his self-offering under the forms of bread and wine, which are the sacramental forms of his body and blood.

That's roughly the way I try to work things out in that part of my book, and I don't see any losses here for the Reformation church. This is no compromise. None of the Reformists... I could say in principle there's no compromise, and make a case, but I don't even have to do that by myself, I've got Vermigli and Cranmer and Bucer doing the same thing, and maybe Calvin...he's not explicit enough for me to rely too heavily on him, but he has a very promising idea that could help get us beyond this impasse around how to think about the real presence of Christ. There's a non-church-dividing alternative to the Roman Catholic view, that is, not church dividing from a Catholic standpoint.

This is part of a more general strategy in my book. There are often places that the Orthodox don't agree with the Catholics that are more congenial to the Reformation. Insofar as we can move closer to the Orthodox and go on their coattails, so to speak...because remember, we Protestants are little slivers in the big pie that comprises world Christianity, and Catholics are 50 percent, and Orthodox are 17 or so percent. That's a big chunk. There are other questions that I wouldn't think would need to be considered so intensively if they weren't important to the Catholics and the Orthodox. But if they think they're important, and if we're striving for church unity, then we have to make a good-faith effort to try to find a way that we can approximate what they're calling for without compromise.

At every point, as far as I can see, this leads to an enrichment for Protestants — and not losses, which is what the Reformers always feared — that if we came too close to the Catholics and we did not know much about the Orthodox, it would just be compromise and loss. Well, there's another way of trying to work this out that doesn't lead to losses. We're recovering elements of the ancient tradition which would only be to our well-being and the well-being of Christianity.

JMF: Do you see progress along these lines being made yet?

GH: Nobody has come to terms with the argument I make in my book, because it's too new. By and large, Catholic reviewers have been favorable. Orthodox, being Orthodox, they're not going to embrace it with open arms, but they're not hostile. It's a kind of parallel movement that I don't engage

with very much, but that I need to give some more thought to now that I've gotten things to this point in my own mind with the book.

Let's say we want to do something with this idea of transelementation. You have to figure out what kind of language you would want to incorporate into your worship. How would you express that? What difference would it make liturgically? This can be incorporated without anything terribly extensive or elaborate. You don't need the kind of arguments, you don't need the kind of explanations that I need to give to back it up at a theological level. On this parallel track of thinking about liturgy and the language of worship, yes, progress is being made. Insofar as a theologian can give good reasons for why this liturgical progress should continue, that's where it finally has its payoff. How does it show up in the language of worship?

JMF: The average Christian who comes to the Lord's Table and partakes of the Lord's Supper knows ...if anything, very little about all this kind of discussion and meaning. All they know is that this is what Christians do, and so they do it. It's the hierarchy and the government of a given denomination, church, or whatever who decides they're not going to have communion with someone else because they don't understand it the same way. But in the case of the believer, it seems that this idea of the iron in the fire is what's going on with the believer. They're participating with Christ and it happens regardless...

GH: Yes, that's right! That's another application of the word trans-elementation. It's used to cover that case, what's going on with the believer.

JMF: As we talked about, I think in a previous interview, the irony of the fact that your taking of the Lord's Supper is expressing in that participation in Christ, in his body and blood (regardless of how you interpret or understand it or describe it or how your superiors do in the church), it is pointing to the unity that exists in spite of all of our...

GH: To a large degree. There are people, though, who think...when Jesus says, "Do this in remembrance of me," there's a Protestant perception that this is a mental event. As you are receiving the blood and wine, you're supposed to remember something.

JMF: Yes, so you're thinking about that as a...

GH: A better translation is, "Do this as my memorial." I don't have time to work this out, but it's like Passover. The original Passover becomes present in celebration of the Passover, and the people who are celebrating here and now are in some sense incorporated into the original Passover so the boundaries between past and present are transcended in the celebration.

JMF: They're taking part in the deliverance that occurred originally.

GH: Yeah. The enactment is the memorial. It's not a second mental event

along with it. Apart from all this theoretical work that I've outlined, the ecumenical minimum has to be there to overcome these divisions, because we have to be able to say, regardless of how we get there, without crossing our fingers, that this is the body of Christ, this is the blood of Christ shed for you — that it is the case that this bread and this wine are the body and blood of Christ.

Luther uses the incarnational analogy. He says, just as we can point to this man and say this man is the Lord, and we don't mean that his humanity is his deity, but by virtue of the union this man is the Lord, or the Lord, the man on the cross, is God. By virtue of the union we say these things that would not otherwise be possible. By virtue of the relation, we can say this bread is the body of Christ because of that *koinonia* relation, because of that mutual indwelling, because of that mystical union accomplished not by the presiding minister, not by the priest, but by Christ himself in the power of the Spirit through the priest and with the congregation. That's the breakthrough that the Reformation needs in order to be able to say, without crossing their fingers, this is the body of Christ, at least the Presbyterians.

JMF: It's a "so what" until someone partakes of it.

GH: Exactly. But the communion in the elements is what brings us into communion with the living Christ, and he's not absent. I hate this term that is sometimes used, the real absence of Christ — the real presence and real absence. There's no such thing as a real absence of Christ — I mean, "Behold I am with you always, until the end of the age." He's present in some sense where two or three are gathering together, which is probably a Eucharistic passage. "I am in the midst of you." There's no such thing as a real absence of Christ.

He's present in this mode — he's present under the forms of his body and blood, the sacramental union of the body, the life-giving flesh with the bread and the wine. That's crucial, that's ancient, that's deep, that is not just a "so what" kind of perception — that Christ is with us in this palpable way that brings his sacrificial death to us and him in his sacrificial significance so that we are renewed and nourished by our participation in what he did there and then. It becomes present to us sacramentally here and now so that we are given an active share in it by grace through faith.

47. INVITATION TO THEOLOGY

Gary Deddo: Mike, please tell us about your time in Aberdeen and sitting with James Torrance and what that was like, and what you took away.

Michael Jinkins: It was a wonderful experience. I didn't know what to expect. I had been a pastor for about 10 years when we went over. It was a life-changing experience in many ways. The most important thing I took away from James Torrance was his personality, his character. Almost everyone who worked with him says the same thing.

His brother Tom was one of the great minds of his generation, perhaps a genius. James was brilliant also – very creative – but the thing that meant the most to me was his personality, his extraordinary grace. He had the uncanny ability to accept you where you are. I still remember the first time I met him on a stairwell in the old Kings College Quad leading up to his office.

The first visit with him, we sat down and talked. It was striking what a gracious, open, quiet person he was. That never changed in the many years from being his student and becoming his friend.

GD: Yeah. My own memories match yours.

MJ: Very much the pastor in many ways. A great theologian, but very much the pastor.

GD: Yes. Some people ask us to compare Thomas F. Torrance, his older brother by 10 years, and James. Would you say this is fair, that Tom's interest was in the intellectual connections (methodology between theology and science certainly came out) whereas James' emphasis was connecting theology with pastoral ministry; that's where his emphasis came through?

MJ: Without any doubt. I served the church that Tom Torrance served before he went to Edinburgh. I served Beech Grove Church as the pastoral assistant while I was in PhD work. I remember doing pastoral visits one time.

I did them week after week and one elderly lady remembered Tom Torrance as her pastor.

GD: Really.

MJ: She said, "Often he would preach and we didn't know what he was talking about. Then he would bow to pray and it was just clear and beautiful, and we always



said he was boiling things down so that God could understand them.” [laughter] That was Tom. Tom never stopped being this first-rate mind who was relating theology to science, to physics especially, but James related to human beings. He was remarkable in that.

GD: Tom also saw himself as an evangelist to the academic world. To evangelize the mind, might be a phrase that he used (I can’t quite remember), to evangelize the world of the mind, and James’s ministry was the congregation. They had a different emphasis. Even though it was a practically identical theological framework, they aimed it two directions.

MJ: That’s true. You could tell that with James, even in his interest in a research subject. He zeroed in on John McLeod Campbell, who in many ways theologically, became his alter ego. Someone who had served primarily as a pastor, and who saw the human relationship as the primary paradigm for understanding the being of God. You see Tom entering in a different trajectory.

GD: It’s an interesting contrast. I’d like to talk about your book, *Imitation to Theology*. One thing you talk about in the introduction is kind of a paradigm shift for yourself. You’re in a crisis for a little bit, but then you have this reconfiguration of how you viewed things and viewed theology and viewed God in Christ. Can you say how that change that came about?

MJ: To put a larger picture on it, I think that real faith develops, grows over a lifetime, and any time you feel that you have come to the end of the growth, you have misconstrued the relationship with God. The pilgrimage with God and the pilgrimage of faith is for a lifetime, and in many ways the key to being human is humility toward that knowledge that continues to unwrap.

When I was a pastor (this goes back a long way, to the mid ’80s), before going to Aberdeen I had gotten to a place where my faith was cold (I think that comes out in this book); I don’t think I believed much in God. It wasn’t so much intellectual – it was just a coldness that I had come to. I remember coming in from pastoring one day in Aberdeen. This was my first or maybe my second semester there. I took off my dog collar (in the Church of Scotland you wear a dog collar), threw it on the bed and said to my wife, “Debbie, I don’t believe in anything anymore.” She said, “I know. I can tell.”

I had come to a point, and you know it well, because we were friends and we would talk about this a lot. I said to you, “It just doesn’t add up. You put this statement to this statement to this statement, it just doesn’t add up.” I remember you saying to me, we played this little exercise, “Imagine that Jesus Christ is a pair of spectacles and you put them on, does life come into focus better?”

I played with that some, but in many ways, the critical event occurred that

summer when I began to explore other vocational options. I went quietly to the University of Durham for a summer program in literature and history (I have a lot of interest in both literature and history). Two things occurred. I found myself right after moving in. A funny thing happened. I'm moving everything in. I'm there by myself, incognito. Nobody knows me as a minister. I'm putting my bags away and I can hear someone crying out on the stairwell. I thought, "What is that? That's sad."

I opened the door to the stairwell and I stuck my head around. There was a young charwoman, one of the maids for the dormitory. She was sitting on the stairs weeping. I sat next to her and said, "What's wrong?" There was an illness in her family. I listened to her and she just poured her heart out and I said, "Would you like to pray?" She said, "Yes, I would," so I prayed with her.

I got up from that conversation and I said, "Now what the heck is going on here? I'm not sure I believe in God and yet I found myself drawn into a pastoral relationship that was the most natural thing in the world." I go into this class and I consistently found myself unhappy when the class found itself stuck. We were studying Shakespeare's plays, the Henry IV, Henry V cycle, and I found myself consistently frustrated with the lack of transcendent reference. For Shakespeare there was, and in the class there was, resistance to finding a transcendent reference.

I found myself thinking, "I'm not happy with this either. I'm not happy with not having this transcendent reference." I found myself about a day later in a place that I have come to love. It's one of my most important sacred places in the world, the Durham Cathedral. I went in and bowed and prayed, "God, I don't believe you exist but I think we really need to talk."

At that point is the journey back to faith that kept unwrapping for me, and it continues to unwrap layer upon layer. At the end of my program, during the viva voce [oral exam], my external examiner, Colin Gunton, one of the most distinguished theologians of his generation (and he died so young) said to me, "I feel that there's a kind of Victorian coziness in the theology of the Trinity that's being described by John McLeod Campbell." He said, "It doesn't feel as expansive as it should."

I found that very critical. I didn't like that comment at the time and I remember resisting it. About 10 years later, I was a professor at Austin Seminary. I'm teaching at Regent College and I'm realizing that I'm feeling growing pains in my theology, and where is that happening?

I happened to be reading A. N. Wilson's book, *God's Funeral* – a brilliant book, which tells the story of the loss of faith in 19th-century England at the explosion of scientific thought. I thought, "I'm going through another crisis."

Why am I feeling a dissatisfaction with the Trinity? This doctrine has become key to my theological life and it is key to orthodox Christianity. Why am I feeling this tension here?"

I realized that once again, my sense of God wasn't large enough, and I found that with Wilson, which was fascinating to me. He had written a fascinating biography of C.S. Lewis, during which he felt he (Wilson) had drifted from faith by the end of that book. He writes this book on the loss of faith in Britain and he finds himself coming back to faith.

I found in William James a conversation partner who was extremely helpful in pressing out and reconfiguring once again, "What do I mean by Trinity? It isn't a cozy Victorian family. What do you mean by Trinity?"

All of that, I'm on a long trajectory. All of us are on a long trajectory. The key to it is remaining humble in the face of the mystery of God.

GD: Thanks. You're president of a seminary, you've taught in seminaries. Many people are skeptical about theological education – about theology itself. I was, years ago. I only believed in biblical studies when I was in my first years in seminary and didn't come to appreciate the place of theology (not that it's everything). What is the place of a theological education for those doing pastoral ministries but possibly also for lay persons? What do you think about the place of theological education?

MJ: That's a wonderful question. I didn't know you started in biblical studies. I started out in biblical studies, too, in college, and probably for the same reasons. I grew up in an evangelical church and I'm thinking to myself, "What do you study? You're going into ministry, so you study the Bible." I did my undergraduate degree in biblical studies with a minor in New Testament Greek. In my last semester of college, I took my first theology course – a Christian doctrine course. I got into it and I thought, "These are questions I'm wrestling with. These are questions at the heart of the Bible. Who is God? What is God like? What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to live in community? What does God require of us?" In many ways the fundamental questions that are being asked again and again in the Bible are the questions that are the bread and butter of theology.

I found myself stepping back one step from the immediacy of those first questions and I started reading theologians. My first theologian, as a serious theologian to read, was Karl Barth. My second was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Those two have remained touchstones for me throughout my life.

I am now probably more in the Bonhoeffer world than in the Barth world because I continue to find, I found Bonhoeffer to be a mind that traversed such a wide range, and it felt to me at some point, disappointingly, that Barth seemed to draw in the questions a bit. For Bonhoeffer, it was that

engagement with culture that continued to open him up, so I find him to be such a winsome character.

For Bonhoeffer, I would go back to this issue: this must have been around the early '30s. Bonhoeffer is teaching in Berlin and did a wonderful series of lectures on Christology. When I came across those (titled in America, *Christ the Center*), I was struck that just staying in textual study of the Bible wasn't going to be enough for me, because Bonhoeffer does this wonderful thing that James Torrance picks up from him. Bonhoeffer says we often get stuck in asking questions of *how* and the great question is *who*. The great question is asked first by Jesus Christ, "Who do you say that I am?" That question came to dominate much of my theological life.

Expanding and impressing it, what does it mean to stay with the "who" question? Not "how is Jesus Christ both God and man?" That's a mystery. It's wonderful, but it can become simply a matter of speculation and curiosity. The real question is, "Who do *you* say that I am?"

Then we turn that question on ourselves. If Jesus Christ reveals this God, what does it mean to be one who follows Jesus Christ? Those are the core theological questions. Anytime theology gets off the track, it is stuck in asking "how" or "why." When theology is doing its job, it's asking the question, "Who?" That goes to the heart of being a human being.

GD: As we discover who God is, then the follow-up question is, who are we in relationship to God? [**MJ:** That's right.] We discover the nature of our humanity in relationship to who he is.

MJ: All the core questions of God are linked up in that. For example, in the rationalistic movement, the 18th century especially, over and over again God is defined as a singular bare monad, and you see the movement of individualism coming out of that, the lack of community that we still wrestle with, so identity becomes an individualist issue. If you're grounded in a God who has revealed himself to be Father, Son and Spirit – Creator, Redeemer, Spirit, Lover, Beloved, Love – any of those images draw you into community, which means that we find our identity in relationship to others. That's a radically different way of thinking about God and then about the necessity of church, as challenging as it can be to live in community. We find ourselves as human in community; otherwise we disintegrate. All of that traces itself back, in a way, to who God is.

GD: In theological education, many people feel a tension between theology and the mechanics of ministry – the "how to do ministry." You talk in your book about the "trap of utility" and all that. Can you say a word about how does that work in theological education, because there *are* things you have to do?

MJ: The example that comes to mind, actually came from one of our alumni. About 10 or 15 years ago, I was talking to an alumn of the theological school I was serving then. He graduated about 1980. He said, “Every course I took that had ‘relevance’ in the title or in the subtitle or in the course description, every one of those courses was irrelevant in five years. Every single one of them. All the courses I thought as a student were most irrelevant are the only ones I still draw upon.”

GD: That’s interesting.

MJ: I found that fascinating. I asked him to talk about it more and he said, “I took a course in Galatians, now how relevant is that?” He said:

What I really needed to learn [I thought] was how to do an every-member canvass of the congregation. That’s what I needed to learn because I’m going have to do stewardship programs and nobody was teaching me how to conduct an every-member canvass of the congregation.

What I discovered is, theological education was three years of intensive reflection on God, on the Bible, on the history of the Christian movement. All of those things that took so much time and distracted me from what I thought I really needed to know as a pastor, those were the foundations. The other things I was able to pick up in a weekend.

Eugene Peterson once said: “Most of the skill-based things we need to be a good pastor, you can pick up on a rainy Sunday afternoon, reading a book or going to a conference.” The process of slowly soaking in a theological perspective on the world, you really need theological education to make that happen. It’s hard to come by that kind of time, otherwise.

48. 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.

49. 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.

50. 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

speak 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.

51. 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 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.

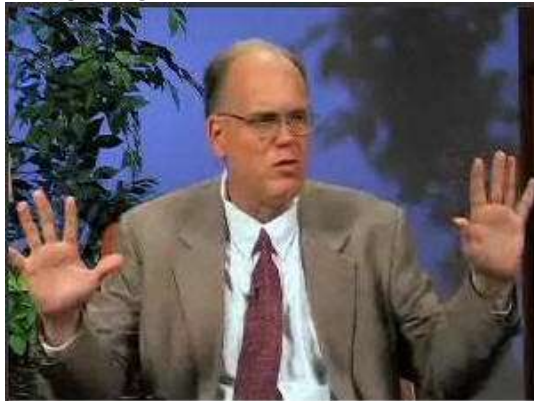
JMF: A book you used in your classes, as well as one that I feel is very helpful and encouraging is *Dancing with Wolves While Feeding the Sheep* [**CK:** Yeah, wonderful title] – *Musings of a Maverick Theologian...*

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 our denomination, 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.

52. JESUS AND THE OLD TESTAMENT SAINTS: A DISCUSSION WITH C. BAXTER KRUGER AND STEVE HORN

J. Michael Fezell: 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 [JT], current president of our denomination. [now retired]

John McKenna [JM], doctrinal adviser to our denomination. [deceased]

Mike Morrison [MM], managing editor of [now Dean of Faculty at Grace Communion Seminary]

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.

53. 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.

54. 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 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.

55. SEEING THE TRUTH ABOUT JESUS AND US

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.

56. 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 Gregorays 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 I 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."

57. 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 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 “bzzzzt!!” 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.

58. 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.

59. WHERE IS GOD IN THE DARKNESS?

J. Michael Feazzell: 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.

60. APOLOGETICS AND THEOLOGY

Gary Deddo: Alister, you have an unusual background – in both science and in theology. There aren't many people who have that kind of background. Can you tell us a little about how those two things came together for you?

Alister McGrath: Sure. I began in high school, studying sciences, and that was my first love. My future was going to be in science and, at that time, I thought science entailed atheism. For me, science and atheism went together. Then I went to Oxford University, studied chemistry, and I went on to the doctorate in molecular biophysics.

Then something else happened, which was while I was at Oxford, I discovered Christianity. This question of how I held together Christian faith and natural sciences became very important. I decided if I was going to do this properly, I would have to do some degrees in theology as well. That's how I transitioned from the natural sciences to theology, although I tried to keep the two of them together.

GD: Why did you think science was an objection to Christian faith?

AM: I can go with two things. One was that it just seemed to me that science offered an explanation for everything. A kind of reductive explanation, which meant that it gobbled up the space that God might occupy. Also, I felt religion was terribly old-fashioned. Who in their right mind would believe in this stuff? I took the view that people who believed in God were mad, or bad, or sad, or possibly all three. I didn't want to be like that. It's both intellectual and cultural.

GD: Somewhere along the way you took an interest in the theology and writings of Thomas F. Torrance. Can you tell me how that came about?

AM: One of the things I was trying to find was someone who would help me think through how I might relate science and theology. I was looking for,



I suppose, some kind of role model, someone who had integrated these. I found several good people who had integrated science and the Christian faith, but not necessarily science and Christian theology.

In June 1976, I think

it was, I came across Tom Torrance's book, *Theological Science*, and devoured it. It was very exciting. As I began to read this, I discovered he was someone who had thought this thing through and gave me an intellectual framework to make sense of the relationship between theology and science. Torrance gave me a mental map, a way of thinking about things, that allowed me to see legitimate, interesting ways of holding science and Christian theology, and mapped out how I might develop my own thinking on this.

GD: Many people consider that science and Christian faith (or any belief in God) are at odds – there's been some talk about a war between these. You saw past that. Was there some key insight that helped you recognize there's not a war? Somehow, the writings of Torrance were helping you sort this out.

AM: It's a cliché, that there's a war between science and faith. It's terribly out-of-date. Scholarship has moved on massively, but the cliché still lingers in the media, who haven't caught up with the literature. Torrance showed me that if you saw them in the right intellectual context, then there was no question. If anything, they complimented each other. Torrance was saying if you see them in the right way, they give you a mental map, which allows you to position them and enable them to have a positive, constructive, and fruitful conversation. That is what Torrance helped me to discover.

GD: That's wonderful, because I run into people who are stuck in the past.

I know some of your interests as well. You've written quite a number of books. Some of them have to do with addressing not so much science and faith, but theology and faith, and helping people grow in their faith. You have a textbook on *Introduction to Christian Theology*. What's important there and why have you written these books?

AM: When I was transitioning from natural science to theology, studying theology at Oxford, having come to it from natural sciences, I found it difficult. I was switching from the sciences to the humanities. I was entering into a new discipline. I found it very difficult to pick it up. I thought, "I'm sure I can learn from this difficulty. If only there was a textbook that might help with this," because all the textbooks I read were useless. They assumed far too much on the part of their readers.

I decided that one day, if the occasion emerged, I'd try to write a book which would have helped me discover theology, because I had a very steep learning curve and I thought, "I'm sure there are many others who are having this experience as well." I thought, "Supposing I write a theological textbook which begins at ground zero, assumes absolutely no previous knowledge of Christian theology, and gradually introduces them," which is what I needed

myself. I thought maybe my own experience could help others do the same.

I see education, helping others discover theology, very exciting. Because, in effect, I'm saying, "Look, I've discovered this. This is really wonderful. Can I help you discover it as well?" My own pain, if you like, has been somebody else's gain because it means it's easier for them after that.

GD: Another obstacle that people run into is the dichotomy between head and heart. They've said there's a gap between the head and the heart. That's generated some negative idea about theology and what it's good for. It seems to me that's another gap that isn't really there, but many people assume it is. How do you address the head/heart gap?

AM: That's a real issue, and there's a danger that theology is seen as very cerebral or very dry, very academic – almost as if it has no connection with the vibrant life of faith or, indeed, Christian worship. One of the things you have to try to do, it's said, when theology is done properly, it doesn't simply inform you – it creates a vision of God. It makes you want to respond in prayer and in worship. It brings together the head and the heart, even though it is focusing on trying to make sense of the fundamentals of the Christian faith.

For me, it's about intellectual engagement without losing that essentially relational activity of loving God, wanting to praise God, and so forth. It's a danger, you're quite right. It's very easy to see theology as simply as an obsession with words, losing any connection with the life of faith, evangelism, worship, and so on. That's a risk, but it doesn't need to be like that. I think the challenge is to make sure that theology nourishes both head and heart.

GD: How do you go about that? In your books, how did you approach it differently to overcome that problem?

AM: The way I approach it is to say that you need to think of God as being so radiant, so majestic, that we cannot possibly hope to do justice of him. You're very grateful you can make so much sense of God and things of faith, and that's why it leads to theology. On the other hand, the fact that it's so immense, overwhelming, that naturally leads you to worship, because you realize, "These things are so wonderful I can't put them into words," so the appropriate response is to get down on your knees and pray and worship. I think holding those two perspectives together stops them falling apart.

GD: James Torrance, who I studied with, used to emphasize, "We need to talk about who God is – God's character. Not just whether he exists or abstract concepts, but the nature and character." It sounds like you're saying something similar to that, getting at the majesty and the glory of God, the

character of God, not abstract descriptions of his attributes or things that don't help people see head and heart together.

AM: Right. Theology does its job best when it makes people want to worship God.

GD: In Christian teaching today in the church, are there any topics or theological themes that you think are undeveloped or misunderstood? You did quite a bit of work early on on the issue of justification. That's a detailed study that I'm sure you found helpful. Perhaps that's a theme, you think, or is there some area that you see Christians are missing it and we might need to review this and bring this back?

AM: That's an interesting question. There's a general point to make first: I worry that Christians have less inherited knowledge of their faith. That might have been the case a generation or two beforehand. Maybe we need to say that perhaps across the board, there's a need for Christians to develop their understanding of their faith, perhaps through catechesis or something like that.

There are areas where there are lots of misunderstandings. The doctrine of the Trinity is a good example. Many Christians are nervous about that because they say, "Hey, one in three? That's bad mathematics, you know? Where does that take us?" They almost hold back from engagement because they're frightened that if they open this can of worms, they'll find all sorts of stuff there. Of course, if they do it properly, they will be excited and so forth.

Justification is a good example. Most Christians, to give a simple example, misunderstand what justification by faith is. They think it means that, "If I start believing in God, I am justified." That's not what it means at all. You need to go back a long way.

Every Christian is on a journey of discovery. The creeds of Christianity give us a framework for discovery. They say, "Here is the landscape of faith. You probably know that little bit very well, but there's more to discover. Please engage and discover." We need to encourage them to discover their whole realm of faith, because often they know little bits very well, but the rest remains undiscovered.

GD: You've written a little book based on the Apostles' Creed. That's what you've attempted to do in that book a little bit, right... **[AM:** Absolutely.] open up the whole of the Christian faith. You mentioned a misunderstanding about justification. Could you give us a short, brief definition?

AM: For Luther, who I agree with on this occasion, what justification by faith means is not, "I choose to believe in God and as a result, God says, 'Oh,

you are justified.” It’s much more: Even the faith I have by which I embrace God is God’s gracious gift to me. It’s about God reaching his hand out towards me, not me reaching my hand out towards him. It’s this wonderful idea of God, in effect, providing all we need. That’s such an important emphasis because we often feel that there are certain things that we need to achieve in order to be right with God. Luther is saying, “No, no. God does it.” We need to trust God and get on in the knowledge that that relationship with him is secure.

GD: Are you saying that we’re justified by our belief in the doctrine, of itself? That’s not where we want to go.

AM: It’s not where we want to go at all. If I could coin a phrase, that’s justification by words rather than justification by faith.

GD: Right. I know you’ve had some interest in C.S. Lewis. Tell us about that. How did you encounter Lewis and what have you taken away from him?

AM: I was born in Belfast. Lewis was born in Belfast as well. But when I was growing up in Northern Ireland, I always thought Lewis was English. It was one of those things I had never really made that connection, but I didn’t read him. What happened was when I discovered Christianity, I began to ask all kinds of hard questions. My friends got fed up and eventually one of them said to me, “Look, why don’t you read C.S. Lewis?” I said, “Oh, well, okay.”

I bought my first book by C.S. Lewis, in 1974 I think it was, and thought, “This is good,” and bought more books by C.S. Lewis and thought, “These are good.” Kept on reading them. I began almost a lifelong relationship with C.S. Lewis because he is so good. He’s so clear. He is very good at explaining things. When you read Lewis the first time, you see some things. When you come back to the same work later, there’s something else you missed. It’s a journey of discovery.

I wrote a biography of him to celebrate the 50th anniversary of his death [in 1963]. In researching that biography, I came to appreciate the man all the more simply because I began to discover more of him as a man, as a deeply-flawed, damaged human being who nonetheless achieved remarkable things. That gave me hope for myself.

GD: I’ve had a similar experience. Lewis is known as an apologist. He was more than that, but a lot of people concentrate on his apologetics and things like that. You have an interest in apologetics as well. Do you approach that task, that ministry, in a similar way, or do you approach it a little differently than Lewis did?

AM: There are differences between me and Lewis, but I think the similarity between Lewis and myself is we’re both atheists who became

Christians and know why we did it. We've inhabited another place and we understand the patterns of thought in that place. We've moved to a different place and know why we made that transition. Now we're both well placed to be able to say to people who are still in this place of unbelief, "Here are some problems you have, and here are some things about Christianity you probably haven't grasped."

For me, apologetics comes very naturally. It's about me trying to set out some of the reasons that brought me to faith, but also I think engaging with some of the questions our culture is asking. For example, Richard Dawkins and others are saying, "You can't believe anything you can't prove. That's just right, isn't it?" I take great pleasure in exposing all his hidden beliefs that are unjustified, trying to make the point that we believe an awful lot of things that cannot be proven and yet we have good reason for thinking are right.

For me, apologetics is important to support the cultural defense of the Christian faith. Going back to a point we were talking about earlier, I was just suggesting to you maybe people don't know their faith as well as they should. All of us probably have to have some kind of apologetic ministry, trying to explain what Christianity is, and also why it makes so much sense.

GD: As you've interacted with people who are outside the church and outside the Christian faith, is there a general sense of what those outside the church and Christian faith don't get, and what Christians need to be aware of, sensitive to, and address first? Are we missing the boat in some ways? Where would we focus conversations with those who aren't in the church?

AM: There are a lot of important points here. One is that many people don't see what the point of belief in God is. They think that believing in God means believing there's some extra item in the universe, like an extra planet orbiting the sun. It may be there, but makes no difference. Why get excited about that?

What you have to try to do is something like discovering meaning, or being loved. It's something that's not simply cognitive, but relational. It's something that changes life. Trying to bring out the fact that belief in God is about discovering what life is all about, that's very important.

Moving on from that, many people outside the church are puzzled as to why people should believe in God at all. Often we have to say, "There are some good reasons for this," and try to set out what some of these are. Often, people are not being hostile when they say, "We can't see why you believe in God." They're actually curious and inquisitive.

It's important to tell your own story, which is, "Here is how I discovered faith, or here is how I grew in my faith, or here is how I was in a household

of faith and discovered its inner meaning,” and so on. It’s important to tell those stories and help people grasp that believing in God is not just about one extra item in your mental inventory, but it is much more about having discovered what life is all about, and that’s a cause for celebration. It gives you a big picture of life, which helps you figure out how to behave, how to live, and how to hope, which is very important.

GD: That seems to put aside arguments for the existence of God or abstract proofs. You’re talking about something that talks about relevance, meaning, and significance. Some apologetics sounds pretty arid, a line of argument and things like that. It sounds like you’re talking about a different approach.

AM: Right. Pascal, many years ago, said, “You should try to make people wish that there were a God, and then show them that there is.” The danger is we often start off by saying, “Let me tell you why there is a God.” People aren’t interested in the question. You’ve got to, in effect, make them want to ask the question because this sounds interesting.

GD: You do a lot of speaking. I suppose there’s a mix of Christians and non-believers in the audience. What have you learned in that context? Are there certain questions that regularly come up? What’s that been like?

AM: It’s a wonderful experience, because people will often want to ask questions. Often some timid person will put up their hand and say something like, “What difference does Christian faith make,” or something like that. There are a lot of other people who wished they’d asked the question, but hadn’t. When you’re talking to a large audience, people are often anonymous. You can say some things and you’re not saying them to any specific individual, and so it’s actually easier for people to hear them.

It’s a great privilege to be able to talk about the difference that faith makes to people and trying to explain what some key Christian ideas mean. The response I often get from people is, “Now we get it. We see what this is all about.” That is so exciting when that happens. A penny drops or a light gets turned on.

Often, I think what gets the most response from people is simply when I talk about my own transition from atheism to faith, why I did it and the difference it makes. People begin to realize this isn’t just about some mental adjustment. It’s about something that really changes your life and gives you hope and meaning and so on. I find that very exciting. I’m glad I’m able to do this kind of thing.

GD: You’ve entered into formal debates with individuals. A couple of what we refer to as the new atheists: Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens, and such. I viewed a couple of these on YouTube. What was that

like to be with them? That's an extraordinary event.

AM: They were quite extraordinary events, and I had the feeling that this was like people talking past each other. It was almost as if there wasn't really all that much engagement. They were almost like set pieces.

Often the debate was invariably, "What is the problem in believing in God," and it was very difficult to get the new atheists to talk about what their proposed alternative was. If you don't believe in God, then what is your basis for morality? Christopher Hitchens, when pressed on that particular issue, will say, "I don't know." In effect, "I just believe certain things and I don't see the need to give a reason for them."

It's important to have these civil debates, if only to show that answers can be given to the questions these people are asking. I don't think the debates necessarily are very productive, but it's important they take place and, in effect, faith is shown to be able to stand up to some of these interrogations and make some good points in response.

GD: It sounds like your approach in these debates was not to win the debate, but to have a conversation, and to listen, and show responses. Yes, civil debate. Sometimes debates don't go in that direction.

AM: No, they don't. What I found myself doing is talking to Richard Dawkins, or Christopher Hitchens, or Daniel Dennett, but actually talking through them to an audience beyond, trying to say, "Look, we're going to get excited about this. They're going to be angry about it. It's a simple, but very important question: what are the reasons for believing God and the difference it makes?" Trying to get people to see that there were some important questions here, which were being hijacked in the name of an aggressive atheist agenda, but good answers could be given to the questions being asked.

GD: In my conversations with people, sometimes it seems the defensive questions and attacks on Christianity and all, actually there are other often personal issues, backgrounds, bad experiences, and things like that that don't necessarily get brought up, but their responses seem so personal and so full of energy and even vitriol. It seems to me that if you don't recognize that, if you just think it's an intellectual problem, that we're missing the boat, especially in a personal situation of having a conversation and dealing with them as full human beings, not just brains or ideas. Did some of that come out in some of these interviews?

AM: Very much so. Often, particularly very angry atheists, have a personal history. It's not an intellectual issue at all. A parent may have died and they've been angry with God for allowing that to happen. Or they may have had a bad experience in the church. Or they may feel that, as Richard

Dawkins does, that Christianity tells lies. Of course, that's a very bad thing to do.

You are dealing with people who are deeply committed for non-intellectual reasons to atheism. When you start to probe, they become extremely defensive because it's not simply a question of whether there's a God or not. It's about my personal history or my personal integrity being called into question.

Often, the anger you find in the new atheism reflects a history. You're right. We need to be aware of that, but at the same time, you have to say that we cannot be trapped by our personal histories. These are big questions. Somehow, we need to break free from our personal histories to think about these things.

GD: That dimension doesn't make the task easier. It makes it more complex and more personal. I find prayer is essential for these kinds of breakthroughs.

Now, another question that I'm interested in ... This is the big picture, where you've dealt with the personal, but now on larger things. I don't know if you think of Western culture – Europe, North America – being post-Christian. One of my questions has been, how did we get here? What happened?

You've studied intellectual history and all that. What do you think about the big picture? Why is Western culture largely leaving behind the Christian faith, especially the intellectual leadership? There still is faith around, churches are still there, but in the direction of the culture, what do you think about that and how did we get where we are? Are we just going to be on this post-Christian decline? What do you think about that larger picture?

AM: That's a really big question, isn't it? There are a number of things going on here. One is a very significant distrust of institutions. Inevitably, that means Christian churches are objects of suspicion. In our culture, there's a shift towards wanting to talk about "spirituality." Spirituality, if you like, is non-institutional religion. It's a personal thing. That's something we're going to have to think about. If people are suspicious of institutions, it means that bishops or church leaders will not be well-received because they're seen as institutionally linked. What we need to do almost is rediscover the early Christian detachment from power, from institutional structures, and see if we can bring that into our way of thinking. That's one important element of this.

There's something else, as well, and this is in at least one study of this process of erosion of faith. One of the difficulties is that parents did not take trouble to pass their faith on to their children. In effect, just saying, "You decide what you want to do." There is an issue there about how Christian

organizations, how Christian churches think about the transmission of faith to the next generation. We seem to have failed on that. That's something we need to come back to.

The third thing I think we need to come back to is this: Perhaps we have failed to understand the imaginative, the moral, the esthetic vision that Christianity contains within itself. We've not helped people to see why it is exciting and important. People find themselves having walked away from Christianity without really understanding what it is. We need to re-unpack the riches of the Christian faith so people can see it.

Another point I would make here, in wrapping this little section up, is a lot of Christians tend to be defensive about this. That creates a perception in the culture that in a kind of way, they're on the losing side. I think we are on the losing side. We have failed to play our cards properly. Perhaps we need to go back, take our packs out, and look at all the cards and say, "These are wonderful cards – why aren't we playing them properly?" and begin to rethink how we present the Christian faith, how we teach it, how we live it out. Those are big questions, but it seems to me that we need to come back to them.

GD: Well, make some suggestions. We talked about the problem, but how would you approach it, especially this esthetic and imaginative? How would we even start taking this new path that you're suggesting?

AM: In Western culture there are many who are overwhelmed by the beauty of nature, or who love good literature, or who visit art galleries. These people are looking for something significant or looking for something deeper, but might not necessarily think of making any connection with the Christian faith. We need to work at how we can reconnect Christianity with groups of people who we seemed to have disenfranchised. That means we're going to need people who are able to talk about Christianity and the arts, who are able to talk about Christianity and literature, who are able to say, "This will bring an even greater richness to what you're doing." It's about trying to build bridges, and no one person can do that.

We need Christians who are scientists, artists, musicians, whatever, to say, "I need intentionally to build bridges between my faith and the professional communities I'm engaging with." That's something very important, but it can be done. We almost need to think of this as a calling. In the past, you might have thought of a calling towards a ministry. Maybe there's a calling to be a bridge person between the faith and particular interest groups.

GD: Well, thank you so much.

AM: You're welcome. Wonderful talking to you.

61. 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 things 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.

62. 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.

63. 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*, *hannun*, 'erek 'appayim, *hesed ve 'emeth*.

Let me just quickly go over: *rachum*, cognate with *rechem*: womb, compassion, *hannun*: 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 *hannun*, 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.

64. 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, 'ereke 'appayim, besed 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, 'ereke '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.

65. 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.

66. HELPING YOUTH EXPERIENCE CHRIST

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

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

JMF: Really?

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

JMF: The way you usually hear about it, though, you turn on the TV, you watch a Christian religious program, and what you usually hear is the "reality"



that you are separated from God, you're on your way to hell, until *you* do something – the sinner's prayer, or whatever – and change God's mind toward you so that he now loves you – and you're saying that's backwards.

JM: By buying into that model, what we are saying is that when we make a decision of faith, we're actually changing the reality. We're changing the truth – which to me smacks more of 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 begin 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.

67. DOES JESUS APPEASE GOD'S ANGER?

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

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

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

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

JMF: And that's not reality?

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

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

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

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

JM: That's right.

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

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

I was taking a series of courses from Fuller Theological Seminary through

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

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

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

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

JMF: Now, that ties in so importantly with the Trinitarian understanding

of who God is, but the whole point of us understanding that God is Father, Son and Spirit – the Father and Son are one God – is that, if Jesus likes us, well, that’s how the Father feels about us, too.

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

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

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

JMF: They all belong to him.

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

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

JM: It’s made a dramatic difference in the way I do evangelism, because what I’m doing first and foremost now is giving young people or anyone who wants to listen the reality of their belonging to God first – not just by creation in some general... God created us all in his image. But Jesus Christ is the creator and he is also the Redeemer – the two are one and should not be pulled apart. Jesus Christ has belonged us to the Trinity – to the Father, Son,

and Spirit relationship – and he’s done that by grace, and he’s done that in a way that’s so sure, that when you begin to speak that way – and make that kind of a robust claim upon a person’s life, the bell of truth often goes off in them and they begin to realize, I am created for something more, and not something that I have to create or make true by my own decision, but something that’s already true.

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

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

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

JM: Right.

JMF: How do you get that across to kids?

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

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

Supposedly monkeys in Australia, the way that they catch them is they put

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

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

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

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

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

become just a drop of rain in a cosmic sea, but in a way that really personalizes you into the person you are created to be.”

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

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

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

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

accepted and cleansed not in spite of God’s holiness but because of it.”

JM: I see that most prominently in the Gospels, where Jesus interacts with sinners, especially in Mark chapter 1 with the leper. In that chapter, Jesus is recognized as the Holy One by the demons. They see the transcendent picture of who this Jesus Christ who has been made flesh – they see that picture in a more accurate way than the human beings that are around Jesus at that time – there’s an irony in that. But here’s Jesus, this is where we find what the holiness of God is like, this story where Jesus Christ reaches out and he touches and embraces this leper at his worst. He doesn’t cleanse him from afar and say, “Zap, I healed you. Now, come here, brother, give me a hug.” He goes up and touches this man wracked with leprosy. I can imagine him putting his hand right around his neck, right there looking into his eyes, right in the sores of his skin and saying, “Of course, I want to. Be clean.” And he was cleansed at that very instant.

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

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

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

JMF: And in fact I’ve already.

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

All we can do is preach the truth and hope that by the Holy Spirit people will have ears to hear. When they hear that, when they hear that good news, they begin to see the “NO” that God has against sin – inside of the larger “Yes” that he is saying to us. He never says “No” to us and then “Yes” to us

later when we get cleansed. It's always "Yes" to us, but he's saying "No" to that sin and he does something about it. He doesn't just give you an offer of some pills to take to make it better maybe. But "NO" – I'm so thoroughly against sin that I'm going to eradicate it. I'm going to destroy it. Because you are so insinuated by it, I needed to crucify you in me as the Holy One, I needed to take you in myself and crucify you in order to make you new, and give you new life, and for you to share my righteousness.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Those are very comprehensive statements. Does that make us universalists? No. By no means does it, because we don’t believe in that inevitable deterministic kind of robotic love – it’s not really love at all. So I’m going to base my theology on what I know about Jesus Christ as he is portrayed in the Scriptures that I just mentioned and others. There are

question marks about hell. Do I know anyone is in hell? I don't, I don't have the vision beyond the curtain to know that there are. I can hope that... I think it's okay for us as Christians based on scriptures to hope that no one is in hell. Because Peter says, God is patient, does not want anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

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

JMF: And that's completely unscriptural.

JM: It comes down to defining God in a way that's less than 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.

68. CALVINISM, ARMINIANISM, AND KARL BARTH

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

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

JMF: And could you rehearse that?

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

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

JMF: A focus on freedom.

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

The idea of what freedom is, is something that Karl Barth hammers on

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

my own faith occurs in that moment.

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

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

Once they proclaim you are a sinner, therefore repent, and then they see people who do repent, then they can say, "Well actually, you were forgiven 2,000 years ago by the cross of Christ, actually you are already reconciled to God, and already redeemed by the finished work of Christ. But we couldn't tell you that upfront because we didn't know if you are one of the elect or not." The "Limited Atonement" piece is really troublesome and causes an internal conflict for the passionate five-point Calvinist evangelist – because he does want people to know Jesus Christ, but he's a little bit hamstrung because he can't get the good news out there at the beginning. He can't say, "You do belong to God, you are one of the elect, you are chosen by God," until that person shows some kind of movement toward God, and then he can give them the goods.

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

JMF: If you are a five-point Calvinist, how can you be sure that you are among the elect, because if you were among the elect, then you should be bringing forth fruits that are meet for repentance. Every time you fail in some way, then you have to kind of look over your shoulder and say, “Well, maybe I just think I’m elect and I’m going through the motions but I’m not really right.” How do I know for sure? The only evidence that there is, is godly behavior, a changed heart – so it comes back down to a lack of assurance based on whether or not you’re bringing forth fruit. And so, if we’re honest with ourselves, most of the time we’ve got a kernel of doubt about whether we really are. We can say, “I’m sure, I’m convinced, I know I am one of the elect.” But there’s really no way of proving it beyond any shadow of a doubt.

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

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

JMF: That kind of language is actually used.

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

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

and the sacrifice of the cross all go together, and you can't force those apart and say, God loves everyone, but Jesus Christ does it apart from them in terms of redemption and in terms of his death on the cross.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Now the weakness. There was a time in my life where I did agree with the Arminian way of thinking – I thought of the cross more as a hypothetical – there wasn't anything actually accomplished by the cross and by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I could say Jesus Christ died for every one of you, but it wasn't true that they were forgiven or redeemed or reconciled to God until that person, in the Jeff-moment, made that decision. As I began to realize that, and began to understand why Karl Barth wanted to move away

from that, I began to realize that it's a great favor to us as human beings not to be thrown back upon ourselves in order to try to make this true or to make this real, or to make this actual, or effective.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Paul is saying, "It's not a question of whether everybody died and rose with Christ." The question is, "Are you going to live for yourself, or are you going to live for him who, for your sake, died and was raised?" There's an objective truth, but there's a subjective participation in the objective truth. It

goes on to say, “We no longer, therefore, look at anyone from a human point of view. We used to look at Christ that way, but from now on we don’t, and anyone in Christ is a new creation. The old is gone, the new is come.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Therefore as a person who’s included in that, you may submit to it or may fight against it. The subjective participation is to believe, not only that you’re included in this, but every person in the world is included. This gets past the “limited atonement” problem. If I don’t know everybody’s been included in this, I’m not really sure if I have been included in it. Because that goes back to... if just a few people are included, how do I know if I’m on the right side

or the left side of the ledger? But to the extent that I know this includes everyone, I'd be assured that it includes me, too. But to the extent that I think it includes *some* people, I'll be concerned and worried about that, and my assurance would be virtually nil, or it will go through this revolving door syndrome.

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

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

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

I would say, that's a great place to be. I think everyone who's a Calvinist who wants to give the first and last word to God, needs to go through this strait of wrestling with that question – because it does still seem to exalt the "do" over the "done." But what Barth wants to do is always keep the "do" *inside* the "done." He would say the epitome of anthropocentrism, the epitome of humanism, would be for us to objectify God and to say from a distance, "This is the situation now (as I just described it a minute ago), and now I'm going to decide if I believe it or not."

Barth would say that Arminianism, at the end of the day, is humanistic. He'd say that Calvinists are right in that it's not good enough just to stop

there, he would say that it lands us in a place of semi-Pelagianism – where belief becomes a work. Barth will never do that. But how does he keep the “do” inside of the “done”? He does that by using the word “be.” As Paul says in this passage, “You’ve been reconciled to God, therefore we beseech you: BE reconciled to God.”

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

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

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

Instead of fighting to get ourselves outside of that equation, just recognize you’re inside of it. Don’t fight that, you’re inside. Submit to the ad infinitum. You can never get to a place where you pull your belief outside of what God has done or what God is doing to make a decision about it as if you’re quantifying God. That is actually religion. Instead, Jesus Christ has made this decision. Your decision is really more of a non-decision. The action step is really a non-action step. It’s important, it’s critical, but it’s actually to submit

to the ad infinitum of saying, “My decision is not that important anymore, my decision is secondary to the decision that God has made for me and Jesus Christ – that God has said, ‘yes’ to me and he said ‘yes’ for me in Christ.”

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

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

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

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

Jesus is trying to get something through to us when he says, “If you want to find your life, you got to lose it.” When you lose your agency, you lose your claim to individual decision-making and making-it-happen, you get back your personhood and you get back your share in the Trinitarian persons and that great dance that’s going on between Father, Son and Spirit. Who, if they knew, would want to hold on to their individuality and be wrapped up in themselves (which is a very small package), if they really heard the gospel with ears to hear and could lose their individualism to become a person?

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

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

69. 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 *Fahrenbeit 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.

70. READING THE BIBLE WITH JESUS AS THE GUIDE

JMF: 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."

71. 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.

72. THE GRACE WALK

Michael Morrison: Steve, you’ve written a book called *Grace Walk*. It’s sold quite a few copies now, and in the book you describe the story of how you came to an understanding of grace, and I wondered if we could start today by rehearsing that story as to what motivated you to write this book.

Steve McVey: Sure. I grew up in a Christian home. My parents were Christians; they’re both in heaven now. I was taught about the Lord from the time I was a small child. I understood the gospel when I was 8 years old, and by the time I was 16, I was preaching. I preached my first sermon at 16 years old and was very sincere....became a senior pastor at 19. Can you believe that? 19 years old and I was a senior pastor of a church with about 100 people — about 80 of them were over 65, which seemed old to me back then. It doesn’t seem so old these days.

I was sincere in my Christian walk, but little by little I found happening to me what I think happens to a lot of people: my focus began to move, in small increments, away from being on Jesus and began to be more directed toward my own performance — how well I was doing and living the Christian life.

The essence of legalism is thinking that somehow we can make spiritual progress or gain God’s blessings based on what we do, making sure that we do the right things, making sure that we’re keeping all the rules. In the modern church, I think we get grace when it comes to evangelism for unbelievers, but then once people believe, it’s like bait and switch — we turn the tables on them. It’s like “OK, it was grace for you to understand the gospel, but now that you’re a believer, everything’s changed. Now it’s all



about you and what *you* do.” I lived that way for the first 29 years of my Christian life. 17 of those years I was a senior pastor.

In my first book, *Grace Walk*, which was published in 1995, I described how the Lord brought me to a

place where I realized that although my heart had been in the right place, my head was in the wrong place. That book starts out with me lying on my face in the middle of the night at 2:00 a.m. crying in my office, as a pastor, saying, “If this is the Christian life, it’s overrated, and if this is the ministry, I want out.” How’s that for sort of a tease introduction to a book? A pastor who wanted to quit.

MM: It sounds like you’d been a successful pastor, if you had 17 years, and if you then continued to focus on performance, perhaps that’s because you were “performing” well.

SM: Right. It’s interesting. I write about it in the book, that for many years as a pastor I felt successful. I felt that way. I got that from accolades of other people, the affirmation of my ministry and those kinds of things.

But I began to pray a prayer, and I tell you this is a prayer that the Lord takes seriously. I began to pray a prayer, and I said, “Father, I want to know you more intimately than I’ve ever known you. I want to be used by you. I want you to work through my life to impact people with your love, your life, more than I could even imagine it.” Then I said this: “And whatever it takes, I want you to do it to bring me to that place.”

He heard that prayer. I’m making a long story short...I wrote a whole book about it. Shortly after that, I moved from a church where I served as senior pastor in the state of Alabama to Atlanta, Georgia. I moved to Atlanta anticipating that I was going there to build a megachurch, and that I would see unprecedented success in my ministry. The church I was going to had been dying in every measurable way for five years before I got there, but I thought when I got there, things would turn around.

But to my surprise, things didn’t turn around. The church just kept dying, right out from under me. After I had been there a year, that’s when, as I mentioned a moment ago, I was approaching the first anniversary date of my tenure as pastor, and I found myself lying on my face, and I said, “If this is the ministry, I want out. If this is Christian living, it’s overrated.”

But the ironic thing is that what the Lord used in my life (as he does in all of our lives when he wants to bring us up to a deeper or higher understanding of grace), is he had to bring me to the place where I had discovered my need for grace. You see?

We “get” grace [i.e., understand it] for unbelievers. But sometimes as pastors, especially, we don’t get it. We think, “I’m preaching the Bible, I’m counseling, I’m doing all the things a pastor should be doing. I’m having success with it.” The Lord has to work in our lives to bring us to the place where we say, “I can’t do what I thought I could do,” so that we’ll be open

to what he wants to teach us.

MM: So in some ways, failure was good.

SM: Failure is always good, because failure is not the end. Suffering and pain and what we interpret as failure is sometimes not failure at all. It's the principle in the Bible about dying to live. Jesus said unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it abides alone; you've got to die to live. The Bible is full of paradoxical statements like that. We have to think about that the Bible says we die to live. We have to be weak in order to be strong. We go down so we can go up. It has to get dark before the light comes.

But we're wired in this world. Our flesh is programmed this way. Especially those of us who live in Western culture, we're wired to think that we have to succeed, and we have to make our mark, and there has to be this continuous upward trajectory toward success and what we're doing. But we don't get strong enough for God to use us. We have to get *weak* enough for God to use us. The best way to learn that is in the midst of our failures.

MM: That kind of thing hurts, doesn't it?

SM: It does. Just like when my children were small and I took them to the doctor for their vaccinations, it always hurt. When I took them for their booster shots, it hurt, and it was for their good. It was a good thing, though in their little minds it didn't seem like it. In our minds, as human beings, sometimes when we're in painful circumstances, we think, "If God cares, why is he letting this happen?" If we could hear him answer, we would hear him say, "It's precisely because I do care, that I'm letting this happen."

In my situation, I came into that church and it kept dying out from under me (numerically, I mean), and I had always been used to growing churches. So I prayed, "Lord, what's going on?" I began to feel weakened. I began to feel discouraged, despondent, finally despair. I kept praying, "Lord, make me stronger, make me stronger."

I realize now what he was saying is, "Steve, I've got a better idea. I'll make you weaker." I'm going to say it again: We don't get strong enough for God to use us, so we might as well stop praying "make me stronger," because grace isn't afforded to the strong. It's not the strong people who tap into grace. It's weak people who understand our need for grace, so we've got to become weak, so that we'll reach a point where we can become recipients of grace in an experiential way.

MM: When we have strengths, we tend to rely on our strengths.

SM: Absolutely.

MM: For some people, it's physical strength, others it's intellectual, some social.

SM: That’s right. That reliance on our own abilities and our own strengths as we’re describing it — the biblical word for that is the “flesh.” When the Bible talks about walking after the flesh, it’s not talking about the skin, these physical bodies. It’s can’t mean that. Paul said to one group, “You’re no longer in the flesh, but in the Spirit.” He didn’t mean they were ghosts. What he meant is, “You get it. You finally get it.”

“The flesh” is you or me trying to live for Christ instead of understanding that we can’t live for him. We weren’t called to live for him. Grace is the enablement, by virtue of his indwelling life for us, to live his life because he’s expressing it through us, not because we’re doing it for him, and there’s a big difference between the two. To experience that kind of outflow of grace from our lives, we’ve got to come to the point where we realize, “I can’t live the Christian life no matter how hard I try.”

It’s a great day for any of us when we discover that the Christian life is not hard for us to live, it’s *impossible* for us to live. There’s only one who can live the Christ-life, and that’s the Christ himself. And he will live it, if we come to the end of ourselves and abandon ourselves in total surrender to him. The gospel is not just the gospel for unbelievers, it’s the gospel for believers, too. We need his grace just like unbelievers need his grace.

MM: People tend to rely on their strengths — sometimes they call those spiritual gifts. How do we tell the difference between our fleshly strength and a spiritual gift?

SM: That’s a good point, and there’s a fine line sometimes, because the abilities that we have come from our Father. He’s given us those abilities. The key distinguishing factor revolves around one question—what animates those abilities? What is it that I’m relying on to give expression to those abilities? Is it me? Is it my own know-how? Is it my own determination? My own willpower? My own intentionality? Or is it an attitude that says, Apart from him I can do nothing, so I rely upon him and by faith I trust him to be the one to animate those abilities.

For those first 17 years as a senior pastor, I tried to do things for the Lord. My heart was in the right place – it was my head that was messed up, not my heart. My heart was toward him. But when the Lord brought me to brokenness in 1990 and began to teach me this grace walk and what it means to let him live through me, I’ll never forget the changes I began to see, because the most evident change is I began to see is that I didn’t have to struggle anymore. I could simply rest in him knowing that he is in control of my life. It’s not even my ministry. It’s his ministry, and if I just yield myself to him, he will do through me what he wants to do.

He's done that in ways that exceeded anything I could have done or imagined. It's not like God has a favorite and he'll do for me what he won't do for somebody else. He doesn't pick folks like you and me and say, "I'm going to do something with their lives, but you guys on the margin, on the periphery, I won't use your life or I won't work for you." No, no, no. He wants to use all of us. Paul told the Corinthians that "You see your calling, that it's not many that are noble and mighty and strong..." You know the passage...but he goes on and says, "God chooses the weak."

So I would say to those who watch us that if they feel like, "I'm just not strong like that guy. I'm weak. I've never written books. I don't have the education or the abilities, or..." No, no, no. I'd say to them, "You're the *perfect* candidate for God to use you, because you know it has to be him that does it, and that's the kind of person he will use and takes delight in."

MM: But he doesn't necessarily use us in the way that we associate with success.

SM: Absolutely not. God's definition of success and ours is very different. It's not possible for us not to be successful as we depend on Jesus as our life source, because *he* is our success. Christ is our life. In him we live and move and exist, Paul said on Mars Hill, and he was speaking then to unbelievers. He said, "In him we live and move and exist."

Christ is our life, so success is our union with him. We can relax. It's not about striving for success anymore. It's about just resting in Jesus and letting Jesus be who he is in us and through us. There's success right there, whatever it might look like.

MM: So I can be a success without doing anything, achieving anything.

SM: Absolutely. In fact, we don't achieve anything. We're not called to achieve anything. We are receivers, not achievers. The great Achiever lives inside us, and he will accomplish through us whatever he wants to do as we depend on him. We don't have to make something happen — as I said, we don't live for him, we don't have to do anything for him.

Now, for people who have been groomed in the legalistic mindset, they're thinking, "That guy's talking passivity." No, I'm not talking passivity. I can speak for all the people I have seen who have embraced grace in saying this: He will do more through us in a day than we can do for him in 25 lifetimes. We just need to stop the struggle.

Jesus said, "Come to me..." (I'm quoting the King James—it's the one I grew up on, so this is the way I memorized it.) "Come to me all ye who labor and are heavy-laden, and I'll give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Learn from me, for I am meek and lowly in heart and you shall find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Religion beats the daylights out of us. (Sound of whip cracking) “More, more, more!” That’s what legalistic religion does. But grace is the voice of Jesus saying, “Come to me and I’ll give you rest.” Yet it’s not passivity, because it’s a life of active rest, where he lives his life through us and does more through us than we could ever do for him.

MM: What’s the role of our decisions in that? How do we let Jesus live through us without us taking credit for the results?

SM: It’s a mindset. Once we’ve failed enough to realize “I will mess it up every time I try,” that’s a good teacher. When we see God doing something through us, we begin to realize “This is not me. I couldn’t have done this.”

Can I give you one example? First time I saw this after I began to understand this... (to *begin* to understand, notice, because all of us are still growing in grace). The first example that I saw in my own life... I had been trying to make my mark for Jesus. I was a senior pastor. My secretary comes in and says, “Pastor, there’s a guy here who would like to talk to you.” I said, “What about?” She said, “About attending church.” I said, “Okay.”

The guy comes in; he was from Africa, from Cameroon. He begins to talk to me about the church, and I quickly realized that he doesn’t understand the gospel or anything about our faith. So I share the gospel with him and the guy believes. He trusts in Christ that very day. Every week he began coming for me to disciple him on Tuesday. I did that every week.

One week he comes in and says, “Pastor, have you noticed that every week when I come, I take notes of what you’re saying? I said, “Yeah.” He took copious notes every week when I was discipling him. He said, “Do you know why I do it?” I said, “I guess you take them back and study.” He said, “No. I go over to the shipping place and I mail these notes to the chief in my village in Africa. Every week the chief is getting these notes, and he goes out and calls the village together. He’s sharing with them what you’re teaching me.” He said, “A lot of people in my village are trusting Christ, and they’re asking the chief questions that he doesn’t know how to answer, and he’s asking me, and I don’t know how to answer, so I’m supposed to ask you. If I translate, will you answer the questions of the new Christians in my village?” All of sudden, it just washed over me. I thought, “Here I am sitting in Atlanta, Georgia, with one man across the desk from me, and I’m evangelizing and discipling a whole village of people in Africa.”

MM: How strange is that? Pastoring them, too.

SM: Exactly. I couldn’t make that happen in a million years. That’s the point I make. When we strive to do things for God, all it results in, is what the Bible calls “dead works.” It’s just religious works. But if we give up on our struggle, and as the writer of Hebrews says, “enter into his rest.” (I used

to think that meant dying and going to heaven — that’s how anemic my Christian life was. No – enter his rest.) I stopped struggling and striving, and I’m going to trust that God is my life and that he’ll live through me.

If we’ll do that, the kind of thing I just described, that one anecdote, that’s just the tip of the iceberg. I’ve been on six continents sharing this message and seeing God do things that there’s no way I could take credit for. How do I know it’s him and not me? Because I’m not smart enough to do the things he’s done through me. People might see his life expressed in different ways. It might not be something that they would consider on a grand scale, but it doesn’t matter, because when Christ does something through us, we recognize, “That happened from a source beyond my own abilities. That was *him* through me.” We see it, and that encourages us and motivates us to want to trust him more.

MM: That reminds me of Susanna Wesley, who had no idea that her role as a mother would turn out to be so influential. Just an ordinary station in life, she thought, and yet the Lord was able to use what she had done.

SM: Perfect example. I wrote about her. I wrote a book called *Walking in the Will of God*, and I make the point toward the end of the book, that very point. I said, fulfilling God’s will in your life doesn’t mean that you have to see your name in lights or anything. I gave the example of Susanna Wesley. What greater contribution could somebody make than Susanna Wesley made by being a godly mother? Look at what Charles and John Wesley gave us – and continues to give us.

MM: You said your heart was in the right place, but your head was not. *What* about our head knowledge is going to make a difference, the kind of difference that you describe?

SM: Here’s the big thing I see in the modern church: We think God has called us to himself because he needs us to do something for him. I’ve got good news and bad news. I’ll start with the bad news: God doesn’t need us. If we think God needs us, then we greatly underestimate him or we overestimate ourselves. You can take a blank sheet of paper and write down a list of everything you think you have to offer God on that paper, and stand up to the edge of eternity and hold that list up to the God who stood on the edge of nothingness and said “let there be” and there *was*, and tell him what it is you think you’ve got that he needs. No, he doesn’t need us.

But the good news is, he *wants* us. He’s not looking for a maid, he’s looking for a bride. This is biblical, Acts 17. The Bible says, “Neither is he served by human hands as though he needed anything.” I like the passage in the Old Testament where God told Isaiah, “If I were hungry, I wouldn’t tell you.” You know why? Because there’s nothing we could do about it. God

doesn't need us.

But the religious culture of the world today, even in the Christian world, somehow communicates, "God has shown you his grace by bringing salvation to you, and now you understand that he's forgiven your sin, you're one with him now, so now it's up to *you*... You've signed up for something and now it's up to you to accomplish something, to achieve something, to do something for him." It's a misguided, albeit sincere, intention, because it suggests the very contrary of what I've just shared from the Bible. God doesn't need us. We have been called to live in this union, this *perichoresis*, this inner penetration of inner love and harmony. We've been called to live in that group hug and then to live out of that group hug expressing the life of the Father, Son, and Spirit in our day-to-day activities.

That's a far cry from religion. Religion demands that we *do* things, but when we live out of the circle of the Father, Son, and Spirit, we find it's not demand, it's desire. It's not law, it's love. It's not responsibility, it's relationship, it's privilege that motivates us to want to express the divine life of the Father, Son, and Spirit to the world around us. That's a country mile, as we say down south, away from religious obligation.

MM: A lot of people have a picture of God that's austere, and not very inviting. But you're describing a more attractive God. Is that part of the head knowledge that makes a difference in our relationship?

SM: How we see God, our theology, is everything. That's the foundation. Sometimes people say to me, "What difference does theology make?" The answer is: it makes all the difference in the world, because our view of who God is, our understanding, our concept of who he is, will affect the way we see and do everything else in life. It will affect how we see ourselves, how we see others, how we see situations that we face.

If we grew up in the evangelical world, it was almost inevitable that we would come to the conclusion that we serve a God whose primary interest is in matters of right and wrong, that his primary focus is that once he's forgiven us of our sins, now he's going to teach us how to do the right thing.

MM: Sure. In the Bible we see all sorts of commands – do this, do that.

SM: Right. But we don't see those commands through an unfiltered lens. We read the Bible like we look at God, and that is through the skewed, tainted, blurred lens of our own making. All the way back in the garden, when Adam and Eve sinned and they...immediately they had this skewed sense of who God is. They began to see him through the distorted lens of their own guilt and shame. Ever since then, we've done that. Just because a person trusts Christ and says, "Thank you, Lord, for forgiving my sin, I'm a believer," don't think that that lens instantly goes away. It doesn't. There's

this renewal of the mind that has to take place.

I've had two monumental paradigm shifts, radical changes in my life since the time I trusted Christ as a child. One was what I wrote about in this book, *Grace Walk*, when I began to understand my identity in Christ...that I don't have to try to live for him, but that I died *with* him and now he is my life. The other was when I began to understand the Trinitarian viewpoint. That is this idea of who the Father, Son, and Spirit are, and that our God is not a punitive, judgmental, harsh, demanding, exacting God who's looking down on us saying, "When are you going to ever learn to quit doing the wrong and start doing right?"

For God to do that would be a violation of what he had told Adam and Eve in the Garden when he said, "Don't eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." But they did, and suddenly everything became about morality, and it became about issues of right and wrong. We lifted up that filtered clouded lens and we looked at the face of our God through that.

But sin didn't change God – it only changed Adam and Eve. Our God never was, never has been, never will be, a God who's preoccupied with issues of right and wrong. Our God is preoccupied with *us*. It's about relationship, not rules.

If we read the Bible through a particular lens, we're going to see a lot of demanding things in Scripture. Let me give an example, if I could, and excuse this kind of familiar example, a personal example. When I go home from California, back to my wife, if she says, "Get over here and kiss me now," if she *commands* me to come kiss her, okay, her commandments are not burdensome, to quote Scripture (laughing).

You see what I'm saying? The commands of the Bible, when we understand the New Testament... First, we're free from the Old Testament law. Paul said in Romans 7, "We are made to die to the law so that we might be joined to another, to him who was raised from the dead." We're out from under the law — we don't live in that world anymore.

The commands in the New Testament, that's like my wife saying, "Get over here and kiss me." John said, "His commandments are not burdensome" (King James, "His commandments are not grievous."). We *want* to do those things. God gives us a new motivation, and the motivation is desire. It's not duty, it's desire. For anyone who thinks the New Testament is filled with commands that they have to struggle to keep, I think it comes back to their concept of who their Father is. Because once we know that we're totally accepted, that changes everything.

Life is not a test. Life is a *rest*. Jesus said, "Come to me and I'll give you rest." He didn't say I'll give you a test. There is no test. It's a rest.

MM: There's not a final exam.

SM: Right. We've passed, we've scored a perfect score with flying colors because the grade that we have is the grade of Jesus, because he is our life, we're one with him. Paul said, "He who joins himself together to the Lord is one spirit with him." It's simple. No wonder Jesus said, you have to become like a little child. With our religious minds and our adult minds, and our Western-world minds, we tend to miss it. It's so simple. If I could say it as simply as the Bible says it: Just believe it!

It's called the gospel because it's good news—if we could just believe it. God in Christ Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, has made everything right. We're restored, we're reconciled, it's all good now. So all we can do, all we need to do, is just live out of the overflow, the celebration, of that *perichoresis*, the *koinonia*, that fellowship that we have with the Father, Son, and Spirit because of the cross. Sounds too good to be true, and when it does, it's probably the gospel – it's grace.

MM: Many people think that that's not very workable. They don't...

SM: It's *not* (laughing). It's not workable – you can only *trust* it. That's a good point. That was a little slip there, I like it. It's not *workable*. It's not of works, it's of faith. Sorry to interrupt, but I couldn't resist that. But you make a good point. A lot of us think that that we're forgiven our sin and now we're in Christ, but now we've got this *manual* here [the Bible] ...

MM: Yeah... isn't right and wrong found in there?

SM: It is, and we're told to avoid it. Here's the key: "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin." You can do the right thing and it still be a sin. It's not about right and wrong – it's about trusting Christ in us to live his life through us. This is where the modern church misses it, in my mind. We're capable of more than doing right. You don't have to believe in Christ to do the right thing. Many people who renounce the gospel don't commit adultery and don't steal or kill, or we could go down the list. But we're capable of more than right – we're capable of more than morality. Morality is that system of right and wrong based on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the one God said stay away from. We're capable of more than moral living, we're capable of *miraculous* living. By that I mean that the deity, Father, Son, and Spirit, flows through us, out into this world like a river of living water from our innermost being.

MM: You say that we're capable of this, but yet in a way *we're* not doing it — it's Jesus working in us.

SM: That's right. We're capable because he has enabled us.

MM: Our role is to get out of the way?

SM: That's right. We are capable because he's made us capable. We are

responsible, response-able. We're now able to respond to him and say, "OK, I get it, I don't have to struggle."

I wrote in *Grace Walk* an experience I've witnessed many times. When I was a pastor I'd visit hospitals. A guy might have had heart surgery, and he's on a breathing machine. Have you ever been in the room with somebody when they wake up on a breathing machine? They have to learn with that thing, because if they're not careful, it happens a lot of times when a person wakes up in a recovery room after surgery and they're on a breathing machine, they try to breathe. And when they try to breathe, they're fighting against the machine, and alarms go off, and it's very uncomfortable for them. I've seen it again and again. My own dad had heart surgery, and I saw him on one. The nurse will come in and say, "Calm down, don't struggle...." Listen to this, "You don't have to try to breathe, just relax. The machine will breathe for you." Sure enough, I've watched it again and again. The people would just kind of let go and relax and quit struggling, and the machine takes over and begins to breathe for them.

Isn't it interesting that the word for Spirit is *breath*? When we rely on the Holy Spirit, we don't struggle to breathe. We just depend on the Spirit of Christ in us, the Spirit of Jesus that indwells us, and as we learn to just rest and realize, "I don't have to make it happen – I just trust him." As we learn that, then he does it through us. It's a rest.

It's one of those paradoxical statements. In Hebrews the Bible says... It's almost comical to me, "*Strive* to enter into that *rest*" (laughing). The reason we have to strive to enter into that rest is because it's not the default setting of the flesh to rest, so we have to be very intentional about that.

We have to say, "No, no, no, I'm not going to take my life or my circumstances, my will, I'm not going to try to take this back into my own hands – I've already proven I'm not capable. So I'm going to, by intentionality, which is the striving part, I'm going to choose, I'm going to decide, I'm going to go against the current of modern religion, I'm going to go against the current of my own fleshly inclinations, and I'm going to just trust and rest and let him be who he is in and through me." That's grace. It's the unilateral expression of his life and love in us and through us. He does it all. We're containers and we're conduits of his life, but we don't work it up.

MM: And that's the grace walk.

SM: Yes Him doing it in us and through us. It's not a passive lifestyle. It's a lifestyle where we actively rest in him, and he does it all.

73. WE WILL NEVER OVERESTIMATE GOD'S GRACE

MM: In an earlier interview, you talked about how you had a couple of theological transitions in your life and you gave a synopsis of the first one. Could you give an even briefer synopsis now, and then describe the second one?

SM: Sure. I understood the gospel as a young boy. I grew up in a Christian family and I believed in the Lord at a very early age, became a senior pastor at 19 years old, and for 17 years as a senior pastor I was sincere, but I was caught up in the typical, I'll call it traditional, religious legalism, and that is the mindset that says that God blesses me or approves of me because I'm doing all the right things that I need to be doing, reading my Bible, praying, involved in church, sharing the gospel, those kinds of things.

In 1990, the Lord brought me to a place of brokenness. I came to the end of myself and my struggle of trying to be the perfect Christian and trying to be a good pastor. He began to show me that it wasn't about me and what I could do for him, that he didn't call me for that, he didn't make me for that, but instead it was about him and what he wanted to do through me. I wrote about that in my first book, *Grace Walk*, in the early 90s. It came out in '95, and I wrote about that time in life.

That was the first monumental shift for me in my thinking. I realized that I was in union with Christ and that it wasn't Steve with a split personality, an evil twin living inside, a new nature and an old nature combating, but I began to understand co-crucifixion — that the old Steve was crucified with Jesus and now Christ is my life. I began to understand what it means to walk in grace instead of religious legalism, instead of building my life around rules, to just relax and let him live his life through me. That was in 1990.

For another 15 years, I taught that message. It's what many have called the "exchanged life" message — "exchanged life" is a phrase that some missionary coined to describe this idea of biblical truth, that our old life died with Christ and that in its place he's given us a new life. I call it the grace walk, Hudson Taylor called it exchanged life, some have called it the higher life, the deeper life, I think Andrew Murray called it the abiding life, Watchmen Nee called it the normal Christian life. Whatever you want to call it, it means Jesus living his life through us, and understanding that our identity is in him.

The second, I'll call it a cataclysmic event, a revelation, if I can use that word, that came to me and I began to grow in, was about six years ago. I've

been a Calvinist for about 27 years. I believed, and still believe, in the sovereignty of God. I found that attractive about Calvinism, and so I'm not trying to be disrespectful to those who hold a Reformed theological view or are Calvinist. But in my own teaching I had said for many years, "No matter how big you imagine God's love to be, it's bigger."

Then I began to think about it and I thought, wait a minute. Some of what I'm teaching about how big God's love is, is inconsistent with the tenets of what I have professed to believe, the five points of Calvinism (represented by the acrostic TULIP, total depravity, unconditional election, and it was that third one that I began to grapple with — limited atonement, and then there was irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints).

I began to think about that "limited atonement." Did God choose everybody, or not? I've said everywhere, God's love is bigger than you can imagine it to be. If God is love the way that I'm teaching, how could this God that I'm teaching and that the Bible says is love by essence, how could he choose the majority of his creation, his people, born to be reprobates, to never have the opportunity to know him? How can I say that's love? How can I say that a minority of us will go to heaven and celebrate forever how loving he is, when he chose not to elect the majority of people?

My theology, my concept of God, began to mess with my biblical understanding. Some people might get rattled with me for this, but it wasn't that I looked at the Bible and said, wait a minute, my Calvinistic understanding won't line up with Scripture. That wasn't what precipitated the change in me. What precipitated the change was, I began to say, the Christ who lives in me, who is the exact representation of his Father, I know him. He's not somebody who would decide to never choose the majority of those that would ever be born and never include them in the finished work of the cross. My understanding of the Father through the Son who lives in me and the Spirit who illuminates truth caused me to say, I've got to go back and look at the Bible again. I began to study the Bible again with fresh eyes, if I can use that phrase — I hope that makes sense.

MM: With new lenses.

SM: A new lens. That's right. It was the lens that said my God is not a punitive judgmental God, but my God is love, pure and simple. That's not one of his characteristics. Love is not "one of his attributes" — love is the DNA of God. I began to go back into the Bible and study it again. You know how the Holy Spirit works. I began to see things in Scripture in a different light, through the different lens, that I had never seen. I began to realize that this God the Father did indeed express who he is through the Son in his

earthly ministry. The Holy Spirit does give us revelation of his love. I began to see a shift.

As I began to see a biblical transition in my thinking, the Lord brought along folks that, lo and behold, had written on this very subject of what we know is a Trinitarian perspective. The Lord began to bring people across my path, guys like you here at Grace Communion International, and people like Baxter Kruger, Thomas Torrance, J.B. Torrance, and others, Robert Capon, and some of these others that have written from that perspective. It's like wow! All these years I've been teaching the grace of God as what I call the grace walk, and now I get it. The grace of God is even bigger than I had thought. I don't guess we'll ever overestimate God's grace, will we?

That's a long question for a short answer, but that at least sets us in the direction of where my thinking came from and where it is these days.

MM: So you examined the Bible from the perspective that God is like the Jesus you had been taught about, or the Jesus you had experienced. Was there previously a “disconnect” between what you thought of God and what you saw as Jesus?

SM: The problem with speaking of my experiences...it might sound to somebody like I'm being critical of the evangelical world, and I'm not, but I will say I don't think my experience is unique. I had the idea that many do, that you have the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the Father, in my thinking at the time (this is not how I see it now), this Father was a *just* God who demanded that there be payment for sin, and he had this seething anger, and to get it out of his system and balance the books and satisfy his justice, somebody had to pay. That somebody was going to be me and you and everybody else. I had this concept of a judicial, punitive, harsh God who found everything in him screaming out that his justice be avenged.

Then I had the good cop (you know what I mean? Bad cop, good cop...) Jesus who says “Father, it's okay. How about if I go down... [and I'm using hyperbole, okay? I'm not being fair to the evangelical perspective I grew up with, sometimes I exaggerate things to make a point, so let me concede that at the start, but there's some truth in this]... It's like my mind said it was Jesus who said, “Father, how about this? I'll go down to the world, I'll live a sinless life, and I'll go to the cross and you can vent all this anger you have against sin toward me, so that you won't have to vent it toward Steve.” God says, “Okay.” So Jesus comes into this world, lives a sinless life, goes to the cross, and God kicks the daylights out of his own Son at the cross. He pours out his anger, he pours out his rage about sin onto Jesus and he gets it out of his system. And now I believe on Jesus, and so God won't pour out his rage

on me, because he's poured it out on Jesus.

But even then, I had this idea that God still is this judicial God who's obsessed with right and wrong, so that even as a Christian, when I would sin, God still would have come at me, but Jesus was going, "Father, Father, the scars, the scars." God would say, "Oh yeah, you're right, the scars." I thought God saw me through his Son Jesus, and that's what protected me.

The fallacy in that, is that what we had was a schizophrenic God. And the Spirit, well, we don't even go there, because I didn't belong to a charismatic or Pentecostal denomination, so I knew the Spirit existed, but we didn't talk a lot about him. I knew the Spirit existed, but in my mind I had this harsh, judicial, judgmental God who had to have justice through punishment, and I had this loving Jesus.

But the fallacy in that view is that Jesus said, "If you've seen me, you've seen the Father." There's the disconnect. How can I see loving Jesus and him say I've seen the Father, if the Father was angry and had some sort of justice (and that's a distorted sense of God's justice) that necessitated that he vent anger against somebody about sin. No. Our triune God, three in one, all share the same heart, and all share the same love and the same passion. They, he, has lived in this *perichoresis*, in this circle-dance of love that has existed through eternity past, it will exist through eternity future.

One day God said (if I can take a little literary liberty, a little imagery here), "This love we share, Father, Son, and Spirit, it can't be improved on. It's perfect. It couldn't be improved on, it's already perfect. But you know what we could do that would intensify it? We could share it. We could widen the circle." So the Father, Son, and Spirit said in Genesis, "Let us make man in our own image." You know the story. It starts there in the garden, where God created mankind. The reason we're here is so that we can be loved by the Father through the Son and the communion of the Holy Spirit. That's what it's all about. It wasn't a good cop/bad cop. Even the fall of Adam didn't change God. Adam hid because he thought God had now gone over the edge and was angry. No. God came for his walk in the evening just like he'd always done.

MM: Even though he *knew* what Adam had done.

SM: Exactly. Adam's sin didn't change God — it changed Adam's perception of God, and it's affected us and contaminated our view of God ever since, unless we see the truth in Scripture that we're talking about today. So God came...and from the get-go he told him, "You don't have to sweat it. His seed will bruise the heel of your offspring, but your offspring (speaking of Jesus) will bruise his head [Gen. 3:15]. One day the devil will be destroyed,

and in the meantime I'm going to cover you with these animal skins, these bloody skins, to show that the remedy is on the way, don't panic. I'm going to banish you from the Garden and keep you out, so you won't eat from the tree of life and be doomed to this life of sin and distortion, forever living under the delusion and the lies."

From the beginning it's grace, grace, grace, grace, and when Jesus came to the cross, contrary to my old view (which as you understand, and some of the viewers will, is called the penal substitution view — the idea that Jesus took our punishment so that we wouldn't have to take it)...

The apostle Paul said it this way in 2 Corinthians: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting those trespasses against them." God the Father was in the Son. In Hebrews it said he offered himself by the eternal Spirit. We've got the whole Trinity. We've got our Triune God (Father, Son, and Spirit) on a rescue mission, not God the Father punishing Jesus, but the Father and the Son and the Spirit in sync working together to rescue us from this destroying thing called sin that would, to use C.S. Lewis's kind of imagery, make us wither away into nothingness if he didn't come along. I get excited about this.

MM: So there was no change in God's attitude toward us because of the death of Jesus?

SM: Here's a verse some people know: "God says, I am God and I change not." God has never changed. God's always loved us. God's heart was toward us before the death of Jesus. That's why Jesus came. It's not that God the Father was against us and Jesus came to change God's mind about us — Jesus came to change *our* mind about God the Father, not to change the Father's mind about us. The Father, the Son, the Spirit had always loved us, and Jesus came to help us see that.

Who were his biggest critics when he tried to show and express that love? It wasn't the drunken cursing sailors. It wasn't the woman taken in adultery, it wasn't the harlot who washed his feet with her hair using the perfume from the alabaster box. No. The people who got all bent out of shape about Jesus saying let me show you the kind of loving Father you've got, the people that got bent out of shape by it were the religious people.

When I teach this message today and you teach it and everybody you have on this program teaches it, we find out the same thing still happens. It's not those "out there," so to speak. I hate to use that term in a dichotomy like that, but it's not those who don't believe, it's those who profess to believe who get mad as the devil about the love of God. They're the older brother in the story of the prodigal. I know — I'm a charter member of that club. I've

lived there.

MM: But you, as the older brother, finally went in to the party.

SM: Which gives me hope. That's why I share this message of perichoresis now. Thank God, it speaks well of my Father that he stood out there in the darkness of my own religion, he stood out there in the darkness when I was saying, "God's not like that. It can't be that good. You can't tell me everybody gets off scot-free. You can't tell me everybody's included. You can't tell me that God loves us all. No, no." My Father didn't give up, but he kept pleading and appealing and showing and wooing (that's an old biblical word), and enticing me to see his love, until finally like that prodigal melted in his father's embrace and accepted it. The interesting thing about the older brother in the story in Luke 15 is we don't know if he went in or not, but one thing we do know, the father didn't go in without him. He didn't go in, but neither did the Father. Our God doesn't give up on us.

This idea of perichoresis, this dancing with deity concept, this idea that we live in the communion of the Father, Son, and Spirit and we live out of that as our reality, that's enough to excite anybody. It's not just us, but the essence of this program that you guys have here, *You're Included*, points toward the good news of the gospel that God was in Christ reconciling the *world* to himself. Everybody was wrapped up in that big bear hug, that big group hug at the cross — not just the religious people. (That would be a sour party, wouldn't it?) Not just the people who believe, but we're all wrapped up in it.

Somebody's going to watch this and say, "Don't you think we have to believe?" Sure. Who wants to stand outside in the darkness of unbelief if you're missing the party? But let the record show: both sons had the same privileges. It's just one accepted his acceptance, and the other didn't.

MM: What are the consequences if we don't believe?

SM: You're going to stand out there in the cold and the dark and miss out on the party, but don't blame your father, because as the father in Luke 15 said, the accepting father in that story that we call the parable of the prodigal, he said to his older son, "Everything that I have is yours." The problem with unbelievers is that — unbelief. It's not like there's something left for God to do for them. God's done what he's going to do for all of us. He's done what he's going to do for humanity.

The problem that exists, and I'm speaking as a pastor, I've been preaching since I was 16 — for 40 years I've been preaching. I was pastor at traditional institutional churches for 21 years, and the problem in the modern church world (I don't intend to be mean, it's just a fact) is we don't preach the pure gospel. By and large, we preach a *potential* gospel, not the pure gospel. We say,

here's what Jesus did for you, now *if* you will believe, then he'll forgive your sin. No. It's not *if* you believe, then you'll be reconciled to God. No. *If* you believe then he'll do this or that. No, no, no.

That's not the gospel. That's a *potential* gospel. The gospel is good news that he's already done it whether you believe it or not. If you don't believe it and want to stand out in the darkness, you're going to miss out on the party, but the *truth* is that the objective reality of what he did at the cross is real, whether you believe it or not, but by believing it we experience it. Experiencing it is where the abundance comes in that Jesus talked about in John 10:10 when he said, "I've come so that you might have life and have it more abundantly."

MM: You said earlier that Jesus didn't die as a punishment. God didn't punish Jesus on the cross. Then why did he die? What's the connection between his death and our salvation?

SM: Because this thing called sin had infected all of humanity through Adam, and it's a congenital disease that everybody's born with, and it's fatal — the wages of sin is death, and such sin was being passed down from person to person through the generations from Adam. Left to ourselves, we would be destroyed by sin, so God said "Sin shall not have the last word. Sin will not be the trump card. I didn't create mankind to wither away into nothingness. I didn't create humanity to die out."

To use a literary imagery, it's like the Father, Son, and Spirit said, "We're going down there and we're not coming back until this thing is done." They came — Jesus the Son came empowered by the Spirit, superintended, if you will, by the sovereignty of the Father. He came into this world to finish a job. What did he come to finish? Daniel 9:24, prophesying about the Messiah, says, "He'll make an end of sin." He'll make an end...he'll finish the transgression. Centuries later, Jesus shows up on planet earth. The angel said, "Call him Jesus, because he's going save his people from their sin."

Come down the road another three decades or so and here's John the Baptist saying, "Look, it's the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." And before his crucifixion you've got Jesus holding up that cup saying, "This is the blood of the new covenant which is shed for the remission of sin." We're getting closer. He came on mission to finish a task. All the way from Daniel, he'll finish the transgression (Daniel 9:24), make an end to sin. Here's Jesus on the cross.

What does he do? He takes all the sin of the world and he draws it into himself. It's not God the Father punishing Jesus. It's *sin* punishing Jesus. Sin brings punishment. It's not God who brings the punishment, it's sin. The

wages, the punishment, the penalty of sin is death. Jesus draws that into himself. It's not God. I'll give you an example. A poor diet and poor exercise habits will lead to the punishment of bad health. It's not God that's punishing you with bad health – it's your own choices. Those habits are pregnant with punishment, with penalty. And so it is with sin. It wasn't God punishing Jesus, it was sin punishing Jesus. He drew it all into himself. When he had drawn the sin of the world into himself, now that which had been started in the eternal circle of heaven before the beginning of time comes to a climactic finish at the cross when Jesus said, "It's finished." He dealt with it, and that's the gospel we proclaim.

Later on, John in his epistle would say, "He appeared to take away the sins of the world." The writer of Hebrews would say, "He put away sin by the sacrifice of himself." The question I would ask the evangelical church (and myself included) is, Did he succeed, or not? Did he fail, or did he do what he came to do? We know he did what he came to do, and he did succeed, and it is finished, and it's all over now except the celebrating. Those of us who believe it are celebrating.

MM: But yet we look at the world around us, we even look in ourselves and say, "the sin isn't completely gone."

SM: That's right. We live in this little box called time/space, and the old Adamic race died with Jesus, and he did defeat sin. He conquered it, as the phrase goes, once and for all. We know the truth...people say the truth will set you free. The truth is, Jesus dealt with sin. No, no, no...the Bible doesn't say the *truth* will set you free. The Bible says, "You shall *know* the truth and the truth will set you free." It's not just the truth that sets you free – it's *knowing* the truth that sets you free. The truth is, he has dealt with sin. He's conquered it. It has no power over us. But if you either don't know or you don't believe the truth, then a person will still live under the lie that befell Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. If they appropriate the lie, then guess what they're going to live like? They're going to live as if the lie is true. It's not. They're going to live in a counterfeit reality (which seems like an oxymoron, but you get my point), out of a delusion, they're going to live as if Christ didn't really do what he did, but he did.

Back to the 2 Corinthians 5 passage, verse 17, "If anyone is in Christ, he's a new creation." Most Christians know that one. But let's come down to verse 19, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them." There's the objective reality. That's real whether anybody believes it or not. Then it says, "And he's committed to us the message of reconciliation, therefore we're ambassadors for Christ, as though

God were making an appeal through us: we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” There’s the subjective reality. In other words, it is real whether you believe it or not, but we’re begging you, we’re appealing to you, believe it, so that it will be real to you.

MM: The verse said that he wasn’t counting people’s trespasses against them. Does that mean that I don’t need to ask for his forgiveness?

SM: Bingo. It insults the finished work of Christ when you ask for forgiveness. I’m glad you asked that because this is one of those things that are so misunderstood in the church world. How about Colossians 2? Let me turn there a minute. (You better be careful, you’re going to put me in a preaching mode here in just a minute, because I do get excited about this.) How about this one? Colossians 2:13-14:

When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, he made you alive together with him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having cancelled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees which was against us and hostile to us, he’s taken that away and nailed it to the cross.

Do we believe this Bible or not? Colossians 2:13 says he’s blotted out all our transgressions. Somebody says, “You mean my future sins?” Here’s a question, how many of our sins were future when Jesus died? They were *all* future sins. Yes, he dealt with all of our sins at the cross. They were all future sins, and he’s dealt with them all.

Let me quickly add, to *confess* my sin doesn’t mean that I’m asking for forgiveness. Somebody’s going to mention 1 John 1:9, that’s what always pops out. That’s not to say I won’t confess, I won’t admit. “Confess” means to agree, to say the same. I’m going to acknowledge it when I’ve sinned, but I don’t do it to *get* forgiveness, I do it because I’ve *already gotten* forgiveness. There’s a big difference between the two.

1 John 1:9, if I can give an amplified explanation or paraphrase, might read like this: Since it’s the nature of the believer to constantly admit it when we’ve sinned, so is it the nature of God to constantly relate to us from a posture of forgiveness, keeping us cleansed of all unrighteousness. My part is that I admit it. What else am I going to do, lie? He knows. His part is to keep me in that state of constant forgiveness because of the work of the cross. What else is he going to do? It’s finished.

MM: Often we try to repent and prove our repentance and show how sorry we are.

SM: That’s idolatry. Do you know why it’s idolatry? Because if I think I

have to show my sorrow and I have to wallow in self-condemnation and I have to rededicate myself and promise God this or that, then what I'm really saying is, I don't believe the work of the cross was enough to deal with sin, there's a contribution **I** need to add to it, and what I add is going to put it over the top. Idolatry.

Let's relax. We're forgiven. Let's just believe in the finished work of Christ. Somebody says, "If you tell people that, they're going to go out and live like the devil." No, they won't. Authentic grace won't do that. Paul told Titus, "The grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to all men, teaching us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and how to live soberly, righteously, and just in this present age" [Titus 2:12]. Grace is divine enablement for us to live a godly lifestyle. It doesn't create a desire to sin – it creates an appetite for righteous living. That's what grace does, real grace. Anything else is disgrace.

74. THE FATHER GETS A BAD RAP

MM: Earlier, you commented that many people view the sacrifice of Jesus as God punishing Jesus. You objected strongly to that notion. Could you tell us why you think it's important for people to have an accurate understanding of what was going on in the crucifixion of Jesus?

SM: It is important because how we understand what happened at the cross will affect our view of the Father and who he is. Growing up for a long time in my tradition, I didn't have any problem connecting to the idea of being intimate with Jesus because of what Jesus did for me. But when it came to the Father, I had a different understanding, because of what my view was (and I think it's a common view): that Jesus took the punishment from the Father so that the Father wouldn't punish me. If that's our view, we're going to think that Jesus is like the loving one and the Father is the stern harsh one who is exacting, and who insists on the books being balanced. It's almost like an angry father, and a mother who's trying to keep the dad from getting onto the children. That's how I saw it, like Jesus was the loving one and the Father was the angry one.

When we look at the cross through the lens of penal substitution — that Jesus was the substitute who took our punishment from God the Father so the Father wouldn't punish us, how will we ever experience a sense of intimacy with the Father? That's out of line with what Jesus came for. Paul the apostle told us about Jesus, that he is the exact representation of the Father. So, just as Jesus the Son is loving, so is God the Father and God the Spirit are equally as loving. I'm not saying that there wasn't a substitution there. Jesus did die on the cross in our place. He was our substitute. But he drew the penalty of sin into himself. The wages of sin is death.

Let me back up to the Garden of Eden. God didn't say to Adam and Eve, "If you eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, I'll kill you." He said, "If you eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you'll die." He didn't say "I'll kill you" — he said "you'll die." In the same way, coming to the New Testament, it wasn't God that punished Jesus, it was sin that punished Jesus. Another word for punishment is the word penalty. It's the same Greek word. It's punishment, it's penalty. The penalty for sin was death.

But what did Jesus do at the cross? God the Father was in the Son empowered by the Spirit, and our Triune God drew the penalty, the payment, the wages, the punishment that sin brings, into himself and away from us so that we wouldn't have to be punished by sin but that we would be delivered from sin's punishment. He took it into himself and died for us so that we

could be free.

Why is it important to see it that way? It's important because if we think God the Father is angry, then Jesus didn't do a very good job of letting us know what he was like, because when Jesus came here he said, "If you've seen me you've seen the Father." Study the Gospels — you don't find Jesus portraying for us a God who's angry with us about our sin. To the contrary! Every time you see Jesus encountering people in sin, he extends grace, and mercy, and love, and forgiveness, because that's the Father.

Even in the story of the prodigal, the story that Jesus told... It's really not the story of the prodigal — it's a story of the father. That story wasn't told to show us something about sinning people, or for that matter, even self-righteous people (the older brother). That story was told to teach us something about our Father. What Jesus told us in that story is this: He told us through the illustration of the younger brother, the prodigal who came back with his decision to rededicate himself and promised his father that if he'd forgive him, he'd do better, he'd serve him more, he'd be a better...but the father didn't even let him give his speech. I spent my life rededicating myself to God the Father, promising him I'd do better, I'd try harder... In that story of the prodigal, the boy tries to give the speech, but the father interrupts him and doesn't let him give it.

Then you've got the older brother, who's self-righteous. You've got the unrighteous on the one hand and the self-righteous on the other hand who says, "Look, all these many years I've served you and I've never violated and transgressed your commandments." The father says, "Son, what do you mean, I won't give you a party? All I have is yours." Both of those boys missed the point, because the younger boy, the prodigal, thought that he would be rejected because of his misbehavior. The other thought he should be accepted and honored because of his good behavior. The father was trying to say to them both, "You don't get it. It's not about you and your behavior, it's about me and how much I love you, independent of anything you do or don't do. It's about me."

So it is with our heavenly Father. He wants to see (and that's what Jesus came to reveal) that he loves us unconditionally, unilaterally, if need be. Those of us who are believers love him, but why do we love him? We love because he first loved us. That is a reciprocal response to his love for us. It's all about our concept of God the Father. He's got a bad rap because of the religious world. In spite of all Jesus did to give us clarity on it, the religious world his clouded it.

MM: For a long time my concept of God the Father was like Lincoln in

the Lincoln Memorial, sitting in this huge throne, stone, impassive, stern, and it wasn't the sort of God that I wanted to spend eternity with.

SM: Exactly. Back to the story of the father in Luke 15. You don't see some austere dignified father there. You see a father who sees his son in the distance and he's wearing these long flowing dignified garments (that they wear still in that part of the world), and he pulls those garments up high so he can run, because he can't run with them down at his feet. He pulls them up high above his knees so he can run, and he takes off running.

Nobody in that part of the world sees their dad's naked legs. That's a shame, it's a disgrace. That father didn't care. He pulled the robes up and he ran, acting in an undignified way, but he was acting out of passionate love, even willing for those who were witnessing that scene to cause them to look away from the boy covered in the filth of the pigpen and look to the father and say, "What is he doing? He's running naked down the street," because he had pulled his robes up above his legs and they'd never seen that.

The kind of love that father had for the boy — he was willing to take the shame off of the boy and bring it onto himself if need be, because he wasn't interested in protecting his reputation — he was interested in embracing and receiving his son back. That, Jesus wanted us to see, is the kind of Father you have. He's passionate, he'll run down the street with his robe pulled up above his knees. He'll take the shame on himself to rescue you from your shame — a different picture than the God sitting in the judge's chair that we imagined, huh? Totally different picture.

The beauty of it is, about this younger and older son in Luke 15 — and I didn't plan to say so much about this chapter, but another point comes to mind. The older boy, there's your religious church-going boy. There's your believer. The father says, "I love you, but I love this one the same." The privileges were extended to both equally. Both were missing out on experiencing the abundant life their father provided for them, one because of his unrighteousness, the other because of his self-righteousness. The story illustrates that sometimes it's easier for an unrighteous person to enter in and experience grace than it is a self-righteous person. Notice that self-righteous brother in Luke 15 — when the unbelieving son began to believe and accepted his father's acceptance and came into the party, the older boy got all bent out of shape about it. He didn't like that at all.

MM: The younger son had reached the bottom. He knew where his works had ended up.

SM: That's right. The religious son didn't want the younger one to be included, but he was. The church world today doesn't want everybody to be

included, we just want *us* to be included. After all, *we* go to church. We read our Bible every day.

MM: We're the ones that have been "cleaned up."

SM: That's right. To quote that older brother, "Look, I've served you all these many years, I've never violated or transgressed your commandments in any way. What gives with you bringing this guy and telling me that he's as accepted as I am? I've behaved a lot better than he..."

The father is saying, "Are you beginning to get it? It's not about your behavior. I don't love because of how good you are. I love because of how good I am." We're all included. You can live in a pigpen, in the penitentiary of the pigpen, or like that older boy you can live in the penitentiary of your performance, but both live outside the pleasure of the grace of God.

We talked earlier about this shift in my own mind. It's what you guys here at Grace Communion are all about, and it's what this program is all about...one thing that's shifted in my own mind is the understanding that we are all included, that what Jesus did, he didn't do just for "good" boys, so to speak. (I say that tongue in cheek, because that's how a lot of folks would see church-going leaders.) He did that for everybody.

We all stand on equal ground at the foot of the cross, and we all need his grace the same, and thank God it's been poured out on all of us the same. Those of us who believe it enjoy it — we're in the party dancing and eating barbeque. Those who don't are standing out in the dark, in the hell of their own choice. But don't act like they're out there in a hell because there's something left for God to do — he's done everything. They're out there because of their own pride and stubbornness.

MM: So you would say an atheist, even some of these militant atheists, their sins are already forgiven?

SM: Absolutely. That's the gospel. Let me tell you a story. I've told this story for 20 years, but I've used a different application. I want to tell it for the sake of those who are familiar with my ministry and for those who aren't. Those who have heard my ministry are going to go "woah...now he's telling that story differently now. He's making a different application."

This story started, I think, with Bill Bright — the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, the largest mission-sending agency in the world. Bill Bright used to tell about a guy named Mr. Yates out in Texas that had a farm. Mr. Yates was trying to eke out a living and the Depression struck and he fell behind on his farm payments. One day a representative from the mortgage company came to him and said, "You're behind on your payments. You've got to make your payment on the farm or we'll foreclose and evict you."

Yates said, “I can’t make my payment.” The guy said, “You’re going to have to pay, or you’re going to be evicted.” Yates said, “Well, I don’t know what to do.” The guy said, “In 30 days we’re going to file a dispossessory notice and get you off the property.”

The day started winding down and Yates didn’t know what he was going to do. One day he heard a knock at the door and when he opened the door, it was a man from an oil company. The guy said, “We’re doing some wildcat drilling out here and we wanted to see if you’d let us drill on your property. We have reason to think there may be oil here.” Yates said, “Go ahead.” He’s thinking in his mind, “I’ve lost it all anyway, I don’t have a penny.” They come onto his property the next day and they sink a drill into the ground and bang, they hit a gusher, 80,000 barrels, 85,000 barrels of oil a day come gushing up out of that well. Bang! Instantly Mr. Yates has millions of dollars in cash accessible to him.

Here’s the question: At what point did Mr. Yates become a millionaire? The answer is, he became a millionaire on the day he bought the farm. Why was he living like a pauper? Because he didn’t know what he had.

The way I used to make that application is, I would say, “You have had riches in Jesus since the day you’ve been saved, since the day you trusted Christ, since the day you prayed and believed on him, but it’s by believing it now that you experience it.” But here’s where that falls short, and here’s where I’ve changed my story. I don’t say anymore that we became millionaires on the day we trusted Christ. That was the day we struck oil. Rather, we became millionaires *on the day Jesus died*.

For whom did Jesus die? The Bible teaches he died for everybody. We’re all included. So if everybody’s included, then the benefits of the finished work of Christ at the cross belong to everybody. Then why is everybody not living out of that spiritual wealth? It’s one of two reasons — either they don’t know it, or they don’t believe it, but it doesn’t change the reality. The day they struck oil on Yate’s property and he began to make withdraws, cash the checks so to speak, he began to live like a millionaire. But objectively, he’d been a millionaire all along. It only became a subjective experience when he cashed the check.

There you go — the objective work of Jesus for everybody. If he died for everybody, then what he did for everybody is true of everybody. Does it matter whether we believe or not believe? Of course! It makes all the difference in the world because it’s by believing that we cash the check and live out of the wealth that’s ours in him. But it doesn’t change the reality of what he did, even if we don’t believe. We’re living like paupers if we don’t

believe, but we're not paupers, we just don't know.

MM: It could have been a story about the acres of diamonds. People had diamonds in their field and didn't know it. It was theirs, they just didn't know the value.

SM: That's right. I remember that book from years ago. What Jesus did he didn't do for just a few of us — he did it for everybody. So I don't say to an unbeliever, "If you will just pray and ask Jesus into your heart, he'll forgive your sin." That implies there's something left undone. That implies that what Jesus should have said at the cross was, "Okay, your move. I've done my part, now it's your move. What are you going to do? The game comes to a standstill until you make your move." No, no, no. Jesus said, "Game over. It's finished. You're in. Game over. Fold the board up, put it up. Now it's finished." If you don't want to believe it (and I don't mean *you*), okay, live like a pauper then.

MM: We're telling a story of something that's already been done.

SM: That's the gospel. That's why it's good news. As I said in a previous program, it's not a potential gospel like God's done something and now he's waiting for you do something — he's done it and it's finished. There's nothing left. Now you can live in that reality or you can live under the lie, again back to the garden. You can live under the lie that befell Adam and Eve and hold on to all this distorted skewed thinking about your Father and who he is and what he's going to be like. You can get all this messed-up thinking in your head and live outside the pleasure of it, you can go into hell clinging to your lies if you want to, but there's nothing left for the Father to do — he's done it all.

MM: A hell of your own making.

SM: A hell of your own making and a hell of your own choosing. People said God's sending people to hell. You're already in hell if you're not believing this good news. Hell is not the absence of God...let's throw that snake on the table. Hell is not the absence of God, ask anybody in the Eastern Church. We in the Western world have the idea that hell means God's checked out and going home. No. Do we understand and believe where the Bible tells us that all things that exist consist by him? Everything that holds together holds together because he's there holding it together. So if hell was the absence of God, then hell would implode or explode, and would cease to exist. Hell itself is not the absence of God. This is another discussion and it may open a can of worms, but I believe hell is the inescapable presence of the love of God. Those who loathe and detest his love find it to be hellacious, but those of us who receive it find it to be heavenly. What did James say? He said if you love

your enemy it seems to them like you're doing what? You're heaping coals of fire on their head.

MM: So it's the same reality, but a different perception.

SM: Absolutely. I'm not making this stuff up as I go. I'm not smart enough to do that. I've studied it and read it, and I can tell you outside our Western world, the Greek Church right now, the church in the Eastern part of the world, they get this. We, you and I, and the people watching us in this part of the world, we've been so influenced by Augustinian theology (and not just theologians, but even people like Dante and others) about what hell is and is not, that we've got it all scrambled in our brains.

I think the Eastern Church has a beat on this thing that God is love. So if I can say it this way — any and everything that can be understood about God must come to love as its resting place, or we haven't gone far enough, because God is love. Everything and anything that we're going to connect to him has to be an expression of that love, or we're not going far enough in our understanding to get to the root of it.

MM: To get back to the crucifixion of Jesus. What was its role? What changed for all humanity? Was it just a forgiveness of sins or was there something deeper than that?

SM: Oh, so much changed. Forgiveness of sins wasn't even the main thing. Forgiveness of sins was the B Team. That was the secondary issue. There had to be forgiveness of sins so that the main event could take place. The main event that took place was *we received life*.

I'll give you an example, two verses. John 3:16, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shouldn't perish but should have everlasting forgiveness [no, no – life]." John 10:10, "I've come so that you might have forgiveness and have it more abundantly [no, life!]." All the verses are about life. He's come so that we can have life — life, not forgiveness. That's what happened at the cross. I'm going to be succinct and people watching will have to dig this out for themselves ...look at all the other programs on *You're Included*. I learned a lot watching the archived programs right here. There's a lot of good stuff on here.

Here's what happened. What the first Adam did was wrap us all up into himself as the federal head and brought humanity down into this place of sin. We were doomed and damned. We were condemned — not by God, but by sin, as humanity. Jesus comes along — the Father, Son, and Spirit say, "That's not going to stand. We're not going to let Adam get the final say on all this." So here's the Incarnation — Jesus comes, the last Adam, and he did (in a sense like the first Adam did), he was our federal head, and he wrapped us all

up in himself, all of us, everybody that had been in Adam.

Paul said that what Jesus did was much more than what Adam did. He uses that phrase more than once – “much more.” He wrapped us all up into himself and then Adam’s race went to the cross with Jesus, died with Jesus, was buried with Jesus, and then, and this is pivotal, this is the good news, when Jesus came up out of the grave a new species was raised up with him. Those in Christ, if anyone is in Christ he is a new creature, a new species.

Who do you think died with Jesus? As a Calvinist I used to say, only the elect, only those who were chosen. But listen to this, 2 Corinthians 5:14, this is out of the Bible. Let me hold it up where people can see I’m reading. “The love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died.” Who’s the one that died for all? Jesus. Therefore, who did he die for? Everybody. He tasted death for every human. Therefore, all died. We all died with Jesus. We were all buried with Jesus.

But when Jesus came up out of the grave, a new species came into existence, something new. The gospel is...here’s what the cross did: The cross provided forgiveness of sin. We don’t have to tell people he’ll forgive your sin. He *has*. Jesus is the elect man, the elect one. He is a man. There’s a God-man in heaven today. He’s the elect man in whom we all reside. Therefore we were all elect. We were all chosen. We were all made holy.

What does holy mean? The word means “set apart.” In the evangelical church we think, if I say so and so over here is holy, people think that means he lives a squeaky clean life. No, no, no. They don’t mind calling this book a Holy Bible. That Bible doesn’t live any way. They don’t mind calling God’s temple the Holy Temple — it just means *set apart*. In that sense he’s called us all, set us all apart. He made us holy.

Righteous — that’s another one. You use the word *righteous*, and one understanding of the word has to do with living a certain lifestyle. But wait — if you look up, in Strong’s dictionary for instance, the Greek word *righteous*, one definition is living your life based on a certain religious or moral code. That’s not what the New Testament tells us our righteousness is. The other definition of righteousness is being made in a right standing with God. Ding ding ding ding! There’s the one! There it is. It might be number 2 on the list, but it’s the one we better go to.

We better go to that one because we know it’s not about living a moral code. We’ve all been made right with God. We’ve been reconciled. So much happened on the cross. We’ve been joined in the union. There’s the big one — we’ve been joined into union with him again. The question then people ask me sometimes is, “You sound like a universalist. Are you saying

everybody drops dead and wakes up in heaven?” No. I’m not saying that.

MM: You’ve already talked about hell.

SM: That’s right, I did. I’ve already talked about hell. If I can paraphrase him — and I hate to try to paraphrase someone as eloquent as he is, but Robert Capon the theologian and author said, on the last day nobody goes to hell because of sin, because the sin issue has been dealt with. He said if you get to judgment day and face God and say “I won’t accept your acceptance,” then you can go to hell, he says, but don’t act like it’s because of sin, because sin has been dealt with in totality by the finished work of Jesus. I’m not saying everybody’s instantly in, whether they believe or not. I think that faith in Christ is essential — otherwise, back for the umpteenth time to the older brother, we’ll stand in the outer darkness if we don’t believe, but it’s not because God’s locked us outside or won’t let us in — it’s because of our own stubbornness and pride.

MM: You’ve described how Jesus dying on the cross...God was in Jesus reconciling us. But the scriptures say that Jesus on the cross said, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

SM: I’m glad you asked that, because that’s one of the biggest misunderstandings in the modern church. You said Jesus asked the question. What did God answer in that Gospel, in the Gospels? What was the answer God gave? He didn’t give an answer. So people looking at God through the wrong lens assume God the Father forsook his Son Jesus.

The answer is, he didn’t forsake his Son. That was the cry of Jesus when he became sin for us. If he had heard the answer right then and there, God would have said, “I haven’t forsaken you.”

How do I know? I’ll prove it. Psalm 22 is the Messianic Psalm from which that cry of Jesus came. Psalm 22:1 of the Messianic Psalm, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” You can read that Psalm, and bit by bit you see it’s talking about the cross right down to them casting lots for his garments — everything. It’s describing the cross. If you go to verse 24, you get the answer to the question. It’s not recorded in the Gospels, but it is in Psalms. Psalm 22:1, “Why have you forsaken me?” Verse 24, “He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted nor has he hidden his face for him. But when he cried to him for help, he heard.”

Now here’s the neat thing. All the Jews knew these Psalms. If I say to you, “Plop, plop, fizz, fizz,” you know the rest — what is it?

MM: Oh, is that Alka-Seltzer?

SM: Alka-Seltzer! Okay, what’s the rest of the jingle? “Oh what a...”

MM: “Relief it is.”

SM: All right, let's try another one: "Winston tastes good like a..."

MM: "Cigarette should."

SM: All right. It was the same way with the Psalms. When people standing around the cross heard the first line of that Psalm, they knew the rest of it. When Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" every self-respecting Jew there knew the rest of it, and the answer was he has *not* forsaken him or turned his face on him. But here we are 20 centuries later saying, he asked the question why did God forsake him — God must have forsook him. We've missed the point. No, he did not forsake him. He was right there in him and with him the whole time.

MM: We see in the resurrection that he didn't forsake him.

SM: That's right. The Father never forsook the Son. People say they were fragmented. Are you kidding? Deity being fragmented? The Godhead would have ceased to exist. Father, Son, and Spirit have always been in that perichoresis, in that circle of love. It's never wavered for one moment, even at the cross, which is encouraging to us, because like Jesus, when we cry out, why have you forsaken me, we can know God says, "I haven't. I'm with you." He'll never forsake us.

75. WHAT IS GOD'S WRATH?

MM: You talked before about the love of God, and I agree with you on that, but I wanted to ask you about the other side. Scripture talks about the *wrath* of God as well. How does this fit in with a God who is love?

SM: People often raise that question, and I will cut to the chase and give the bottom line and then we'll unpack it. The question suggests that there is a dichotomy between the wrath of God and the love of God, and that would be a mistaken notion, to think that somehow God's wrath stands apart from his love. Let's go back to the fundamental essence of God. John said God is love, not God loves, but God is love. Love, *agape*, is not one of the incidental characteristics of God's personality. Love is the foundational essence of who he is. If you could break down God's DNA, what you will find is love. Everything we understand about God has to be understood through the lens of his love, or else we've not studied it far enough . . .

Let's use a syllogism here. God is pure love. Here's a certain act that is not an expression of pure love. This act then cannot be God. So let's take wrath. God is pure love. Pure love can only express pure love. Wrath cannot be an expression of anything less than love if it comes from God. In fact, the wrath of God is an expression of his love.

This is where we get back into this thing of our Western mindset and Augustinian views of theology and all of this. We have had our minds tainted about the subject of wrath through misguided teaching — some of it coming out of Augustinian thought, some of it coming from extra-biblical sources like Dante. For a lot of people, their imagery of hell and the wrath of God is from Dante's *Inferno* and not from the Bible. Agreed?

MM: Yeah.

SM: So we've got to come back and say, no, wait a minute. Just like I've done with other things connected to God and who he is, I've had to come back to this subject of wrath and say wait a minute, wrath can't be God being mad, pouring out hate, because then he wouldn't be pure love. So I came back to that word *wrath* in the Bible. You're a seminary professor, so I'm sure you know this more than most of us. Let's start with the Greek word for wrath — what is it, teacher?

MM: *Orge*.

SM: Right. The Greek word *orge*, which is the biblical word for wrath in the New Testament, is an interesting word. Again, let me hit the pause button and say, the definition that we use with words sometimes depends on our preexisting concept of who God is. Words can have more than one definition. For instance, I say I love my wife. I love Mexican food. Nobody

thinks I hold Mexican food in the same esteem that I hold my wife. The same is true with biblical words, words like wrath.

If you look in the Greek for the definition of the word, and for the average person who's not a seminary prof, we have to fall back on more simple things — thank the Lord for the internet, because we can go to places like Crosswalk.com or BibleGateway.com and we can click there on certain verses when we want to know a word. Let's take the word wrath. Go to Crosswalk.com and type in the word wrath and look for it in the New Testament, because we're going to go to the Greek now.

Find the word, let's say in Romans, where the word *wrath* is used a lot. Look it up in the New American Standard Version, or the King James Version, and [after clicking on the verse] when you look beneath that verse you have some options, and one of them is the interlinear version. So you click on "interlinear" and it will put up that verse with every English word with a link to the Greek. When you click on the link, it will take you to Strong's and it will define that Greek word.

Now we've done that, and so we've found the word wrath and we want to know what it means. One definition of wrath is going to be "anger." But if you look down at, I think it's the second or third definition, you're going to see that another definition of wrath is "any intense emotion."

Let's come back to the Greek word *orge*. *Orge* is an interesting word. It's [often] translated wrath, but it can mean any intense emotion. I'm using this example because I want to make a clear point here. I'm not using it to be crude, but the word *orge* is the origin of our English words orgy or orgasm. Those are intense words. Those words in mixed company almost make you blush to use them. But I make that point because I want it to be clear that the word *orge*, which can yield the word orgasm or orgy, in that sense it has nothing to do with anger. It has to do with a very strong passion.

I'm going to come to a pause on this in a minute, but let me finish this train of thought. If you look at the word *orge* and you go back to the root of that word, because *orge* is the derivative of the root, and you go back to the root of the word *orge*, it means to reach out and to strain in a quivering violent way, a shaking way, for something that you long to possess. Having said all that, you know where I'm going.

So the wrath of God...let me put it as a question: What if (and I believe it) the wrath of God is not God pouring out contempt on people in hell, but what if the wrath of God is him pouring out violent love? Grasping, quivering, reaching, shaking, but those who reject it are so adverse and opposed to his love that to them it's torment. From his perspective it's not that at all. The love of God is wonderful to those of us who receive it.

It's like the gospel — it's a savor of life unto life. But to those who reject it, it's horrible. It's hell. It's the savor of death unto death. James said, "When you love your enemies, it is as if you were pouring out heaping coals of fire on their heads." I don't think that the wrath of God is an expression of contempt. I think the wrath of God is a violent expression of God's love, and people hate it unless they perceive that love.

MM: So God might intend it for good, but they perceive it as bad?

SM: Absolutely. If I can give an example, let's suppose I see my little grandson out in my back yard and he's holding a snake. I see that snake coiling, and love rushes up in my consciousness for my grandson. So I run as fast as I can toward him. He's holding the snake and he looks up and he sees on his granddad's face this look of horror and rage. He's going to interpret what he sees through the only paradigm he has. He may not understand the danger of the snake. He sees this expression of rage and anger in my face, and it strikes terror in him. I run over to my grandson, and imagine I pick him up and I shake him and shake him. That little boy is going to think he's never seen me so angry with him in his lifetime. But I'm not angry with him. I'm trying to shake something out of his hand.

Do you get the comparison I'm making? Daniel, I believe it's chapter 7:10, talks about a river of fire that flows out of the throne of God. I think that's the white-hot love of God. And as they say, the same sun that hardens clay melts wax. Same with the love of God.

Can I give you a quote? I don't want to preach a sermon, but I brought a note here. I don't want to trust my memory on this. This is Saint Isaac the Syrian, one of the early church fathers. Here's what he said: "Paradise is the love of God wherein is the enjoyment of all blessedness." I've been going on about hell, here's what he says about it: "I also maintain that those who are punished in Gehenna are scourged by the scourge of love. Nay, what is so bitter and vehement as the torment of love?"

MM: In Romans 1:18, Paul writes (and this is the first use of wrath in Romans): "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of human beings who suppressed the truth by their wickedness." He's saying that the wrath of God is being revealed. Doesn't that sound like God's kind of irritated by their refusal to accept what he's doing?

SM: I have to give you credit. When you use the word *irritated* in connection with wrath, that's understating it. I think it's more than irritated. But again, it depends on the lens you use to interpret the scripture. If you start with the fundamental belief that God is love, again I'll come back and say we have to interpret the scripture in light of everything that comes from

God as being an expression of love, or else there's an incongruence in God that can't be explained. There's a conflict. He's not pure love if something comes from him that is something other than love.

Some will say, "Well, then, love is just one of his characteristics, love is just *part* of what God is. He's part love, he's part wrath." Then I would say, "Are you suggesting that God is schizophrenic? He's love some of the time, he's hate some of the time?" No. Let's go back to the passage. I'm not suggesting that the wrath of God is not real. The wrath of God is very real. What I'm saying is it's possible, and in my opinion probable, that many of us have misunderstood what that wrath is, the nature of that wrath. Let's look at the passage you read. "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven." Think of wrath there as an intense, violent expression of love is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness.

Back to the illustration I gave about charging up to my grandson holding the snake. That was wrath. It was an intense expression of love, and it came out as violence because of the contempt that I had in this imaginary story for the snake, but it was love for the child. But the child, if he doesn't clearly understand my heart, may think that what's he's seeing is anger against him, but that's not what it is.

Notice that Paul talks in Romans 1:18 about the unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness. For them to suppress the truth, the truth is already in them, or they wouldn't be able to suppress it. To suppress means to push down something that's already there, and there can't be any disagreement about this, because the next verse elaborates: "Because that which is known about God is evident within them." Not outside them – within them – for God made it evident. God has put this intrinsic knowledge in us, and when we reject or suppress the truth of his love for us, then you know what he does? He expresses wrath. He turns up the fire of his love so that it becomes hotter. You're not going to beat God's love, so stop trying, is the way I might say it.

Can I read another quote from Saint Isaac the Syrian that we mentioned earlier? Can I read one more quote from him? I think he does a good job expressing the Orthodox tradition on this. Here's what he said: "The power of love works in two ways. It torments the sinners even as it happens here when a friend suffers from a friend, but it becomes a source of joy for those who have observed its duties. Therefore, the same love of God, the same energy will fall upon all men, but it will work differently." It's just what Paul said, the comparison, the parallel. It's what Paul the apostle said of the gospel. It's the savor of life unto life for those who believe, but it's the savor or stench of death for those who don't believe. [2 Cor. 2:16]

MM: Okay, suppose these people don't like God's love. Why does God insist on doing something that he knows that they'll find unpleasant?

SM: Because he's sovereign, and his love is agape, it's unconditional. He loves whether you love him back or not. He doesn't love because he anticipates a certain response from us. You see what I'm saying?

MM: He's going to love whether we like it or not.

SM: He's going to love because that's who he is. He's going to love whether we like it or not, and whether we receive it or not. That's who he is, he's God. God is love. For God to do something other than love would be a conflict of who he is. He'd cease to be who he is if he didn't love.

MM: And you can't just ignore it.

SM: Well, you can, but it's hell, buddy. Right? (laughing) It's hell if you ignore it, if you try to resist it. Let's play this out a minute. You're the seminary prof, but I want to play the devil's advocate, okay? I'm going to walk this out and I'm going to ask you the question that maybe the viewer would. Is God pure love, first of all? The obvious answer is yes.

MM: Yes.

SM: If he's pure love, could anything come from him that's not loving?

MM: No.

SM: No. Does wrath come from him?

MM: Yes.

SM: So is wrath an expression of his love?

MM: Somehow, it must be.

SM: It's got to be. You follow down that trail and there's no other way around it. If God is love, and he is, and if pure love can only do what's loving, and that's true, and wrath comes from God, and it does, then it has to be an expression of love or else God is not loving. People grapple with this: "oh, I don't believe that." Then what are you going to believe? How are we going to explain the wrath of God unless we say God is not....

Some say, "Well, love is just one characteristic of God." Really? What are the others? "Well, wrath." By wrath do you mean hate against sinners? That was the view I held. I thought God hated sinners, reprobates. That's the viewpoint many hold. "You're saying God is part love and part hate? At the least you'd have to admit [I'd say to this imaginary critic] that God is not pure love if he's part hate."

MM: You need to catch him on a good day.

SM: Exactly. What is agape? Let's back it up a step. Not only is God not pure love, but he's not even agape, unconditional love, because if it's unconditional, then what would make him hate? If this would make God hate instead of love, then the love that's left is not unconditional, because there

was a condition that wasn't met that caused it to become hate. Am I talking in circles or does that make sense?

MM: It connects with a couple other ideas — but many people think that the wrath of God means that God desires to punish. And that ties in with what you had said earlier about God not punishing Jesus on the cross. God has no desire to punish us — he wants to rescue us.

SM: He has rescued us, in fact.

MM: Oh. Done deal.

SM: It is finished. I heard that line somewhere before. He has rescued us whether we acknowledge it or not.

MM: Continuing in Romans 1, I find it interesting that Paul describes what God does in his wrath. Paul is eloquent about how bad they are, and in verse 24, “Therefore, God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity...” etcetera... In other words, he let them do what they wanted.

SM: Right. What's the rest of the verse? “So that their bodies would be degraded among them.” What's sin going to do? Left to itself, what will sin do in a person? Those people or any of us, what will sin do?

MM: It hurts.

SM: It hurts. There's a penalty. We will spiral downward. The wages of sin is still death. But once we get down to that place of death, now we're in a great spot, because guess what? Our God's grace doesn't make *sick* men well, our God's grace makes *dead* people live. So for God to raise you up, you have to get dead enough. Does God call sin sinful behavior? No. But the grace of God is so big that sin won't get the last word. Our God says, let sin give its best shot, and when it's killed you, I will raise you up, because that's what I do. That's my thing — resurrection.

MM: In a way, Jesus has already killed sin.

SM: He has. You guys do a remarkable job here at Grace Communion International of helping folks understand the difference between union and communion, objective and subjective. There is the objective reality that exists, and it's real. Hebrews 9:26 says, “At the consummation of ages he's been manifest to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.” Jesus, in the objective sense, he's dealt with sin once and for all. Here's the wonderful thing. Sin is not an offense to God. It's not like sin does something to God. God defeated sin. He vanquished and defeated sin. Sin does nothing to God.

Somebody might say, then why does God care about sin? Does God not hate sin? Sure he hates it. Why? Because of what it does to you and me. We still live in this little box called time/space. The objective reality is he's dealt with sin, but in this little box we're living in, called time and space, in the

experiential subjective sense, we can still experience the consequence, the penalty, the punishment of sin. God hates it for that reason, because he loves us and doesn't want to see us hurt. God doesn't say to us, "Don't sin because I hate it when people do that. It really just bugs me — I'm holy and righteous and I'm so squeaky clean it just disgusts me to see people do something nasty and dirty and sinful."

MM: Violating my rules.

SM: Exactly. "You're offending my sensitivities." No, that's ridiculous. God says that same thing he said to Adam and Eve about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil: Don't do that because it's going to kill you. Don't do that, it's going to hurt you. I love you, and I hate sin not because of what it does to me, God says, but because of what it does to you. I love you and I don't want to see you hurt. That's God's thing with sin today, in this world we live in. It's not what it does to him, but what it does to us in the subjective world.

MM: That would explain why we should avoid sin even though we've already been forgiven.

SM: Right. We avoid sin because sin is drinking poison and God loves us.

MM: What if we like the taste of that poison?

SM: That's a good question, and the one who would seriously ask that, would reveal that they don't know their identity in Christ. Because the truth is, we *don't* love the taste of that poison. Here's the thing — that apple tastes good until it gives you a stomachache, and then you realize yuck, the pleasure of sin is, as the Bible says, for a season. It's got a sweet taste coming in, but boy does it turn sour on my stomach in a hurry.

The picture I've given is a guy walking down the road and he looks over here, and here's the sin house. He hears music and there's a party going on, and it looks like they're having a fun time in there. The guy says, "I'd like to live in that place." He goes in there, and the minute he walks into the sin house with all kinds of things going on, the guy immediately says, "This is as wonderful and exhilarating and thrilling as I thought it would be," because there is pleasure in sin for a season. It's gratifying. Not satisfying, but gratifying.

He gets a rush out of it, but then after a while he's in the sin house and he starts thinking, "This is getting old. I don't know." But the thing of it is, he can't find his way out. The longer he's trapped in there, the more he hates it, until finally the place that he couldn't wait to get into, now that he's in it, he finally, in fact soon, reaches a place where (because it's not his nature to live in that house), from the depths of his being he finds his heart crying out,

“God, get me out of here. I don’t want to be in here.” Why do we like the taste of sin? The answer is, we don’t. We only *think* we do. It’s got a momentary flavor that appeals to us, but it will quickly turn on you.

MM: The perception is the key element.

SM: It’s not our nature to like sin. Sin is resident in us. Paul said in Romans 7, “So now if I’m doing the thing I don’t want to do, I’m not doing it, but sin which dwells in me.” He said that in two verses in Romans 7, within three verses apart. He was drawing a distinction between his authentic self, his true identity in Christ, and the power of indwelling sin, which he says again and again in Romans 7 is “in my members.” It’s not who I am.

I jokingly tell people the first time I went to London, England, I had a kidney stone, but I never asked anybody to call me Rocky. It was in me, but it didn’t define me. In the same way, there’s the power of indwelling sin that’s in our members, but that’s not who we are. Let me tell you who we are. Who we are is that we’re righteous, called, holy, set-apart people who, if we will get out from under the lie — and how do you do that? You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free. The truth is a person named Jesus, and when we come to know him, we will understand we don’t want to live a life of sin.

Back to the verse in Titus, “The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, teaching us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires.” It doesn’t teach us to sin. Grace doesn’t make you want to sin – grace makes you want to glorify the Lord and say no to sin.

MM: Because of the grace, we desire the divine life more, and these other things aren’t part of the divine life. There’s no attractiveness there.

SM: Right. There’s an inconsistency. There’s a momentary appeal to it. Let’s not talk as if there’s *no* attraction to sin. But the fact that sin is pleasurable doesn’t say something about our nature – it says something about the nature of sin. That speaks of the nature of sin, not our nature. It’s not natural for us to live in sin because that’s not our nature. I can teach your dog to walk on its back legs, but it will never be comfortable doing it, because it’s not his nature to do it. Peter the apostle said in 2 Peter 1:4, “We’ve become a partaker of divine nature.” We sin, but there’s always this internal conflict when we commit sins, because something deep within us, namely the Spirit, the new man knows that’s not who I am. It might gratify, but it won’t satisfy, because I’m not living out of my core. I’m not living out of my authentic self when I do that.

MM: I wanted to go back to your image of this person trapped in the house of sin. How real is it? They think they’re trapped.

SM: It’s an illusion. They’re not trapped.

MM: It's a hologram.

SM: It's like the elephant at the circus. You come outside the circus tent and there's a two-ton elephant there with a chain this long and he's hooked to a little post in the ground. That elephant could drag a Greyhound bus down the road, but he thinks that thing's holding him there. Why does he think that? Because when he was a baby elephant, they put a big chain around his leg and put the other end on something he couldn't drag, and he lived that way day after day until he began to be conditioned, "I cannot move when this chain is on my leg." So he becomes this huge elephant, and he could drag a bus down the road, but when they put the chain on his leg he stands there thinking he can't move.

What holds him in that spot? Is it the chain? No, what holds him there is a lie. A faulty perception holds him there. That's what keeps people in this imaginary sin house. They think they're trapped. They believe the lie that they can't get out. But the truth is, sin has no power over us. When we understand the grace of God, we'll know what Paul meant when he said, "Sin shall no longer have dominion over you because you're not under law but under grace." We understand it when we lock in on what grace really is — unconditional love and acceptance, divine enablement for us to be all that we've been called to be and do all we've been called to do. Then we can walk out of that house just that quick. It's a mirage. It's not real.

MM: A lot of people walk out of that house and kind of want to go back in sometimes.

SM: Then they didn't stay long enough.

MM: (laughing).

SM: I'm serious. Martin Luther said this: "When thou sinnest, sin boldly." That green apple didn't give you a stomachache? Eat three more and watch what happens. They hadn't hit bottom, in other words. I'm not advocating sinful behavior, but I'm telling you, let sin run its course, and the wages of sin is death, and you won't want to go back there again.

MM: A little aversion therapy.

SM: Yeah. That's the good point. We found out that the new man, which is who we are in Christ, does have an aversion to sin. Read Romans 7, verses 16 through the end of the chapter where Paul says, "I don't understand myself at all. I'm doing the things I hate and the things I want to do I don't do." Does that sound like a man who wanted to sin? Not at all. It is our nature, when we understand who we are in Christ, to hate sin. We don't want to live that way. If we think people are going to do what they want, let them — they'll hit bottom. I think we're overly sin conscious in the modern church. If we were as Christ-conscious and taught others to be as Christ-conscious

as the Bible says we can be, sin would become a moot point.

Here's a passage in Hebrews (I love talking about the Old Testament sacrifices). Hebrews 10, starting in verse 1, "The law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, it can never by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year make perfect those who draw near" [NASB]. The law cannot perfect, the sacrifices could not perfect people. Look at verse 2, "Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered?" Why? "Because the worshipers, having been once cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sin."

Paul, or whoever wrote Hebrews, says that if the old covenant sacrifice had been a perfect sacrifice and those people had been permanently cleansed, they wouldn't have even thought about sin anymore. He goes on and says in verse 3, "But in those sacrifices there's a reminder of sin year by year." The implication is, we come over to the new covenant and Jesus is the perfect sacrifice and we have been cleansed completely, past, present, and future, so we don't need to live with sin consciousness. We need to live with Jesus-consciousness.

MM: Focus on the positive.

SM: Focus on Jesus. I often tell about how I loved basketball when I was a teenager, and I played every weekend. On Fridays I played till late at night, because I didn't have to go to school. If you had said the Friday will come, the time will come you can't play basketball on Fridays, I would have said you're crazy. But one Sunday I went to church and on Sunday morning in Sunday School a girl came in that I had never seen, and when I met that girl I thought, "I want to ask her out." I ended up asking that girl to go out on a date, and I went out the next Friday night with her.

The next morning on Saturday my friends came over banging on my door and said, "Where were you? You know we play basketball every Friday night." I was a 16-year-old boy. I said, "I was with a chick. I didn't have time for basketball." I dated that girl every Friday for three years and I ended up marrying her, and I've been married to her now since 1973, and I cannot tell you when I played basketball on Friday night. Why? Not because I disciplined myself to give up Friday night basketball, but because I found something I wanted more. That's the thing about sin. We don't live with sin consciousness — we fall so in love with Jesus that sin loses its grip over us and we just walk out, because we're holding hands with Jesus and walk away from it without even thinking about it, without struggling against it.

MM: That is great.

SM: Isn't it great? I think of the old song we used to sing when I was a teenager — you're my age, I bet you remember the song we sang that said,

turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full into his wonderful face. Do you remember the next part? No? You lived a sheltered life, didn't you?

MM: I did. I didn't have TV, didn't go to church.

SM: You were spared some things and you were deprived of others, and I won't say which is which, but I'll let you figure out which one you were deprived of and which one you were spared from, but there's the old song that says, turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full into his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace. And that's it.

God's not mad — God's delivered us from sin. Now we are back to what we started with — the wrath of God, even that is an expression of his love. Let's get it down in our minds once and for all — God is love. If you ever hear, read, see anything that seems to contradict that, then let's step back away from it a minute and say, wait a minute, I must be misinterpreting what I'm hearing, seeing, or reading, because God is love. Let's settle that once and for all. Let's not put God on trial every time something comes along we can't make sense of and say, is God really love? No. Let's settle that.

We may not have answers for everything. We won't, but that's okay. We don't have to have answers for everything. Our God is a mystery, so we push up to the edge of our understanding as far as we can push and then we stop and say okay, all I know is that in the fog there beyond what I can see, there's a God who is love, and we live with that assurance even when we can't make sense out of it — whether it's hell, wrath, the sin house, anything else.

76. THE GRACE WALK, REVISITED

J. Michael Feazell: Steve, it's great to have you with us again.

Steve McVey: Thank you – glad to be here, Mike.

JMF: You wrote *Grace Walk* back in the 1990s.

SM: The book came out in '95; I wrote it in '94.

JMF: Okay. Around 1990, you started to have a change in your understanding of what it meant to be a Christian, what it meant to trust in God. Can you talk about how that happened? What led to writing your first book, *Grace Walk*? Then we want to talk about where you've come since.

SM: There have been two really significant years in my life in terms of the development of my understanding of God, of myself, of other people, and salvation. The first was in 1990. I had been a senior pastor for 17 years. I had been a Christian for 29 years. I grew up in a Christian family; my parents took me to church as long as I can remember. I became a senior pastor at the age of 19. I was one of these go-getters who just wanted to build my church and reach people. For the most, I had felt very successful. I wrote about it in my first book, *Grace Walk*, that you just mentioned. Churches I served grew numerically and the members loved me and I loved the members and things went well.

To compress the story, in 1990 I went to a church in Atlanta, Georgia, thinking that I was going there to build a great mega-church. The church I'd left had been a growing church and by all the ways that I measured success back then, I considered myself successful, and the people there didn't want me to leave. It was a small town in Alabama and I thought when I get to Atlanta, the potential there is so much greater, there's no telling what's going to happen there. I prayed for the Lord to really use my life in an unprecedented way for me. I believed that it was going to explode, and I'd ask God to do whatever he wanted to do in my life, to cause me to know him as intimately as I could.

Let me slow down there, because it's so important. Let me say it again, I prayed for God to do whatever he needed to do in my life to cause me to know him in as intimate a way as I could. I didn't really understand what I was praying, because when I moved to Atlanta, I thought I was going to go there and this church was going to grow, grow, grow. The church I went to had been declining in every measurable way for five years. Everywhere I'd been, that would reverse when I got there and pulled out my programs – church-growth programs and my home-run sermons and all of this.

But to my dismay, the church continued to decline in every way. I became frustrated, and that frustration turned into discouragement, and that discouragement turned into depression. If you read my book *Grace Walk*, the first sentence says, “It was October 6th 1990 and I was lying on my face in the middle of the night crying.” The reason I was crying was because everything I’d done to cause that church to grow had failed. I was about to have to get up the next day (because I had told the church I would) and give a state of the church address where I was going to share with them how.... Typically I’d always used it as a time to share how we’d move forward and cast vision for the next year, but nothing had happened to celebrate in my first year there. It was lying on my face, October 6th 1990, that I came to the end of myself. I call it brokenness, giving up on my own ability to manage my own life and ministry.

Lying there, I poured out of my mind and my consciousness everything I’d been depending on to give me a sense of value, to make me feel that I was successful, that I was lovable, that I was significant. I said, “Lord, I’ve been depending on all these things to move me forward spiritually and in every way, but I quit. I give it up.” I said, “If this is the Christian life, it’s overrated.” I said, “If this is what ministry is, I want out.” Then in anger I hurled an accusation against God in prayer, lying on my face, I’ll never forget, I said, “God, I’ve given my whole life to you, what do you want from me?”

The thought came into my mind—and I knew it didn’t originate from me—the words came into my mind, “Steve, I just want you.” That was new to me, because when the Lord spoke that in my heart, it resonated up into my consciousness. I realized that God didn’t want me so that I could build big churches or counsel people or even lead people to Christ or preach good sermons or any of that. I began to realize when he said that, he meant: “I don’t need you as an employee. I’m not looking for a maid, I’m looking for a bride.” In other words, “I’m looking for somebody in my church to pour my love into and for them to experience this intimacy with me.” Over the weeks that followed, I began to study things like Romans 6 and Galatians, where Paul talks about our identity in Christ and what it means to live free from the law (I was very legalistic at the time).

My life began to transform as he revealed my identity to me and who I am. I began to understand what it meant when the Bible says, “We’ve been crucified with him.” I began to understand what Paul meant in Galatians 2:20 when he said “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” That was a turning point in my life because I had given my whole lifetime to try and to perform for God, to do for him, to make sure that I made spiritual progress and gained

his blessings based on what I could do. The Lord began to show me that that's not what grace is—that's the essence of legalism: thinking we can make progress or earn God's blessing based on what we do. The Lord began to show me that grace is the expression of his love toward us, so that we're blessed and we make progress not because of what we do but because of what he's done.

That was the greatest turning point in my life up till that time, from the time that I had begun to trust him as a young boy. Everything changed. The life I lived was what missionary Hudson Taylor called "the exchanged life," that was the phrase that I often used. When I wrote a book I called it the *Grace Walk*, but Hudson Taylor called it the exchanged life. Andrew Murray I believe called it the life, Ruth Paxton called it life on a higher plane, Watchman Nee called it the normal Christian life.

The bottom line, whatever you want to call it, is that life in which we understand that we're not our own source but we actually live by the life of another person. It's not grace in our walk, it's not us trying to do things for Christ, but to the contrary, it is Christ doing things through us. He's the source, and that makes all the difference. I've never been the same since the Lord began to show me that. I'm still growing in my knowledge of what that means.

JMF: You wrote a series of books starting around that time, you wrote *Grace Walk*...

SM: My second book was *Grace Rules*. My third book initially was called *Grace Land* and after some years the publisher changed the title to *Grace Amazing*. Those first three books that I wrote (I've written nine) specifically dealt with the topic of who we are in Jesus Christ and what it means to live in grace, because that is such a transformational message for people to understand.

JMF: So around '95, though, more things happened.

SM: 1995 is when *Grace Walk* came out, and for a number of years I taught and still teach what Hudson Taylor called exchanged life, I call the Grace Walk. Basically it's the teaching that we died with Jesus Christ, we were co-crucified with him, we were buried with him and when Jesus was raised we were raised to walk in the newness of life. That is the message that I have been teaching since 1990, and also teaching what it means to live in grace as opposed to living in legalistic religion, and there's a big difference between those two. From 1990 up through 2004, I taught what I called and many have called the believer's identity in Christ.

But in 2004, that was the second significant year in my life where a real

radical paradigm shift came. That was when I began to be exposed to what I believe now to be the broader message of grace, or if you prefer the deeper message of grace. I like the way the apostle Paul referred to God's grace as the *manifold* grace of God. The word means multi-faceted. You look at a diamond from a certain angle and you see the beauty of it, but when you shift it, and a different facet is exposed and the light catches it in another way, now you see this diamond from another facet and you realize that it's more beautiful than you had initially known.

One of the things that the Lord began to show me in 2004, that I think is so important for all of us to understand is this: we never graduate with our advance degree in grace. In other words, we're always growing. Peter said, "Grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." The apostle Paul described the love of God as fathomless, we cannot fathom it. In 2004 I was first exposed to some Trinitarian writers. I think my first exposure was to Baxter Kruger and his book *The Great Dance*, and other things that he has written. I heard some of Baxter's podcasts and some of the interviews he did with you. Baxter put me onto the Torrance brothers, and I began to read Thomas Torrance and some of his things, and the circle widened. I began to watch *You're Included* and see some of these guys.

It's like I began to say, "I thought I hit the mother lode when I began to understand the Grace Walk, or the exchanged life," but I began to realize, "I don't have a degree in grace because we never graduate from that school, from that course of learning." It was by the things that Torrance wrote, and it was by the understanding that this efficacy of the cross of Jesus Christ didn't just apply to Christians but that the efficacy of the cross of Christ applied to all humanity. It's as if Grace 101 now expanded to Grace 201 and I began to say, "That which was facilitated in the lives of mankind by Jesus is not a reality merely because I give it a thumbs up by walking down the aisle and shaking the pastor's hand on Sunday morning, or with a profession of faith, or by praying a sinner's prayer or by anything that I do."

I began to understand, "The objective reality of what Jesus did is true for everybody, whether they believe it or not." You won't benefit from it if you don't believe it, you won't experience the reality of it, but I began to see "This is true for all of us." That was 2004 as the Lord showed me that, and I didn't talk about it for five years. It was only five years later that I began to publicly speak about this, because I thought, "This is off the charts. Grace can't be this big. I know I've said God's love is bigger than you can imagine, but I didn't mean this."

JMF: In our baptism we'll say such language as "Do you accept Jesus

Christ as your personal Savior?” and it’s as though our first exposure to grace is “I’m a sinner and I need salvation and I need Christ in my life.” I, I, I ... We go about focused on how do I walk with Christ and so on. It doesn’t occur to us yet that we are part of a humanity that has been rescued in total.

SM: That’s exactly the thing that shocked me, because like everybody that I’ve grown up and around (I suppose it’s true in the Western world; we have such an individualistic mentality), that it’s about me, and as you said, Jesus is my personal Lord and Savior. Nobody’s denying that we each have a personal relationship to God the Father through Jesus, but the key is that what Jesus did, he did for us all. I taught many times from Romans 5: “As through one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, even so in the same way through the obedience of the one the many are made righteous.” I would say, “Just like we were all utterly sinful to the core in Adam,” then I would say, “Those who believe are utterly righteous to the core now.”

But now I understand that my exegesis of that verse was not complete, because the Bible is saying that just as what Adam did had universal effect on humanity, so is it the case that what Christ did had universal effect on humanity. As the program title here says *You’re Included*, we’re all included. We don’t make it so by believing it; we believe it because it is so. That was a change for me. My appeal used to be, “Won’t you believe on Jesus and be made right with God? Won’t you believe on Jesus and be put in union with the Father? Won’t you believe on Jesus and have your sins forgiven? He’ll forgive you *if* you’ll just ask him.”

That negates the statement of Jesus when he said “It is finished.” When Jesus said “It’s finished,” that’s what he meant. As a guy who taught grace for many years, from 1990 till 2004, I was teaching the grace of God (and certainly I’ll call it a level up from where I had been because at least I knew it was him more than I had) but I still found myself saying that it only becomes when *you* do it. It wasn’t really finished at the cross, it’s not finished until *you* do it. I often say these days, “Jesus’ last words on the cross were not ‘Your move.’ His words were ‘It’s finished.’”

JMF: Now it’s your turn, over to you.

SM: No, that’s not it. It’s finished. It’s finished whether you believe it or not. As Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.” I always knew that part in the next verse: “So we go out like ambassadors, as though we were speaking on God’s behalf, saying, be reconciled to God” but I zeroed in on that, and I neglected the first of that passage in 2 Corinthians 5 that says, “We have been reconciled.” Everybody’s been reconciled, so the authentic gospel

is to go to people and say, “You’ve been reconciled through Jesus. Our triune God has made it right for everybody. Now, you believe it: make that objective reality your subjective experience by believing it.” It amazes me how that rattles folks sometimes when we say that, but I’ll be quick to say it thrills others.

JMF: Many people are afraid to believe the gospel because they don’t believe it could apply to them because they think, “I’m so bad that I’ve got to get better before I can take that step.”

SM: Isn’t that the truth. Despite the fact that Jesus said that we all have need for the physician. The more desperate we think our situation is, in actuality we might say, the more suited we are to experience his grace. Because grace is experienced not by those who think they have it all together. Jesus came for us all and we realize none of us has it all together. None of us has dotted the I’s and crossed the T’s and got it all sorted out. We all need grace. We all need it equally. I’ve taught for many years on the topic of brokenness. Brokenness is that condition that exists when we’ve given up all confidence in our ability to manage life, when we come to that point where it’s “I just can’t do it. I could never do it. I can’t.” That’s the point where we experience grace.

Even a lot of believers will say “I want to rededicate myself to Christ and I’m going to try harder to do better.” How many times do we have to do that before we realize it doesn’t work? You know the old definition of insanity, but how many of us have done the same thing the same way over and over and over and yet, we’ll find ourselves at the place where we say, “But this time I really mean it.”

JMF: Yeah, and you feel like you do mean it. But you sin again, and then you’re back where you started.

SM: That’s right. I call it the motivation, condemnation, rededication cycle. Most of us have lived on that cycle, many of us for a long time.

JMF: Say the cycle again.

SM: The motivation is where you charge hell with a squirt gun, “I can do it all, I’m excited for Jesus.” Condemnation is when you backed off and realize “I’m not doing all the things that I think I should be doing,” and you wallow in self-condemnation. Rededication is where I say, “Lord, if you’ll just please forgive me, I’m going to try harder to do better with your help. I’ll do better this time.” We rededicate ourselves and then move back to motivation. Mostly back to the rededication of ourselves.

The problem is self. That’s the whole problem: self is the problem. We’re not alive from the self life. The biblical word the apostle Paul used for that is *flesh*. “Walking after the flesh” is the phrase of the Bible, which means

basically the self life. Me living out of my own resources and abilities. You can rededicate that and buy some time (many of us have), and you'll experience the same failure that you did last time. That's not the answer. No matter how sincere we are, it's coming to the end of self that's the answer. Not saying "It's hard for me to live the Christ life," but instead acknowledging the fact it's *impossible* for me to live the Christ life. There's only one who can live . . .

JMF: We're saved by grace through faith. We turn faith into a work. We know it's by grace, but then we say it's through faith. I need faith, we say to ourselves, and it's been preached. That's what you're talking about, you've got to, when you believe, when you accept this, when you do your part to accept it, then God will change his mind towards you, apply the sacrifice and resurrection of Christ to you, when you take the step of faith. But we *do* need to believe, so how does that work?

SM: Let's start with a comparison of the new and the old covenant. We know the new covenant is better—if you read the book of Hebrews, the word *better* is a commonly used word in that book. One thing Hebrews does is to compare the new and the old covenant and the sacrifices and the priest. In the old covenant, when the priest on the Day of Atonement offered up the sacrifice, what was it that caused that sacrifice to be efficacious? Was it the faith of the people? In other words, if some Jewish guy was out there and he didn't come to the temple that day and the high priest offers up the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement, that guy out there, he's not expressing faith in the sacrifice, he's out there doing his thing.

Was that sacrifice efficacious for that man? The answer is yes. Because it wasn't the behavior, the belief, the faith of the guy out there that caused his sins to be covered under the old covenant for another year. It was the purity of the sacrifice. It was the sacrifice that God looked at, not the man and his performance or his belief. I think most people would agree with what I've just said, that guy out there in Israel, if he wasn't at the temple, he was covered by that sacrifice with or without faith.

Now we come to the new covenant. Are we going to say that under the new covenant, that somehow it's less than the old covenant? No. Jesus was the perfect sacrifice for all humanity, and the efficacy of what he did on the cross applies to everybody whether they believe it or not. As you said, do we need faith? Yes. Why? Because the writer of Hebrews in chapter 2 verse 4 said, "The same gospel that was declared unto us was declared unto them [unbelievers] also but it profited them or benefited them nothing because they did not combine the truth with faith." The guy who doesn't believe in

the sacrifice of Jesus, does the sacrifice apply and has it fulfilled its purpose for him? Yes, it has. But if he doesn't believe, he will not enter into the joy, the experience, the subjective reality of the benefits of the cross.

Let's talk about the faith. A lot of folks who talk about grace are quick to say "Jesus is my righteousness," and we'll say "Amen." They'll say, "Jesus is my peace"; we'll say "Amen." "Jesus is my wisdom" (Paul said that in 1 Corinthians 1:30, "It's by his doing that you've been put into Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom and righteousness," and he goes on). Some of those people that I'm speaking of now will say, "But you have to have faith. You have to generate faith"—as if faith is some currency that we spend with God to get what we need. The Bible teaches, no, Jesus is your faith, too. In Galatians Paul talked about "before faith came" and then "after faith came," and he personifies faith there, because faith is Jesus himself.

To go back to the old King James Version I like, our newer translations sometimes don't nail this exactly because they'll talk about faith in Jesus so in Galatians 2:20 we'll talk about "The life that I now live I live by faith in the Son of God." But if you go back to some of the older translations, even the King James Version, Galatians 2:20 will read, "The life that I now live in the flesh I live by the faith *of* the son of God." That's an important distinction. It's not even our faith – it's his faith in us, and all we do when we say "I don't have faith." Well, welcome to the world, if you think you can't generate faith on your own – you're right. What we do is we lean in, and we align ourselves, so to speak, with the faith of Jesus, and he's got plenty of faith for us. That's what enables us to experience the reality.

JMF: We wind up trusting in our faith.

SM: Faith in faith, that's right.

JMF: Then we question our faith. We know our faith is poor. Sometimes it's great and then sometimes, most of the time, it's kind of in the toilet. We struggle with "I need faith for salvation. I don't seem to have any faith; I'm lost." So we're back in depression again. But we're not trusting in our faith, we're trusting in the person, we're trusting in Jesus himself, who has faith for us. We can trust in his faith and in him in every way to cover all the bases that we can't cover, because we can't cover any of them. We're dead in sin. He's the one who raises us in righteousness. What a comforting and encouraging thing to get ahold of it and quit worrying so much.

SM: You've nailed it. If we could just get in our minds this reality: it's finished. "You who were once so far off, have been brought near by the blood of Christ," Paul said.

JMF: "Have been"—past tense.

SM: “Have been brought near.” When did that happen? It happened at the cross. It doesn’t happen when we press the magic button saying the magic words — it happened at the cross. If we could just believe that. I’m speaking to me as well...

JMF: It applies at all times to all people going both directions.

SM: Right. It sweeps across time, it sweeps across forward and backward, because the cross is eternal. We think of the cross as being something that happened in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago, but in reality, the cross is eternal. The problem of man’s sin was remedied before the first molecule was created, because he is the lamb slain from the foundation of the world. If that truth really gets ahold of us, it would cause a sigh of relief. It would release us from thinking that we have to do something to either get in God’s favor or stay in his favor, because we don’t.

He has taken care of it all through the incarnation. He’s identified himself as a man with us, and he’s inseparably joined us together to his Father through the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. We’re joined together in him, before the Father. “seated with Christ in the heavenlies,” Paul says. We’re not big enough to change that. We’re not big enough to nullify what Jesus has done. If we just believed and understood it, can you imagine the kind of stress that would roll off of our minds and lives?

JMF: Isn’t that a new creation?

SM: That’s right, yeah.

JMF: Thanks for being here and going through this stuff. Great stuff.

SM: Thank you Mike, it’s my pleasure to be here.

77. RELATIONSHIPS AND EVANGELISM

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 Melancthon, 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

sinner 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.

78. 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 concern 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.

79. 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.

80. 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.

81. KEEPING CHRIST AT THE CENTER

J. Michael Fezell: We wanted to begin by talking about your book, *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity*. Tell us how you came to know Thomas Torrance and how you came to write the book.

Paul Molnar: It started in the early 1980s when I read his book *Reality and Evangelical Theology* — that was my first exposure to Torrance’s writing, and I enjoyed it a lot. I was at a theological conference and someone asked who your favorite theologian was, and most people at the conference had Karl Rahner as their favorite theologian, so I said, “My favorite theologian is Thomas F. Torrance.” I had read that book, and then I had read a couple others besides, when I got that question. The person looked at me like I had three heads, because he had never heard of Thomas F. Torrance.

Subsequently I read most of his writings, and I was quite impressed. For good reason, Torrance is thought of as the most important British theologian of the 20th century. He taught for many years at the University of Edinburgh. He didn’t formally teach the doctrine of the Trinity for political reasons (because another professor was teaching that course), but he did work the doctrine into all of his lectures in Christology and so on. He didn’t write his books on the Trinity until after he retired — his two major works on the Trinity.

What impressed me the most about Torrance was his vast knowledge of patristic theology and his ability to not only demonstrate a clear understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, but to show how the doctrine of the Trinity functions, enlightening us in our knowledge of Christ, the Incarnation, atonement, redemption, ascension, resurrection, the church, and the sacraments.

The reason I came to write this book was to show that side of Torrance which I was most interested in — his dogmatic theology. Torrance is famous for doing work in theology and science, which is also very important and very good, but my special emphasis in this book was looking at his dogmatic theology, showing how Trinitarian thinking shaped all of his doctrines. That’s where I went with this book.

JMF: And you’ve met him a couple of times.

PM: I invited him to St. John’s University in 1997 with the help of his son, Iain, who introduced me to him and enabled me to bring him to St. John’s. He came to St. John’s to speak on Einstein and God. He gave that same lecture at Princeton and Yale in 1997, and while he was there I had lots of time to get to know him. We had dinner together, we had lunch together,

we had quiet time together — driving in the car together, we talked theology. It was a great experience for me because by that point, I had been reading him for 15, 16 years, so I held him in awe, to be honest with you, just to be able to speak with him.

One morning when I went to pick him up at the hotel he said, “Call me Tom,” so my tongue nearly froze in my mouth when he said that. I couldn’t call him Tom — he’s Professor Torrance, the great theologian. When I introduced him to the audience at St. John’s — he had sent me a thick C.V., and he said just introduce me, I’m just a minister of the gospel. That wasn’t going to fly for me. Having had a C.V. this thick, I was going to say something. So I went through a long explanation of how important he was and the work he had done and so on. I’m not sure how well that pleased him, but he was polite about the whole thing.

He was in his 80s, though at that time he was quite young and we had good exchanges during the lecture and the question and answer session, and we took him to dinner afterwards and he had good exchanges with members of the theology department and the philosophy department. But he did indicate that that would probably be his last trip to the United States and that if I wanted to see him again, I would have to see him in Scotland, which, as it happened, I got to do two years later.

When I was lecturing at St. Andrews and at Aberdeen, I visited him at his house on Braid Farm Road in Edinburgh, and in his study we sat and chatted for three or four hours. It was quite an experience. I learned a great deal from him. We had many exchanges of emails and letters, and he would send papers to me that he had written, and I would send papers to him and he would write back to me with comments on them. So I got to know him quite well and I learned a great deal from him.

He’s affected my thinking a great deal. One of the major premises of my book *Divine Freedom* was that to think accurately about God, we would have to think from a center in God and not from a center in ourselves. I learned that from Tom Torrance. In my book on *Incarnation and Resurrection*, I learned the main thesis of the book from him, which is that you need to hold the incarnation and the resurrection together if you’re going to have a clear understanding of the meaning of the resurrection. To him that meant: If you tried to think about Jesus’ resurrection in abstraction from the incarnation, you would have what he called a docetic view of the resurrection.

A docetic view of the resurrection in his mind meant that you would undermine the fact that Jesus rose bodily from the dead. It would just be an ideal description of something that may simply describe the disciples’

reactions to Jesus, or it may describe some person's idea of life after death, but it wouldn't be an idea dictated by the fact that the resurrection was really the completion of the incarnation, in that it was also the completion of our reconciliation with God, by the fact that Jesus was raised bodily from the dead. So his thinking had affected my thinking a great deal.

JMF: Many people have a sense that the incarnation ended at the resurrection. In other words, Jesus does not continue to be fully human for us. Even at prayer they're thinking of Jesus as being fully God, but no longer thinking of him as being fully human for us.

PM: Yes. Torrance spends a great deal in his life's work undermining that idea. Why would it be important for Torrance to undermine that idea? It would be important because if Christ is not risen from the dead and ascended into heaven, and continually mediating between us and the Father in his full divinity and full humanity, in Torrance's mind, we would then have no human connection with God. That's one way of putting it. Another way of putting it that we're not really saved humanly.

For Torrance, Jesus' continuing high priestly mediation is of the utmost importance, because if he is not the continuing mediator between us and God, then something else or someone else would have to be inserted into his place and would become for us the supposed mediation between us and God. We would be cut off from God by even thinking of such another mediator, because there is no such thing — it would compromise God's oneness and God's three-ness.

God mediates *himself* to us, the Father through the Son in the Spirit, and to even suppose that there could be some intermediary other than Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate who continues to mediate humanly and divinely, would compromise both his divinity and his humanity and the meaning of our salvation. So there's a lot at stake.

JMF: What are examples of other mediators that anyone has proposed?

PM: Some theologians tend to emphasize what they call a theocentric theology, so that they could have the world religions agree about God. In their theocentrism, they would want to avoid the Christocentrism that would see Christ as the exclusive revealer and exclusive Savior of the world. Such theologians might argue that Christians could believe in Jesus as their Savior, but not as the Savior for everyone else, because that would be a kind of exclusivism that imposed Christianity on other religions and would undermine a proper pluralism, in their estimation.

But for Torrance, you can't be theocentric at all unless you're Christocentric, because Christ is the one mediator who not only mediates God to us,

but us to God, so that by sharing in his human knowledge of God, we have true knowledge of God. For Torrance, that's not something you can have if you construct a theocentrism that bypasses Jesus Christ, because that's essentially unitarian theology.

JMF: That would be the idea that all roads lead to the same God, and that as long as you have a belief in God, then that's the main thing, as opposed to recognizing that Jesus is the revelation of the Father.

PM: Right. People who hold that sort of theocentrism as opposed to Christocentrism are basically thinking that Christocentrism is the product of the church's response to Jesus.

JMF: Christocentrism meaning Christ at the center?

PM: Putting Christ at the center, seeing Christ as the exclusive Savior, for example, or as the exclusive revealer. They argue against the notion of exclusivism because they want to sound more open in a pluralistic society to other religions. But in my mind, they've given up the truth of the Christian faith, because what makes Christ unique and exclusively the revealer and Savior of the world is his eternal being as the only begotten Son of the Father. It's not something that's grounded in the reaction of the community — not the Christian community, not any community.

This is why Torrance rejected what he called Ebionite Christology and Docetic Christology. When he did his Christology, he stated that he didn't want to begin from below, as in Ebionite Christology, or from above, as in Docetic Christology, and then he defined the terms. For him, Ebionite Christology would be any sort of Christology which saw Jesus as an ordinary human being who became the Son of God at some point in his life, or perhaps at the resurrection. Or it was a Christology that Jesus was an already existing human being into whom the Word descended.

For Torrance, the miracle of the virgin birth signifies that the eternally begotten Son mysteriously, miraculously became incarnate, took flesh from the Virgin Mary through the power of the Holy Spirit. It's a miracle. It can't be explained, it can only be acknowledged. Therefore, Torrance would say, as he does in his book on the incarnation, that we must begin thinking Christologically with the fact of Jesus Christ. For him, the fact of Jesus Christ cannot be established historically from below, because if you just start with history, all your results theologically or conceptually would be historical results.

We must start in faith, recognizing and acknowledging who Jesus actually is. Torrance opposed that sort of Ebionite Christology which suggested that it was the community's response to Jesus, and that people *thought* of him as a

God; that made him unique, as an extraordinary human figure who people thought of as divine, but he wouldn't really be divine. In Torrance's mind, it's the deity of Christ that gives meaning to his human history because the hypostatic union, the second person or hypostasis of the Trinity becoming incarnate, is precisely the one who posits into existence his human history. There is no human history apart from his divine being. Docetic Christology is the idea that Jesus is just one particular historical embodiment of who God is, but not the *embodiment* of who God is. Torrance would reject both Christology from below and from above, arguing that we must begin by accepting history, humanity, and true divinity from the outset.

JMF: That raises a question... Jesus was perfect and obeyed his Father's commands and so on, and yet, as Torrance argues, he took our fallen nature on himself, that which is not assumed is not redeemed. How can both be true? How can he be perfect and yet take our fallen nature on himself?

PM: Let me give you what may at first sound like a perplexing answer to that question. Torrance would say we can't explain how that can be so, because if we could, we wouldn't need to acknowledge it and begin thinking about the reality in faith. But he would say it *can* be so, because in becoming human and assuming our fallen human nature into union with his divine being, God healed our self-will and therefore our sin, beginning with his becoming incarnate and continuing throughout his whole life of obedience through to his death on the cross and completely in the resurrection and ascension.

He would say that God never surrendered his divinity in becoming incarnate (so he could forgive our sins, because he was God incarnate), but he could also, from the human side, live our reconciliation subjectively in his perfect life of obedience. Unless the Word actually assumed our fully human nature, he wouldn't have come all the way to us within our human history. Redemption takes place within the personal being of the mediator, both so that when Jesus suffers God-forsakenness in obeying the Father, he lives out a human life in the midst of sin and temptation, in the midst of stresses and strains that would want to divide the unity that took place in the hypostatic union, but, in the end, did not do so.

JMF: Hypostatic union being ...

PM: The hypostatic union is the unique union of the divine Word and the human nature of Jesus. We participate in Jesus' humanity through faith in him. The hypostatic union is unique — there is no analogy for it in experience or in any form of knowing. Torrance would say that Jesus is an ultimate — no, Jesus is the ultimate. By *ultimate*, he means that in any science

you have to work with certain ultimates, without which the science wouldn't make any sense. Those ultimates cannot be proven or justified on any grounds other than the fact that they are what they are.

He would say that Jesus is who he is — the word of God incarnate. The hypostatic union is that unique event signifying that Jesus the Word was born of the Virgin Mary and that he was therefore truly divine and truly human throughout his entire life. Because Jesus is the ultimate, there is no ground for verifying who Jesus is outside of Jesus himself. That's why it's important to recognize that in the resurrection and ascension, Jesus continues to live and interact with us even now.

For Torrance to speak of the Holy Spirit is really to speak of the Holy Spirit uniting us to Christ. If you spoke of the Spirit and weren't speaking of our union with Christ through that Spirit and therefore through faith, you weren't speaking in, and by, and through, and about the Holy Spirit at all. That's crucially important — the fact that Jesus is the ultimate.

What it means to Torrance is: the first [group of] theologians, who try to verify who Jesus is in his uniqueness by a study of history or try to verify who Jesus is by some sort of *a priori* Christology, or what Karl Rahner calls a searching Christology, one that suggests that we can construct an understanding of what humanity is and what humanity is searching for, and in that search discover the true meaning of Jesus. Torrance would reject that sort of thinking because if that's the route we pursue, then it's our search that becomes determinative of who Jesus is — we no longer are absolutely in need of and rely on Jesus himself, who at present is disclosing to us who he is. That would be seriously problematic.

If I could give one example: I have it in my book on divine freedom, in chapter 6, where I contrast Torrance and Rahner on their interpretations of the resurrection. Rahner says that he's not going to begin with Jesus Christ, but with a transcendental experience. Rahner argues that wherever anyone hopes for some sort of life beyond death, that person already experiences the meaning of the resurrection, he says, perhaps anonymously, where Torrance would say you can't have an experience in the resurrection anonymously, because to have an experience of the resurrection is to know that Jesus Christ himself was raised from the dead and as such is the mediator who empowers us to know God conceptually.

He would say to Rahner, "You're holding what I would call a non-conceptual understanding of God." Rahner holds such an understanding when he argues that we have un-thematic, anonymous knowledge of God. Torrance would say there is no such thing as anonymous knowledge of God. Either you know God because your concepts are tied to the events depicted

in the gospel story — his incarnation, resurrection, preaching, and ascension. Either you know God conceptually, or you don't know God at all — you're describing your own experience, symbolically interpreted. Torrance was dead set against that sort of thing.

JMF: What is the right explanation for the idea of a person who doesn't know Christ and yet experiences good things and lives out good things and so on? Since Christ is the only source of what is good, isn't there a sense in which there's a participation in that which one doesn't know what he's participating in yet?

PM: In one sense, everybody is in relation with Jesus Christ. But theologically, to understand what that means, one would first have to understand who Jesus Christ was and what he did. Otherwise, the danger in the statement that you made to me is that one could argue that, as long as one is a good person, one is already a Christian.

I don't think we would want to equate the idea of being good with being a Christian because in being good, we could then rely on our own goodness with the idea that by being good, God somehow owes us our righteousness. However, Torrance argues that when Christ died for the sins of the world, he died not just for the bad part of us, but for the good part of us. He means that just by being good, we're not necessarily thereby Christians.

JMF: Yes. We're talking about two different things, in a sense. We're talking about what is the nature of the unbeliever, or the non-believer, or the not-yet-believer (or however we want to say it) in terms of their union with Christ by virtue of his incarnation on behalf of humanity, that on one side, and the nature of the relationship of the believer on the other. Not that the unbeliever is a Christian, but nevertheless, the non-believer is taken up into Christ in his incarnation.

PM: That's right. Objectively.

JMF: Right. And there is, to that degree, a participation in Christ whether he knows it or not.

PM: True.

JMF: But the believer enters into a relationship that is personal and is knowing and is a fellowship, friendship, walking with God, and worshipful personal relationship that transcends the other.

PM: Yeah. Let me clarify something that I said a few minutes ago when I was talking about Rahner's statement to the effect that those who have an experience of hope have an experience of the resurrection whether they know it or not. What that tends to mean in his thought is that we can rely on our experiences of hope in order to explain the meaning of Christ's resurrection.

The problem that I was pointing out was that for Torrance, you can't explain the resurrection by exploring people's experiences of hope, because the resurrection is its own explanation. We need to rely on the risen Lord himself to make sense of it to us.

When Rahner argued that you could have an anonymous experience of the resurrection just by having hope for eternal life, Torrance would say that is a docetic explanation of the resurrection, because it's equating the meaning of the resurrection with our hope for something beyond death. That's the point I was trying to get at. Christ died for the sins of the world so that everyone somehow is already included in his resurrection. The difference between Christians and others is that Christians recognize the meaning of that statement.

Any attempt to neutralize that statement by equating an experience of a knowledge of the resurrection with our experiences of hope for life beyond death subverts the need to believe in Christ's bodily resurrection and understand that as the meaning of eternal life. It could undermine the reality of eternal life, at least conceptually, because you would be equating it with something that's a universal experience instead of recognizing that it's something that can only be had and understood in faith by an actual union with the risen Lord — it loses specificity. Does that make better sense?

JMF: I think so. It would be the difference between recognizing that...to use an analogy, maybe not a very good one, but we all have a shadow if we're standing out in the sun. If you look at the shadow and then try to explain from the shadow what it means to be a human being, you wouldn't be able to get there from there. That doesn't mean that the shadow is not related in a very real and positive sense with a human being who is casting the shadow.

PM: In that sense, Christ's life to the resurrection casts a shadow over the entire human race, but only those who see the meaning of the events of his life understand the inner meaning.

JMF: It's an entry point for evangelism, it would seem, though, to be able to point out to someone that those things that are good in their nature, their love for their children, for example, doesn't come from nowhere — it's a reflection of who Christ is in them and with them as a human being. It isn't something that springs out of them, nor does it come from nowhere. It's that Christ is already at work in you. Christ already is in you. Why not come, why not acknowledge what the source of this love is, and know that you are loved and accepted, and turn to him? Does that make sense?

PM: Well, yes, but the danger in that is that the focus would then be on people's experiences of love and not on the one who empowers it.

JMF: What I mean is that to help a person who thinks, which many do, that I'm worthless, God doesn't love me, how could he? If you knew me like I do, then you wouldn't be telling me that God could actually love me, so I need to get good before we have this discussion. But instead, we're able to say to them, God already loves you and accepts you. Where do you think this came from, or that came from? God has already done everything necessary for you. Why not acknowledge that and turn to him?

PM: That makes sense. I'd agree with that.

JMF: That's at the heart of where many people have difficulty in trying to comprehend Trinitarian theology, because they assume "You're saying that if Christ's union with humanity through the incarnation has actually made a difference already and he had made himself one with humanity in such a way that he will not let it go, and will not be who he is without humanity, then you're saying that everybody, even unbelievers, are saved."

That isn't the point. The point is that everyone is in union [with Christ], but not that everyone is a believer and is participating in the relationship in the way that a believer would, in the transformational way. But as an entry point for evangelism, you are able to say not that you have to do something in order to get God to like you, but that he already does. He's already taken you up and done everything necessary for you.

PM: That's right.

JMF: But the difficulty people have, again, is that they think, "You're teaching universalism. You're saying everyone is saved no matter what they do, because they're in union with Christ." But there's a difference between "in union with Christ" as an unbeliever and being in communion with Christ in the way that believers are.

PM: Of course. Torrance says that universalism is a form of rationalism. He rejects both universalism and the idea of conditional salvation because he wants to say just what you said — that by uniting God and humanity in the history of Jesus Christ is, God has objectively unified us, overcome our self-will, our attempts to be independent of him, overcome our alienation, our suffering, and even death itself in the history of Jesus. That is taking place objectively, but also subjectively, in that Jesus was faithful to God in our place. That is the objective and subjective justification of the sinner, you might say.

As you said, we don't have to do anything in order for God to love us, and the very idea that we could, would miss the fact that he loves us while we're unlovable, because we're his enemies. But as you say, and Torrance says at one point... (well, you didn't quite say this, but it could be implied in what

you say – help me if it’s not the right thing! [laughing]) that none of us can say who is saved and who is not saved, because that’s God’s alone to do. It would be rationalism in the direction of universalism to make that statement. But on the other hand, to say that salvation is contingent on our response to the gospel, we throw salvation back on us and miss the point, the objective point that you were trying to make.

JMF: Exactly.

PM: He doesn’t want to say either of those things, because he’s leaving room for the grace of God, for God to act. God does will the salvation of all, and it is (in Torrance’s mind) utterly inexplicable that people would reject the Savior, but it happened once on the cross, and even after his death and resurrection, it still can happen, because Christ does not force himself on people. Even though the goodness that people have comes from God through Christ, they may never acknowledge that. It’s a possibility. Even when they do acknowledge that, I think Torrance would also say, even that’s not under their control. That’s the work of the Holy Spirit empowering them to see and to live subjectively what is objectively already a reality in the life of Christ.

JMF: By grace from beginning to end.

PM: Right.

82. GOD CHOSE TO ENTER OUR HUMANITY

Sin and salvation

JMF: There are a lot of ideas about salvation. I don't know if everybody wants to be saved, maybe not everyone thinks about it or cares, but those who do care want to be saved. What is the Bible driving at when it speaks of "salvation" and "being saved"? Is it being saved from sin, is it being saved from death, and that's it? Or what is salvation all about?

PM: It is being saved from sin *and* from death, because the consequences of sin and death are being cut off from God. I love the way C.S. Lewis puts it in his book *Mere Christianity*. He says, "The human machine was designed to run on God and there is no other possibility." The problem of sin is that we try to run on our own steam.

JMF: We're putting diesel in the gasoline engine.

PM: Exactly. Or sugar in the gas tank. So the human machine simply conks, and there's no way to solve that situation on our own, because we've created the problem by relying on ourselves (being in-turned upon ourselves, you might say), by being self-reliant, self-willed. Lewis argues that salvation means that we have to learn to un-train ourselves in what we've trained ourselves into for thousands of years, self-will, because it's self-will that cuts us off from our only source of happiness — God. Salvation is the overcoming of sin and death, but I agree with Torrance and Barth, who both argued that we don't even know the true meaning of sin until we see God's grace, until we see what he looks like in light of God's love for us in Jesus Christ.

Barth said that there is such a thing as an unprofitable focus on sin. It can lead you to be morose. But when you see that sin and death mean that we as individuals try to live independently of God, when God did design, as Lewis said, the human machine to run on himself...then it makes a whole lot of sense to realize that salvation is an act of God for us that we cannot accomplish ourselves, and therefore free grace. It's also an act that includes us humanly because Jesus was fully human, and that act of God healed us humanly because the sinful human nature that was assumed in the Incarnation is now healed. Christ lived the life that is sinless. None of us can do that.

JMF: What's the problem with sin? Why does sin...other than the fact that it's destructive and hurts and ruins relationships... (I guess I'm answering the question myself). Isn't ruined relationships what makes sin,

sin?

PM: Not necessarily, because you can speak about ruined relationships with psychologists...

JMF: But doesn't sin lie at the heart of that?

PM: No. Objectively, sin does lie at the heart of disrupted human relationships, but you can't simply equate the fact of disrupted human relationships with sin, because the real essence of sin is humans being self-willed, exercising their choices without trusting in God himself.

JMF: Isn't it being out of right relationship with God?

PM: Right.

JMF: And that results in bad human relationships.

PM: That's right. But you can't discover the meaning of sin by analyzing the human relationships, that's what I'm trying to say.

JMF: Right.

PM: Let me put it another way... Barth and Torrance say that we don't know the true meaning of sin except in and through Christ. The essence of sin was disclosed on the cross, in that even though we may claim that we want to live by grace, all of us are powerless to live by grace alone. Only God's grace, the love of God that comes to us in Jesus Christ, empowers our lives insofar as they are lived by God's gracious forgiveness of our sins in Christ. Therefore, seeing the true meaning of sin is not something that we can do for ourselves – it's something that comes to us as a disclosure from God when we see the events of the cross and the resurrection.

JMF: The separation or the alienation that we experience from God... sin lies at the heart of that.

PM: That's right.

JMF: You're saying God has acted from his side to forgive and...

PM: And also from the human side in Jesus Christ.

JMF: ...to a better way.

PM: Right. So that's the possibility of our salvation and the reality of our salvation.

JMF: The result of salvation, though, the product of salvation... maybe we could even say what salvation *is*, is to be back into the right relationship with God...

PM: Yes.

JMF: Not that we've ever been in the right relationship with God, but it's to become Christ's own relationship with God.

PM: Through Christ...right. So in Christ, we are in right relationship.

JMF: So salvation is being drawn into his relationship with the Father.

PM: Correct. I also like the chapter in C.S. Lewis’s *Mere Christianity*, “The Perfect Penitent,” where he says that nothing in God’s nature corresponds to submission, suffering, and death. Because out of free love for us, Jesus here is perfect God; he also becomes the perfect penitent. He doesn’t need to repent to believe, because he’s already perfect, but out of love for us, he can repent perfectly because he’s God, and he does it for us humanly and therefore when we share in his perfect obedience, we live the life that is ours in him. We can only do it because he enables us to do it.

JMF: And he didn’t have to be baptized either, but he does it...

PM:...vicariously for us. Right. When he was baptized, it’s not because he sinned, but because he assumed our sin for humanity and so his baptism was the beginning of his living a human life of perfect obedience, which culminated on the cross where he said, “Not my will, but thine be done,” and then experienced God-forsakenness.

That raises a number of issues among contemporary theologians — can God suffer and die? C.S. Lewis said that nothing in God’s nature corresponds to suffering, submission, and death. We have to live our salvation by submitting to Christ. Christ living for us as the Savior submits to God. There’s nothing in God’s nature that’s like that, but he says by becoming incarnate, God can suffer, surrender, submit, and die, and he can do it as God and man. Unlike some of the fathers in the early church who would say that God cannot suffer and die because God is perfect, C.S. Lewis says that God can suffer, surrender, and die both as God and as human in the incarnation.

Torrance is very good on this, too. He insists that God in Christ atones for our sins, bringing about repentance from within the person of the mediator. He would say that God both does suffer in our suffering, *and* he’s not a God who moves from our suffering.

One of the great things that I like about Torrance is that he says that if Jesus was just a man dying on a cross, then Christianity would be immoral. When I first read that, I said, “What is he talking about?” When I went further, I realized that he was making sense, because if Jesus was just a man dying on a cross, then salvation would be the equivalent of human sacrifice or some human attempt at self-justification by placating God, and that would be an immoral...

JMF: Isn’t that how a lot of people look at it? That God was very angry at humanity and...

PM: Something had to be done...

JMF:...then Jesus comes along, and he’s the one who loves humanity, so he says, if you’re going to be that angry, then kill me and I’ll take it on myself,

that kind of thing, that he stands in the gap.

PM: Yes. I think that is common. To use a more popular image, C.S. Lewis's said, "I don't like thinking of atonement in the police court sense" because he thought that concept was immoral before he became a Christian. (He had been an atheist.) He said, "Because that would imply that Christ did something wrong and needed to be punished in our stead." He said, "I would rather think of the atonement as a kind friend helping us out of the hole that we've gotten ourselves into by doing something for us that we can't do for ourselves."

Torrance's view comes much closer to that second view. Torrance argues, if you put *God* on the cross, then not only is it *not* immoral, but now you see the depth of the love of God — that God was willing to sacrifice his own Son out of love for us while we were incapable of helping ourselves. God is not only not remote from us (as he could be if Jesus was just an innocent man trying to placate the deity), but he's actually the deity involved in the suffering of Jesus in an act that was geared to, and did in fact, overcome all suffering and death.

So you might ask, if he overcame all suffering and death, why is there still suffering and death? The answer is that our history is not *automatically* Christ's history, that Christ gives us the freedom to respond and to live within that history of faith. He gives us that interval between his first coming and his second coming as the time of freedom in which we have that freedom, and we're given that freedom to live that life by faith now.

JMF: There's probably a lot more that could be said...

PM: Pages have been written on that, that's for sure.

Immanent and immutable

JMF: Let's talk about your book *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity*. What is the fundamental point you're getting across in this? (You alluded to this earlier.) You need to define "immanent Trinity" (it's not spelled imminent, like "just about to happen," but immanent, as "fully present"). [**PM:** Yes, with an A.] I want to read a comment on the back of the book that sets a tone. "Paul Molnar sets out a contemporary doctrine of the immanent Trinity and addresses the issue of how we can know God according to his true nature rather than create him in our own image."

PM: That opens a door to a discussion that I use when I introduce the topic of the doctrine of the God in class at St. John's. It's a story told by Colin Gunton, who had just had a conversation with a professor about a book that that professor had read, entitled *The God I Want*. The professor said

to Colin Gunton that “I can’t imagine a sillier enterprise than writing a book entitled “*The God I Want*,” because it’s not the God I *want*, but ‘the God you’re damn well going to get!’” I think that covers the point. In other words, God has his own existence in himself, and that is the doctrine of the immanent Trinity.

It’s a doctrine that recognizes that God is God for us, because we would have no knowledge of God’s eternal life, his immanent existence, his existence within himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, if it were not for God creating the world first, then revealing himself in history, reconciling us, and redeeming us, which is commonly referred to as the economic trinity — God’s actions outside of himself. The Greek word is *oekonomia*, which literally means household, but was used as a term in the early church to refer to God’s plan of salvation, and then his executing that plan within history as creator, reconciler, and redeemer.

I say in this book, that Barth says (and also Torrance, but Barth in this particular instance), that God is who he is – eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and that we know God through his revelation of himself in the economy, in history, but that we cannot reduce God to his revelation of himself in the economy. We have to make a clear distinction (but not separation, I argue in the book) between the immanent and the economic trinity. If we do not make that distinction, then we would end up in our thinking reducing God to what he does for us, so that then all we have is a God who is present in history, but no God existing in himself.

Unfortunately, a number of theologians have what is called the purely economic doctrine of the trinity, reducing God to what God does for us. Writing a book entitled *The God I Want* has done that to the nth degree, you might say, because such thinking supposes that we can invent images of God and really be talking about God. In this book I argue that God has his own life and retains his own life. Even though he is in close union with us in Christ and through the Holy Spirit, he retains his own life. We can’t confuse God’s life with our life.

We don’t want to say things like “God is not relational unless and until he relates with us.” Some theologians hold that position. We don’t want to say things that suggest that “God becomes the God he’s going to be precisely by relating with us within history and working out his being within history.” This is common in process theology. I’m not a big fan of process theology, because it misses the point of the doctrine of the immanent Trinity, which is that God has his life in himself, but that God is not a prisoner of his freedom. As one who loves, he loves us, but he remains God even as he loves us, so

when he works outside of himself as our reconciler and redeemer, he doesn't abandon his own eternal existence.

I will say things in the book, following Barth and the early church, that God is eternally Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and would be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit even if he never decided to create, to reconcile, and redeem the world. Barth says something like that in Volume 1, Part 2 of the *Church Dogmatics*. Barth never abandoned that thinking throughout the *Church Dogmatics*, not because he believed that God is locked up within himself and had no relations with us (otherwise he never would have written 1000 plus pages of the *Church Dogmatics* telling us about how God is involved with us in creation), but because unless God has his life in himself, it becomes superfluous for us to talk about his life with us, it becomes projection, it becomes us working up our own images of God, and that's the huge difficulty that I address in that book.

JMF: The word immutable is often used in describing God, and we think of that as being unchangeable, which relates back to what you were talking about before — how some think of God as not doing anything in himself until such time as he creates the world and involves himself in the world. We have a couple passages in Scripture, “I change not” in Malachi, and “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever,” but particularly “I change not” in the Old Testament. What is meant by “immutable”? How is God unchangeable? In what way?

PM: The answer is that in all his changes, God remains the eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That's the importance of the doctrine of the immanent Trinity. Let me explain. Torrance makes the statement that “God is always Father but not always creator. God was always Son but not always incarnate.” So in those two statements...

JMF: We already see that *immutable* does not mean absolutely no change whatsoever in God.

PM: Right.

JMF: So it means something else.

PM: Because if God was the absolute instance of changelessness, he would be a prisoner of his inability to change. He'd be a prisoner of his freedom. That's not what Christians mean when they speak of divine freedom.

JMF: That's not what Christians *should* mean when they speak of... (laughing).

PM: Well, I stand corrected (laughing). Right. Here Torrance and Barth are similar, because they're both saying that God's freedom has to be

understood positively as his freedom to love according to his own will. So, not being a prisoner of his own freedom, God can choose to love us as creator. God can choose to become incarnate. Torrance says when God does choose to create us and to love us by becoming incarnate, these are new actions, and he says they're new even for God. If you don't say that, then you've got to embrace some notion of Origen's idea (espoused very early in church history) that there's no distinction between God's internal relations and God's external relations. In other words, you're basically arguing that the world and God are co-eternal.

This was rejected in the early church, and Torrance is explicitly rejecting it. He says, and this is the import of the doctrine of the Trinity together with doctrines of Christology, that the Father-Son relation has priority over the creator-creature relationship. If we don't see that, then we will end up collapsing the immanent into the economic Trinity, and one of the ways that that could show is with this rigid notion of unchangeability, because we'll be projecting our ideas of immobility, of God as the unmoved mover, into God, but if God is unmoved and in that way he moves creation, then God doesn't have any active, dynamic, relational freedom in himself. He's, in a sense, a prisoner of being unmoved. That would prohibit God from coming into space and time and enabling him to relate with us from within space and time. So there's a lot at stake in that question.

JMF: The passage in Malachi speaks to what it's talking about, because it says, "I am the Lord, I change not, therefore you sons of Jacob are not destroyed." His unchangeableness is specifically in reference to his covenant faithfulness to love them in spite of their rebellion.

PM: Exactly.

JMF: That's where we can have total confidence. I've heard people say, "If you're saying that God can change (after you explain how he became creator, that's a change, he became incarnate, that's a change), then how can I be sure that he will not change his mind about loving me and saving me?" That's exactly where there is no changeableness in God, in that covenant faithfulness, his steadfast love.

PM: That's because God is eternally the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the one God who loves in freedom. He's both loving and free, not one or the other — one *and* the other. That's crucial.

If God were not free in his loving... I think it was in volume 2:1 of the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth attacked this person named Angelus Silesius who said, in explaining the doctrine of creation, "I know that without me God cannot for an instant be." Barth was really upset at that statement because it suggests just what we were talking about before — that God needs us in order to exist.

Barth makes a few little remarks on the side saying, “When God creates us, it’s not as though he needed a playmate, it’s not as though he needed to satisfy some need of his. He creates us out of the free love that he is, but nothing compels him to do it. It’s his free will to do it.”

It’s a crucially important insight. We have theologians today (I mention them in the book) who argue that because in human love *we* need others to love, therefore it’s better to say that God needs us, because otherwise there wouldn’t be true love, if he didn’t need us. They missed the whole point of the Christian doctrine of God. God loves us with a divine love that’s sovereign and free, that overflows to us without any need, and therefore can effectively overcome our self-love in a way that nothing else would.

JMF: It makes sense to me. And we’re out of time. So if we need to expound on that, we’ll have to do it next time we get together.

83. GOD'S WILL AND OUR DECISIONS

JMF: Many people have the idea that God is unchangeable, because he's perfect. If God were to do something different, or if he were to change his mind or answer a prayer from somebody, then that would mean that the way he was before the change wasn't perfect, and he had to become perfect, or he was perfect and if he changed he wasn't perfect before, so therefore, using that kind of logic, God never changes, and he therefore had to decide everything that would ever happen ahead of time, and everything plays itself out that way. If that were true, then how can we expect him to answer prayers and interact with us in a real and present way?

PM: We wouldn't.

JMF: So what's a better way of looking at that?

PM: A better way of looking at that is to say that God is free and knows events that will happen precisely as genuinely contingent historical events as he wills them to exist non-deterministically. Torrance is good on this, pointing out that in Greek thinking, the notion of logical necessity and determinism seems to be endemic to the way they think about creation, about reality. That leads to the ideas of fate and so on. Torrance would say, I think rightly, that Christianity Christianized Hellenism rather than the idea that Christianity was Hellenized.

JMF: Hellenism is Greek thought.

PM: Exactly. The epitome of Greek thought, projecting sensual images into the deity, was erroneous.

JMF: In other words, thinking of God as having the same kinds of passions and so on that human beings have...

PM: Correct. Thinking of God deterministically would be sort of an extension of that sort of fatalistic, necessitarian, logical thinking. Since the Christian God is a living God and is free and loving, when he acts toward creation, it's from the overflowing abundance of who he is. It's not out of need, it's not because of imperfection, it's not because he needs to fill something up in himself. When he creates the world he creates the world out of love according to his own wisdom for his own purpose. Sometimes that purpose may seem unclear to us, but he has a purpose, and it's not arbitrary, and it's not a deterministic sort of purpose that suggests that he's encumbered by his relation with us. The existence of the world as a distinct entity is not a threat to God's being.

JMF: Or to his sovereignty. So that would mean that there are any number of choices a person can make and any number of paths a person's

life can take, without God determining that way ahead of time or before all time, and yet that is still under God's control, and it's still part of what he is working out for his redemptive purposes.

PM: Yes, with one proviso. I would like to remove the word *determined* from that, and say that God knows those events as free events that we will do, but he knows them precisely because he's not encumbered by the past or by the future. He's always the one he is, transcending time and within time, so that he's not losing part of his being when the past goes away and the present goes into the future...and he's not yet because there's a future. He's present to all times because he's God and eternal.

Torrance gets into some of this stuff and so does Barth... God has his own time, a unique time, in which he doesn't pass away, as we do. Our time is marked by its limitations and by the fall, so we don't really have time. We have no control over time. Created time must find its meaning always in God's eternal time. God's eternal time, however, is unique to him.

Both Barth and Torrance say that God has time, because he has time for us in Jesus Christ. That time is the healing of our time, so that we share in Christ's eternal humanity, because Christ, although he hasn't eternally existed (otherwise he wouldn't be truly human), now exists eternally as the risen and ascended Lord. When we share in that, we have eternal life — life without end. Since God is not encumbered by the limitations of past, present, and future as we are, he can know things that are future for us, precisely as events that are freely determined, contingently determined, and not necessarily determined, in a deterministic sense.

JMF: "Contingently determined" means what?

PM: It means that they're totally dependent on God's purpose and will to be what they are. It means that they might not even *be* at all, or they might be differently, depending upon God's will for them.

JMF: Sometimes a Christian will get the idea that in a given situation there's only one right decision they could make, and that they must seek out what God's will would be for them in this situation. They assume that there is only one possibility of what God's will might be for them, and that if they make the wrong choice, that would be a disaster. They want to make sure their decision is God's will, so they enter into whatever regimen that they think might help, whether it be prayer and fasting or seeking counsel or whatever. Often they end up, regardless of the counsel they seek, doing what they want anyway.

Is there only one right decision, and is God's will always a specific thing that we must do, and a specific decision, that there's only one will of God and then everything else would be wrong? How does God work with us, in

other words? How does he interact with us on a day-to-day basis?

PM: It's not an easy question. I'm thinking back to Barth's ethics that he develops in Volume 2, Part 2 of the *Church Dogmatics* and then in 3 and 4 where he talks about the divine command. It's been a long time since I've read that material, but if I remember, he argues that God's command infallibly reaches each person in their particular circumstances and makes itself known to them as his will because it is a permission, it's a freedom to serve him, which enables that person to be what God wants them to be.

One of the marks of coming up against the legitimate divine command is the fact that it's a freedom, not an enslavement. It never says to the person, "If you do this, this, and this, then you will get that, that, and that." It's always a freedom to obey God himself. So there is only one possibility – but not in a legalistic sense that you have four possibilities there and you choose one, and if you get the right one, then things go well for you and if you choose one of the other three, then you're in trouble. That would be the wrong way to think about this sort of interaction.

We really do interact with God, but we're not set in a position... (Barth would often say, and I think Torrance would follow him in this)... like Hercules at the crossroads, we choose between two possibilities, and if we choose the right one, then everything's good, and if we choose the wrong one, everything's not good – partly because our wills are enslaved to sin and are freed by God in Christ for service of God.

Love of God and love of neighbor in Barth's thinking means that the divine command reaches each individual in different circumstances and at different times in each person's life... that's why prayer is necessary, to discern precisely what that is, and then to obey. It's not, as it were, a test, where if you get this point right then you're okay, and if you don't... It's really a freedom, a freeing of a person from the illusion that they could determine God's will by their choices, because they can't, they can only obey. Let's say you were called to do a Christian act at a given moment – you either do it or you don't do it. You either obey or you don't. It's not a question of trying to figure out which is the right way to go.

JMF: Some people struggle over whether they should buy this car or that car. They want to get the whole church to pray for them to make the right decision. It's as though they think there's only one right choice they can make. Sometimes the pastors of certain churches will enter into that and presume to speak for God and tell them, you should get the white car because that's... We can bring some almost-superstition to every decision, assuming that we have to be careful that we stay within the will of God, but pretending that we

know or struggling over the fact that we don't know.

PM: That doesn't sound very freeing, does it?

JMF: No, it sounds so...

PM: It's kind of unnerving, you might say. In such circumstances we can entrust our decisions to the care of God and to God's forgiving grace, so if we made what turns out to be a bad decision, a year from now sell the car, get another one, don't worry about it. I think we can trust in God's loving care and in the fact that he will bring good even out of bad decisions.

JMF: More of a lifestyle of trusting God to help us through the decisions we make.

PM: Correct. And trust in his forgiving grace when things don't go exactly the way they should.

JMF: There are certain principles anybody can use in trying to make a wise decision. You want to weigh the pros and cons. You want to get wise counsel, and you want to listen to good judgment about it and so on. But at some point you have to make a decision.

PM: An informed decision. Especially with regard to cars. If I'm going to buy a new car, I want to know every detail about that car.

JMF: There are many things we could obsess over. But when it boils down to it, we want to bring our Christian life, our walk with Christ, into whatever circumstance or decision we might make. Sometimes we make poor decisions and we still bring with that our faith that God will help us through. Sometimes we make a good decision, and we still bring with that our faith that God will bless us, help us to use it rightly, not foolishly.

PM: One of the good things in that is that we don't have to worry about whether our decisions in the last analysis were right or wrong, because Christ promises to make good for us. He's responsible for us. We are responsible to him and to God, but because he has made himself responsible for us, we don't have to make a final judgment about what we're doing. We leave that to him, to his care.

JMF: But at the same time we realize that decisions have consequences. If we do a foolish thing, then it's going to have consequences.

PM: Which we do at least once a day, maybe twice a day.

JMF: Perhaps most of the time. Yeah. That raises opportunities to trust God to have mercy on us.

PM: That's the whole point of prayer. Some of the botched decisions that we make point us once again to our utter need to rely on God's forgiving grace. That's not something we can control by plotting and planning every little detail of our lives and getting the whole church to pray for it, you know,

that it's not raining on Thursday morning.

JMF: When I leave for our vacation.

PM: That sort of thing.

JMF: These are the kinds of requests that sometimes come in.

PM: People might conclude from that, that since it is raining, therefore God doesn't love me. So that concept of God is all too human a concept.

JMF: To what degree does God interact with us on a personal level with our daily life? Is it a matter of how much we bring him in, or is it that he's always present but he lets us make our own decisions and make mistakes and live with the consequences, or is it hands-off, he's out there watching us, for whatever reason? How does that work?

PM: The God that we know in Jesus Christ is not a hands-off deity, because he has loved us while we were still sinners and powerless to love him. He continues to love us in exactly the same way in Jesus Christ. There's no limit to his approach to us. We can only love because God empowers us to love at any given moment. God is deeply involved in each moment of our lives, but sometimes we're so busy that we don't see that and we don't pay attention to that, or we look right past it toward our own agenda, which, when put into effect, will enable us to sort of redefine who God is and what revelation is and what salvation should mean, to make ourselves feel comfortable.

God is not a distant deistic deity — that's the dualism that Torrance always refers to as problematic — because the God who meets us in Jesus Christ meets us in a myriad of different forms experiences. He is never far off but is sometimes hidden to us in our own experience because we're not paying attention or not really trusting God. We're sort of reinventing the God we want instead of trusting in God as he is.

JMF: Isn't another form of reinventing the God we want, to take the approach of... you hear in some conversations, the Lord told me to take this job or the Lord told me that we should move to Kenya and be a missionary. Sometimes the whole church knows it's a foolish decision, and yet the person is convinced that the Lord told them that, and in their own mind, they bring God into every decision they make, as though this is what the will of God is for me. It's as though I don't have to take responsibility for my own decisions because God told me to do this. So for you to tell me that this was foolish...

PM: That could just as easily be a manipulation of God's will. That's a problem. For example, God told me this morning I should be a chemical engineer. I don't know a thing about chemical engineering, but God told me to do it, so I'm going to go and do that. If you get such a revelation

supposedly, you should have to then look at the abilities that you have, the talents, where your life has been to this point, and ask yourself seriously whether that is something that God is asking you to do. I don't think God is actually telling you to do that at all.

JMF: God is telling me that you're supposed to do that.

PM: I should be a chemical engineer because I utterly failed at the arts, so I might as well be a chemical engineer. Barth once said, I think to someone who was asking about whether they should be a theologian, you have to look at whether you have the temperament, the qualities that would lead to someone being a good theologian. You might have none of those things. If that's true, then that's a sign of God's interacting with you. You have to use common sense.

JMF: I think this happens too often with people who take up a missionary plan. They come to the conclusion that God is calling them to some sort of missionary service, and they will pluck their family up without regard to the effect on the children of moving to a new country, a new culture and so on, without really understanding what they're getting into, when they have heard a presentation or they have heard of a need and they feel some twinge of conscience or something, and so they assume that God is moving them to make this huge life-changing decision. Sometimes it becomes a major mistake for the family, but they're convinced that this is what God wants them to do. I don't know that there's any solution to that, because we all stand prey to that in one way or another.

PM: It's true. That's an extremely difficult decision, but the point that you made about that person needing to look at the overall effect on the entire family should weigh heavily in such a decision.

JMF: Getting good counsel from not just the person and people who want them to go, but from people who have been there, done that, and from their pastors, from other counselors, and are listening to the suggestions and ideas from more than one point of view on the topic.

PM: No question. I'm thinking of Tom Torrance's own life when he was asked by Barth to follow him in [the University of] Basel, and he stated that was one of the hardest decisions of his life. He decided not to go because he didn't want to uproot his children from school and bring them into a setting where they would have to speak and learn in German and so on. He was never sorry that he made that decision, but it was difficult. He had to weigh all of his family issues and so on, and in retrospect I think it was a good decision.

JMF: Just because a thing might seem spiritual or holy doesn't mean that

you can't continue to serve God effectively in any other way.

PM: Absolutely.

JMF: But we sometimes substitute going out and doing some kind of a seemingly spiritual thing, trying to make up for all the other problems in our life, to feel better about our walk with God.

PM: Very true. We have an amazing ability to deceive ourselves.

JMF: Isn't that part of what we learn from Trinitarian theology, in the fact that Christ is already everything for us, and our trust is in him to be everything we need to be?

PM: That's why when Barth talked about Christian vocation, he said the Christian preacher and teacher should point vigorously toward Christ as the one who calls us toward his purposes, and not point toward Christian experience as the way forward in these matters. I think he was right.

JMF: It's often hard to face the fact that maybe the best place for us is right where we are, being who we should be in Christ, as opposed to finding a new and exciting place somewhere else that promises...

PM: But may not deliver. I couldn't agree more.

84. THE GIVER AND THE GIFT

JMF: You've written about grace being identical with its giver. What is the significance of that?

PM: It's extremely significant. Jesus Christ *is* God's grace, present among us. That means that in Jesus Christ, God actively loves us, binds us to himself, reveals himself to us, and that means therefore that you cannot detach that act of God (because God's being and God's act are one) from what God is doing in that particular history.

If you did that, you might then think of God's grace as a detachable quality that adheres in human nature, and you might come up with such ideas as creative grace and different types of grace. Your focus then would be off the reality of grace, which is identical with Christ himself and, more importantly, your focus would be on the gifts of the Christian life and living the Christian life in abstraction from the one who empowers you to live it.

It's enormously important not to separate the gifts that we receive in Christ, living as part of the new creation — faith, love of God, love of neighbor. It's enormously important that we do not detach those from the giver, because if we do, then we no longer *need* Christ, and to the extent that we don't need Christ, we become self-reliant once again. We can become self-reliant under the guise of speaking about grace.

Torrance is great in pointing out the subtle dangers of Pelagianism in the human heart — our constant attempt to turn back on ourselves, even using Christian concepts in order to validate such a turn. He is dead against that, rightly so. It's a disaster to separate the gift from the giver. If you separate the gift of atonement from the giver, then the atonement becomes something we do.

Some theologians today (you may be aware of some of them) argue that if we reconceived salvation today as us trying to create a better world, then we have to realize that we need more than one savior of the world — we need many hearts, hands, and feet to make the world a better place.

Yes, we need many people working for a better world, that's true. But you can't equate salvation with people working for a better world. That's what happens, though, if you detach grace, the gift, from the giver. Where there is grace, where there is the freedom of love, to love God and to love neighbor by working for a better world, there we are bound to Christ and totally dependent on Christ and not on us trying to make a better world and therefore reconstructing a notion of salvation by saying we need more saviors. That sort of thinking is the ultimate proof that we're attempting to

save ourselves, then we've missed grace, we've bypassed it.

God's actions and being

JMF: It seems to tie in with the concept of separating God's being from his acts. What does that mean, and how does that relate?

PM: Torrance and Barth were big on stressing that God's being and acts are one. When dealing with the Trinity, Barth used to say that God is one being in three modes of existence — he preferred “modes of existence” to “person” — it did not make him a modalist, as some have suggested.

JMF: He's using “mode” in a different way.

PM: Right. He's allowing God — the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit — to dictate his meaning of “mode,” so he's not trying to conform the Trinity to a prior idea of “mode.” He would say that God is eternally one being in his act as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When God decides to and then acts as creator — the Father through his word and in the Spirit, and then again as reconciler and redeemer — we need God in Jesus Christ. Jesus is God's act, but you can't separate that act from the being of God, so that as God's act in Jesus Christ, we're actually meeting Jesus Christ.

Barth would then argue that if in your thinking you ignore Jesus Christ or don't begin thinking about God with Jesus Christ, then, in effect, you bypass the one possibility for a knowledge of God that comes to us from God. We can't bypass God and then attempt to know God, because that's a recipe for idolatry. Torrance makes statements such as, “We must think from the center in God and not from a center in ourselves, because God's being and act are one.”

The act of God in Jesus Christ in the incarnation is God coming to us, approaching us, empowering us to know him. You could never say, as some have, that “Jesus is our historical choice, is our foundational figure for our Christian religion,” because who he is is utterly dependent upon God's act and thus upon God, because you can't separate God's act from his being.

Both Barth and Torrance would say that God's act is the Holy Spirit empowering us to believe in Jesus Christ. They both cite 1 Corinthians 12:3, which says, “No one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.” They take that seriously. Barth will make statements such as this, “Knowledge of God is an event enclosed in the mystery of the divine Trinity.” He means that God himself in the Holy Spirit, uniting us to Christ and thus to the Father, begins, upholds, and completes our knowledge of God.

Such knowledge can never be traced back to anything in our thinking or anything within our experience. Our thinking and experience would be real

enough, and they would be real knowledge of God and they would really describe God, because they would be faithful descriptions of God's act and being, but none of that is under our control, and all that is a miracle, because it goes against the grain of our natural attempts to create God in our own image.

Both theologians take the problem of sin, the problem of our human limitations seriously. Barth was speaking about God's hiddenness, even in revelation. That is, that nothing in history in and of itself can disclose God to us. We need God to act, and God does act in his Holy Spirit and in his word. When we hear his word by the power of the Holy Spirit through God's acting, we're already united to God's being, because you can't separate being and act. The fact that God's being and act are one is crucial. For Barth, they annihilated the whole need for natural theology.

JMF: What is natural theology?

PM: It's the attempt to know God by relying on nature, reason, conscience, or history. It's the attempt to reason to God's existence without relying on God's revelation as attested in Scripture. It's the attempt to know God without biblical faith. What one of us doesn't have some knowledge of God or some natural goodness in us? The presumption is that we have *some* knowledge of God, but when we know God in Jesus Christ, we can't rely on *any* of that — to know God with certainty. All of that is called into question and comes under judgment. We must give up any attempt to rely on our natural goodness or our natural knowledge, and take up our cross and follow him, Torrance would argue (and I think he's right). We don't want to take that away from people, because that's the last hope of the person who refuses to hear the word of God in Jesus Christ — that's all they have to cling to, is their attempts to build a knowledge of God on themselves.

Barth has a long section in *Dogmatics* volume 2.1 where he talks about natural theology. He doesn't want to disprove it or argue, because in the act of disproving it, he would be engaging in natural theology. He simply wants to say that because of the Fall and because God has approached us in Jesus Christ and made himself known as the reconciler and redeemer, if we bypass those particular activities of God, then we will be constructing an image of God that's in variance with who God actually is. That's the problem of sin and the problem of natural theology. When we really know God, it's by the miracle of grace and not by anything we did. Even when we know God, it's not by means of any twist or turn in our usage of concepts. It's only when our concepts are commandeered, so to speak, by God, that we actually know him.

In both Barth and Torrance, following Hilary of Poitiers (Barth put it more forcefully than Torrance, although Torrance could be pretty forceful), Barth said that “words are subject to realities, not realities to words.” He said, “Anybody who does not accept that axiom as their working axiom as a theologian is no theologian and never will be.” Torrance adopted that axiom himself and used it as part of his repertoire.

So, natural theology is an attempt to make the reality of God acting in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit subject to our words, our ideas of God, rather than allowing God to define who God is to us. In the one instance, it’s understanding seeking faith, which can’t lead anywhere, theologically speaking. In the other instance, it’s faith in the word of God being led by the Holy Spirit seeking understanding. But again, faith itself comes from the Holy Spirit; it’s not something that we invented. It’s grounded in God.

Law, sin, and repentance

JMF: What is the relationship between a believer and what the Bible calls the law of God? How does the believer relate to the law of God in the sense of both the Old Testament and New Testament?

PM: Torrance says something to the effect that our entire lives have to be recreated ethically, morally, and legally speaking, because people can use morality and the law to hide behind them, in the sense that they wall themselves up by trying to obey the law and thus not having to obey God — legalism and moralism, you might say. When we hear the word of God in Jesus Christ, all of that changes. When we really hear the word of God, God frees us to live in harmony with his will for us. We will then be living according to his law, because the point of the law is to direct us to our total reliance on God — God’s love and God’s grace.

Nobody ever quite lives that or has lived that, except Christ himself. That’s why we were saved outside of and apart from the law. Christ didn’t come to destroy the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them. He gave them their true meaning, put them on a true footing, so to speak. In Christ we see that the law is not an end in itself, and neither is morality an end in itself, because we can use both to try to justify ourselves and save ourselves, and we can use both to hide behind them, making it seem as though we’re really good and law-abiding when all the while we’re not honestly relying on God. So there’s sort of a suspension Torrance talks about.

Barth talks about the fact that when we really know God through revelation, the law won’t make any difference, it won’t matter, because we will simply be trusting in God and doing God’s will. We will be obeying the

law, but not because we are trying to obey the law, but simply because it's not even a question for us. Trusting in God, we'll really be loving God and loving our neighbor and doing those things that would signify that.

JMF: It's like Paul said in Romans 13: "Let no debt remain outstanding except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law." Jump from verse 8 to verse 10: "Love does no harm to its neighbor, therefore love is the fulfillment of the law." The law gets taken care of when you're walking in the gospel.

PM: Right. That's what Barth meant when he said that you won't be worrying about the law and its fulfillment when you love God, because you've been loved by God first and empowered to love God. You will spontaneously love your neighbor ... fulfill the law, in effect.

JMF: I've known people who were so focused on the law that they are the opposite. If you think of loving your neighbor, you wouldn't think of them, because they're so austere and they're so judgmental, both against themselves and everybody else, because of their focus on the law (as an end in itself, practically) — they think it's the stepping stone to God, as opposed to a focus on the grace of God in Christ.

PM: Dealing with those sorts of people is difficult.

JMF: It is. God pity the poor group, nation, church, or whoever might be under the authority of such a person.

PM: I agree. I think of C.S. Lewis saying you can tell the people who are behaving in such ways by the haunted look of those whom they are trying to love. Trying to fulfill that law of love can become a legalistic activity.

JMF: You talk about the love of God being "unconditional." What does that mean?

PM: Barth quotes from John, where it says that "God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son that those who should believe in him would have eternal life." The love of God is identical with the sending of Jesus Christ to love us while we were enemies of God. The gist of that statement is captured in Barth's response. It's a crucial statement.

JMF: As Paul says in Romans, "Christ died for us while we were yet sinners and he demonstrates his love for us in that."

PM: I think that's crucial. It demonstrates to us that any attempt to love God, without recognizing God's love of us first, is a replication of the predicament of self-will and sin, isolating ourselves more and more from God. That isolation can take place even under the guise of Christian categories, which makes the situation more difficult. That's an important point.

JMF: It comes home for people, if they could embrace it, the most when

they find themselves — I’m talking about believers or Christians who find themselves embroiled in sin. They’ve failed in some habitual sin or they have done something that is outrageous, and their first response is typically, “How can God still love me after this?” There’s a depression that sets in and a sense of being cut off from God. It’s renewing and helpful (and it’s not easy to do, because it seems so unreal at the time) to remember that Christ died for you while you’re still a sinner, while you were still enemies. He doesn’t feel any differently about you today than he did yesterday, before you did that, or than he will tomorrow, after you have gotten through your emotional grieving and repentance process.

PM: That’s a great point.

JMF: But we have to remember always that this love of God is not something that’s going to go away, and it’s not something that’s going to change, and it’s not something we can move beyond its limits.

PM: We shouldn’t really want to.

JMF: Not that we want to, but we can’t. Whatever state we find ourselves in, we can go back to the arms of the prodigal father.

PM: I was also thinking of the parable of the prodigal son. It’s without conditions. If somebody took the inheritance and I was the father, would I really welcome that person back without conditions or would I say, “You can come back, but I’m controlling all the money from here on out”?

JMF: I would have all sorts of conditions.

PM: I would have all sorts of conditions, but God has none. The fact that he loves us in Christ gives a permission, a freedom, for us to live that new life, so we can trust in God’s forgiving grace. Torrance (and Barth, too) was vociferous in speaking against any idea of conditional salvation. The notion of conditional salvation destroys the unconditionally of God’s love, because if salvation is conditional on anything we do, then we’re thrown back upon ourselves to try to make good something that we can’t make good. We can’t possibly make good, because God loved us while we were still sinners. It turns into a vicious circle at that point.

JMF: I can hardly think of the parable of the prodigal son without thinking of Henri Nouwen’s book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, where he takes Rembrandt’s painting and analyzes each part of it in connection with the story of the parable. It’s such a moving and reassuring rehearsal of the unconditional love that God has for us.

PM: I was thinking a moment ago of C.S. Lewis, where he says, “Repentance is not something that God demands of you before he takes you back — it’s simply a description of what going back to God is like.” We can’t

go back to God without it, but it's not a condition of God's loving us, it's rather the thing you do when you recognize what God has done on the cross and in the resurrection (and recognizing that is not under our control either). But if you say that you're going to turn back to God and you're not submitting to God and therefore repenting, you haven't returned to God; you've just returned to an idea of God and you're once more trying to save yourself conditionally, you might say.

JMF: Don't we sometimes turn repentance into some kind of a work or some kind of a chore or duty? Instead of freely trusting that we can simply return to God who loves us, we project ourselves onto God as being somebody who is going to require a certain amount of penance or a certain number of deeds (or whatever we have in our head) before he's going to accept us back. We think that repentance needs to be tooth-grinding and fist-clenching and begging and sackcloth and ashes.

PM: And hair shirts, and so on. I think that's disastrous. That would not be living by grace. Living by grace means that we can trust in Christ and turn to him, as you said.

JMF: In the prodigal son, this son's repentance was not a great repentance at all, because he really was...

PM: He realized that he was feeding pigs.

JMF: ...and he just wanted a decent meal among the servants who he knew were living better than he was. He didn't expect the kind of reception that he got.

PM: That's right.

JMF: All he knew was, that's where I need to go to stay alive. And so he went back.

PM: There's a moral in that, right? Those who are searching for the perfect form of repentance before they repent are going to have a problem, because even our repentance is the repentance of unprofitable servants, you might say. Even in our repentance, we're dependent on the heavenly Father taking us back.

JMF: In one sense we could forget about our repentance and simply trust God to love us and go back to him trusting that he will accept us, love us, help us.

PM: That is the nature of God's unconditional love.

JMF: Thought of that way, repentance and trust or faith are the same thing.

PM: I think so.

JMF: What's your next book?

PM: I'm working on a sequel to my book *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity*, and it's going to come out with InterVarsity Press. I'm working with Gary Deddo on that. I'm going to put some real time into that this summer. I haven't put as much time into it as I should have.

JMF: Is there a potential title or a working title?

PM: The title is *Faith, Freedom, and the Spirit*. In the first book I focused on the need to acknowledge God's freedom in himself so as to recognize the way God was acting within history — it was really God and not just our using theological language to describe ourselves in place of God. So in this book I focus on Barth and Torrance again, but I'm going to look at the way the Holy Spirit works in connection with reconciliation and redemption, and then talk about how God works in the economy empowering us and enabling us to know him and participate in life, without blurring the distinction between creator and creature, but actually affirming the two and therefore engendering human freedom. I'm going to focus on the work of the Holy Spirit and knowing God through the Holy Spirit and reconciliation and the work of the Holy Spirit in redemption.

JMF: There hasn't been a lot of work specifically on the Holy Spirit in regard to Trinitarian theology...

PM: No, there hasn't. So that's the direction I would like to move. For all who might have thought that I was maintaining the divine freedom in terms of the doctrine of the immanent Trinity... (Some people have interpreted my book to mean that I was separating God from his actions, but I wasn't, because I wouldn't have written the book if God was separate from us. The only reason I wrote the book was to say that God who is active in history is free and acts free in love within history.)

So I would like to clear up some of those misunderstandings by focusing on the Holy Spirit and showing how, when the Spirit unites us to Christ, there are genuine human actions of those who are reconciled, but you can't read off reconciliation from those who are acting, any more than you can read off what it means to be a Christian by looking at what a Christian does, because sometimes there are Christians who behave well and sometimes there are Christians who behave badly.

JMF: The same Christian.

PM: That's right. I would argue against those who say that you can judge the truth of Christology by the ethical fruits of those who live the Christian life. You can't. The truth of Christology is judged by who Jesus is as God's action among us, actively reconciling us to himself even now. And the only way to know that is through the Holy Spirit.

So that's where I'm hoping to proceed with my next work. It's been a while since I've looked at the chapters as I've fleshed them out, and I might have to make revisions as I go and as I learn different things. But I think it's going to be about nine chapters. Hopefully it will be interesting. I'll deal with questions that are raised about my first book, and then I'll focus on God's acting within history, all the while making sure that I'm speaking about God acting within history and then human beings being freed by God to know and love him.

JMF: Is there a tentative publication date yet?

PM: [The book was published in 2015.] I teach full time at the moment, and I don't have any research leaves coming up, so I am mainly working during the summers and during the year as well. Next year I'm going to be preparing some lectures to give as well, so hopefully those lectures will work out as chapters within that new book.

JMF: We'll look forward to seeing it.

85. RESPONDING TO GOD IN AN AUTHENTIC WAY

J. Michael Fezell: 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 *accompaniment* 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.

86. 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.

87. 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.

88. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HUMAN?

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

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

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

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



The theology side (I'd always been a little nervous about theology) is very ivory tower and distant from the way that we're trying to live day-to-day as faithful believers in the market place. Yet I started to recognize that as a general term for saying, "How do we

think about God, and how do we think about everything else in relation to God – to let that word be this covering. I thought, “There is a lot at stake whether we get this theology accurate or not.” I don’t mean *right*, because theology is deep and rich, and God’s way of giving himself to us is clear, in terms of who he is as Father, Son, and Spirit. But the ways that he lets us reflect on him are many and good. *Right* and *wrong* always feels like there is only one way, and everything else is wrong. One of the beauties of being in the Trinitarian theology conversation is to go, “It’s sort of like this, and when we think about this...” There are many angles that we as creatures can try to glimpse, and love and worship out of.

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

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

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

Whatever we are doing, are we caring well, and loving well? So I went back to school and started a Masters in Psychology. Someone caught me in the middle of that experience and said, “Cherith, none of your questions sound psychological – they always sound theological – they’re always of a much bigger picture, a much bigger arena in which all these things come to matter.” That became a moment where I thought, theology is not so much a frightening word – it’s a nice term for the arena in which we as the people of God get to think about the things of God. He encouraged me to think about doing theology instead of psychology. So I changed course and I’ve become what I never thought I would be, which is what people call a *theologian*.

JMF: You started at Regent College?

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

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

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

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

CFN: My father (Gordon Fee) was born and raised, as was my mother, in the Pentecostal tradition, but I lived in Reformed worlds that are curious about how to have conversations about what does it mean to live the life of a Pentecostal... I grew up as a person who deeply loved the biblical text, watched my father who deeply loved the Lord, and then love the biblical text (and not in the reverse order). I used to go with my dad when he would teach, or go on retreats to do these kinds of things. I couldn't get enough of the story and it never occurred to me that I should be like him, because I thought, this is equipping me to get out into the marketplace. So I was a paralegal for 15 years and loved being just a Trinitarian believer in the work that God had called me to do at that time.

I came from a background that made life in the Holy Spirit normal or

natural to me. I did not see a lot of excess, I did not see a lot of things that were confusing or frightening (I hear a lot of horror stories from people's experiences). So I'm asked to speak about that.

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

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

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

Not just who he was, but who he is, and what he's presently doing that helps inform our own understanding of getting up in the morning saying, "What are we doing today, Jesus? What are you doing today and what, by the Spirit do I get to participate in that continues to bring glory to the Father, in a way that you take my human life seriously and mediate my human life and pray for my human life today, and intercede that I would not be led into temptation but to walk in the way that looks like the kingdom come on earth, so as in heaven." And to pay attention to what that would mean and not get my belief system locked in, but to function as somebody who is supposed to look like Jesus in a way that I'm going to look for. That raises a new wonderful dynamic about how to follow the Lord. That has become a deeply incarnational conversation that I didn't see coming, but just sort of developed over time over the last ten years.

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

CFN: I was at Regent at that time. I knew in my heart of hearts (although

I kept taking as much Bible as I could instead of theology, because I was afraid that systematic theology would become dry, categorized and compartmentalized) I loved theology emerging from the text. It took me a while to trust the theology classes that I was taking would reinforce that, and they did, beautifully.

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

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

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

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

CFN: They think about God singularly... kind of, there’s God and us, as if there are two subjects, and that’s it...

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

CFN: Solitary picture, that’s right, and always a male picture. She was of the conviction that the people who suffer most, including at the hands of the church, because of the way theology is either spoken or enacted, are women, and usually women of color with children. She had spent a lot of years caring for the poor and the oppressed in Central America, in South Africa... Over time, she felt that if we could talk about God as a female, then men would not use God as their alter ego and have God function in these ways that she

perceived as distant. If we could have God be female, then it would be hard to see God that way and then hurt or harm women. I'm not convinced that that's true – not because it's not an interesting idea, but because we're so broken that no matter how we perceive God, we're still going to harm each other, and need to forgive one another.

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

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

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

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

– you don’t have the things that are the reconciling acts that only God can do.

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

What does it mean for him to say, “I only do what I hear the Father tell me to do, I only do what I see the Father doing, I enact by the power of the Holy Spirit what God is doing in the world. [That is what a true human being is about – to bear the image of God for the good creation and for its flourishing, and for its life to be restored and for its healing and for its recreational restoration.] ...to be faithfully what I am supposed to be and what I am going to be, as well as being God who is present to me, is ...” I don’t have words to explain the mystery and the beauty like that.

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

JMF: In a sense that still leaves us alone.

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

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

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

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

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

invite me into today that isn't what I would do by myself?"

89. WHAT WILL THE RESURRECTED BODY BE LIKE?

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

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

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

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

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

That has nothing to do with the gospel, but it's the way that as a child, I heard that. I don't think I ever heard it preached to me except that it's the

language of “when our souls go to heaven.” It’s falling into the language of our hymns, where we sing “then sings my soul” as if there is a different way of praising God in this deeper spiritual way of being, that if I can just ignore my body and not even have to deal with the shame that comes with being this embodied person, and just get into that spiritual place, then this is what I have to look forward to, is to shed this skin and be in a disembodied new way of being. I didn’t realize this then, but this is called Gnosticism.

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

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

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

So I started, in these last years, looking at what I was not seeing over and over in the New Testament text, that let me keep splitting out Jesus’ divinity from his humanity, kept splitting out my soul from my embodied life. One day I came across the conversation that Jesus gets pulled into between the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They’re all good Jews and they’re all well-trained, but the Sadducees are trained more in Greek thought and they have no time for or belief in the resurrection of the body, because who would ever resurrect a body? It’s no good!

The Pharisees are still holding to the Old Testament promises through Jeremiah and Ezekiel and Isaiah and all of these deep new covenant promises that when the new creation is restored, when life comes back, it will be the flourishing of all creation and you will get your life back. So, here these two groups are arguing and pulling Jesus in, and so they set it up with the woman

marries the husband who dies, and then marries the many brothers that he has, and so who is she going to be married to in the resurrection? I had been reading this because I had had a few friends of mine, men (in theological studies, they are mostly men), and we were talking about Jesus' human life and his ongoing embodiment and how that matters. They said, "I don't understand... as you're doing this work and challenging this feminist theology, etcetera, why these women feel like they need God to look like them when in heaven there will be no male or female, so it doesn't matter?"

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

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

I watched Jesus' life and the promise of his resurrection, which he kept instilling as their only hope (that he too had to trust that the Father would raise him from the dead), because he wasn't going to raise himself and he wasn't saying, "I'll be back in three days, I'm just going to die and I'll be back." He agonizes in this place of trusting, that he is doing something that the Father will make an atoning eternity-changing reality and that he would, by the Spirit, bring him back to live in this whole new way that he has never died and hasn't experienced and doesn't know.

So I began then to listen and watch his 40 days of life and his insistence that his followers do not move until they too receive the Spirit, because there is no way that they are going to be able to begin to participate in the life that he has now guaranteed in his new humanity by the Spirit, in the same way that he was already beginning to enact prior to his death and resurrection, without the same Spirit that raised him from the dead. Paul uses that term over and over. Peter uses that term. John uses that term, "the Spirit who

raised Jesus from the dead,” and “this Jesus whom you killed, God raised him from the dead and has seated him at the right hand of the Father, and with the Father has now poured out the Holy Spirit whom you see in here.”

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

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

JMF: No human does.

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

JMF: He would be abnormal if he did.

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

is what you are, an image bearer of God.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Everything that we are comes out of response to the fact that this is who God is to us. He doesn’t just show up as an idea of the three Persons in one to invite us into this idea of communal love, but to say, “look, right here, in

the way that God has chosen to be God, there is now a human being permanently present.” So you are never without the ability to say, so what *is* my life about and where is it going? And what have you done with my past? Because the one who stands in for me is not only this perfect human who I can’t relate to because he’s perfect, but this human who bears the marks of a deeply broken and imperfect humanity who had entered into every kind of condition that humanity has, yet without falling and breaking in the process, without sinning into that process. His life bears the effects of being betrayed by his best friends. His life bears the effects of being isolated and alone. His life bears the effects of being unjustly and horribly, horribly executed. His life bears the effects of systemic sin, of personal sin, hitting him and influencing him all the time.

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

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

“How could I possibly be more for you, Cherith, than to become like you, as a choice of freedom and love? And to become like you and take that into my way of being God permanently, so that you are never without somebody who is also your permanent advocate. So, you can’t make me love you more,

you can't make me love you less. Nothing you do, height, depth, powers, principalities, your brokenness, your horrible past, your attempts to try to be good in your own strength. Nothing can separate you from the love that has now been guaranteed to you in Christ Jesus, who holds you in that communion with the Father by the Spirit and stands as God for you, having received and accepted and loved you, and stands as the new human." He says, "Father, when you see her, see her as she will be finished. Because this is what she will look like."

JMF: And already do.

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

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

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

You can't do that by yourself. You can only do that by the power of the Third Person of the Trinity happily taking up residence in you and saying, "This has been how the story was from the beginning, is that the Ruach of the Spirit of the living God would rest upon and dwell within his image-bearer. *That* has been what we've been about. It's what Jesus' life looks like, as this anointing as the new and true image bearer, and now you, Cherith and Mike, beloved image-bearing children of the Father, who are conformed to the image of the Son, your brother and your Lord, who happens to also be the King over all kings and the one who is reigning."

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

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

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

JMF: Muddle on through it.

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

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

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

CFN: Amen. And it's a good thing because if I muddle or stop this bottle or whatever else, he is still the Lord of the church and the King of all things and he'll invite you back again tomorrow when you wake up. Because he's already sealed the deal. He's already doing what he is doing, and nothing that I can do can also stop that grace from flowing.

90. IMAGE BEARERS FOR GOD

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

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

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

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

It's worth a little rabbit trail for a minute to look at how the New Testament, which...at the time that it is becoming what it is...at the time that

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

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

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

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

Starting from the beginning, every one of these ancient cultures has a creation narrative that has some kind of battle that usually takes place over water – the water is the place of chaos, and who knows what danger is lurking there? Creation usually is the fallout or the byproduct of the negative side of some kind of cosmic battle. Once this thing gets played out, then it's like, "Then what do we do with this stuff?" If we've got those gods or that god

who ended up with all this stuff, how do we relate to that god to keep him appeased, or her, making sure that we're fertile, or whatever their relationship to these ancient gods is.

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

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

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

The Genesis 2 retelling of what it says in Genesis 1 — that here is God who chooses Adam from the earth and breathes his life into him, breathes his Spirit, *ruach*, into him. Then he becomes the one who literally is for creation. He is to name it, he is to tend it and flourish it, he is to have "the one who completes him as an image-bearer with the other." She is called the *ezer* to him, God's strong helper, which is the language that God uses of himself in the Old Testament. You know, "Woe to Egypt who doesn't have Yahweh as their *ezer*." She's not his right-hand support system — she, with him, bears the character and image of God in the world.

Genesis 3 then turns around and says, here's what happens when the story

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

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

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

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

This re-anointing and image-bearing says, "I will breathe my Spirit into

you. You will begin to function again in a way that looks like me and not the power and the oppression of Pharaoh and the rulership, but the releasing of humanity to start functioning as what it really is in relation to me.” It’s a crossing through water again, and light, and those kinds of images.

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

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

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

For Jacob’s brother, Esau, to be the one who of these twins is the firstborn, the true rightful image-bearer, the true firstborn son who should carry that name forward, that is Isaac, the son who came from nowhere in terms of God’s mercy. When Esau begins to look like the idolatrous people with whom he marries into and begins to...instead of what Yahweh looks like, God says, “No. I refuse to put my name on that. I refuse to say that that is what I look like in the world. I will stand against that, but I will do that by being for it, by coming back around and restoring these people to myself.”

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

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

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

If that's my high priest, that's also what he's doing – constantly, permanently priesting for me, permanently standing in for me and offering perfect sacrifice of his life in the perfect human obedience of his life. I am always, as an image-bearer, joined to him. The Father always holds the two of us — holds me and God's people — but always holds us with his Son — to participate in something. It isn't about how well I pull it off, it's the fact that it's already been pulled off.

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

CFN: That's right.

JMF: ...healed and redeemed.

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

...

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

CFN: Exactly.

JMF: And then Paul brings it up.

CFN: And how do you thank God for that?

JMF: Yeah.

CFN: Which is beyond our comprehension.

JMF: Yeah, it's fascinating.

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

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

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

CFN: Paul is writing a letter to a church he knows well and loves very

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

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

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

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

He finally gets to this point: “It's really all about the fact that you belong to each other, that you are this communal life enjoined to the Triune God together. There's only *allelon* (it's a Greek word that means ‘one anothering’). There's only one another. You love one another, you forgive one another, you care for one another.” If the story plot of Corinth was looking at you, you wouldn't know whose image you're being conformed into. He finally

says, “It’s all about looking like the character of God. It’s loving. It’s being patient and enduring and suffering long for the other, and believing and hoping and trusting.” We can’t see where this is all going, but at the same time we can, because we see him.

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

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

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

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

91. WHAT JESUS' HUMANITY MEANS FOR US

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

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

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

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

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

JMF: And by whole person you mean...

CFN: It's like the fun phrase that Karl Barth uses when he tries to talk about us as embodied souls. The very next sentence he'll use the term ensouled bodies or souled bodies, because he doesn't want us to see one prioritizing the other. To be a person is somebody who is constituted this way. There is no way for us to be the deep inner-core soul person that we are, that does not have its physical male or female manifestation. This is what it means to be Cherith. There is no other Cherith who is trapped in this body or currently taking up residence in this body. Embodied Cherith, at her

deepest, is all there is. I'm not just my body. There's something that is deeply *core* that remains in terms of who I am with my new body. We're landing in territory that's hard to describe, so Barth plays those terms off of one another.

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

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

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

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

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

Or on this side, people are saying, “We know that the material world isn't

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

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

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

JMF: In spite of that story.

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

We would engage in some of these deep questions. In the process of doing that, I asked them to begin to hand in assignments that became reflections that were not prose. They weren’t written papers. They had to be things that showed me in some other form—I don’t give any restrictions

around what it had to be—both their own body map and a God map. Not that you can completely categorize either, yourself or God, but how, through a tiny lens, how do you see yourself right now? What is your sense of your embodied person, and how do you see God? These were deeply far apart, because the incarnation wasn't the way that they saw God first. God was the big far-away God, or the wrath of God, or the confusing God, or the God that you hoped liked you most of the time.

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

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

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

This book is trying to get to the core of why Jesus' humanity matters every day, so that issues of justice do not become "topics of interest," if I happen to be somebody who's all about social justice or I'm all about creation care, or I'm all about immigrant issues, or I'm about this, or I'm about that. You are a human image-bearer who is already being called to enact the future that's coming, where God's justice and reign, and the flourishing of creation is finally the way it is, where you finally get your life back, and so does

everything else (referring to Romans 8 – that you are already the person that creation is holding on by its fingertips waiting for the glory of the children of God to be revealed, because once we get our lives back, so does everything else).

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

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

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

Those became life-and-death conversations. If you change that one word by this letter, it means something completely different, and it’s an iota of difference, and you’re saying either Jesus *is* God, or he is just sort of *like* God but not really God. These were deep conversations with deep ramifications in the everyday life of the community of the saints back then. They still are; we are unpracticed and unlearned at thinking through the implications of who Jesus really is. I speak for myself and my own church traditions—it’s easy to keep going back to the familiar and just seeing what we know, without going into the part that’s harder to say. We know what we need to profess, what we’re called to be witness to, what we’re called to say in worship.

At this stage I fall into doxology and worship and praise because I can’t explain it as a creature-child – I just have to celebrate it, because it defines

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

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

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

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

Jesus has been trying to turn this around for me and say, "Cherith, I suffered because you do. I've entered into your situation. I knew what was coming for you. I know the human condition. I knew you would have this. And the only way for your story to turn out with a different ending than having that suffering be the final word, is to enter into your suffering and take it and heal it and redeem it, so that when you are in the midst of it, you see it as a participation in the fellowship of mine and you know the outcome,

and you know that I can empower you to endure that, just as the Father by the Spirit empowered me all the way to and through the cross.” It’s become an earthy conversation in some wonderful ways. I am hoping by getting the book out there, that it will also create a lot more dialogue on some of these issues.

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

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

JMF: Right.

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

Paul is saying, “Nothing from those two laws will ever deliver you from that, but in the Spirit, every day, by continuing to trust and release and invite God.” You don’t have to *invite* him to be present – it’s almost just letting him loose. It’s letting him have the moment. To say, “Lord, I won’t constrict you. I will listen when you talk to me and stop, and when I’ve prayed earlier today, ‘Lead me not into temptation but deliver me from evil,’ when you try to do that for me, I will listen to you and not go into my default setting or not go the easiest place of my kind of bent-ness.”

Over time, God begins to take that bent-ness and straighten it into conformity with his Son, which is an obedient submission, which is a “What are we doing today, and how do I be a part of that?” I’ll have things all

through every day that need forgiving, but the Lord already knows that before I woke up, and he isn't inviting me or not inviting me in based on how well I'm going to do today, I'm just in.

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

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

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

I know how this turns out because he's right there with me and he's saying, "Cherith, you don't have to wait for the future, would you like to be part of what I am doing today in my reigning, in my standing in as a priest for the sake of the other before the Lord? Would you like to be an intercessor on behalf of... Would you like to go minister to the needs of... Would you like to stand for justice because I am the ruler over all things?" That means you have to stop and take the time to say, "That is not okay" instead of saying "well, that's sort of inconvenient for me, or as an American I feel entitled to it," or whatever it is.

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

92.A TRINITARIAN PERSPECTIVE IN WORSHIP

JMF: What was it that led you into your study of Trinitarian theology?

RP: It was an experience in my church one Sunday. I must have read something about the Trinity before coming out because it was vaguely at the back of my mind when I went into the meeting. When the meeting began, the leader at the front said, “Well, everyone, we’ve come here to meet with Jesus.” I thought, “Okay, I’ve actually come to meet with some other people as well, but that’s nice.” They went on and they prayed, “Dear Lord Jesus, thanks for being with us, come and be with us as we sing to you.” Then we sang a whole lot of songs.

Something near the beginning made me think, “This is interesting because there’s Jesus talk, but what about the Father or the Holy Spirit?” There was no mention of them. So I listened as the meeting went through. Song after song, they were either what I call “Jesus songs” or they were what I call “You, Lord” songs, which are the kind of songs about the Lord or God and it doesn’t say either Father, or Son, or Spirit. In the context of the meeting, it was clear that the “You, Lord” songs meant Jesus. All the prayers were about Jesus, and then we had a sermon about Jesus, but there was no mention of the Father or the Holy Spirit. We had a sinner’s prayer at the end, but it was a sinner’s prayer re-cast in a Jesus version, “Dear Lord Jesus, I’ve sinned against you. I know you love me, you died for me, you rose from the dead, come and live in my heart.” Then we went away.

By this point I was thinking, there’s something weird about this. The other thing that was weird was that nobody else seemed to think there was anything wrong. It just didn’t click, it didn’t register. I thought, now that’s worrying, that you can have a whole meeting devoid of any sense of engaging with the Father or the Holy Spirit in a Christian meeting and they won’t notice it.

I thought, “Maybe I should go.” I went home and got a worship album, probably the best-selling worship album in the world at the time, and thought I’d have a look through the lyrics and see what they’re saying. I read through the lyrics, and all the songs were good. On their own, there was not a problem with any of them. But as I read each song, what struck me... (it was a recording of a worship event)... looking at the whole thing, there was not a single reference to the Father or the Holy Spirit anywhere.

Intriguingly, the story of Jesus was completely collapsed, so there were references about God’s transcendence, there were references about the imminence and presence of God, but there was no reference to the

Incarnation, the story of Israel, creation, no reference to the ministry of Jesus. One song referred to his death and resurrection. There were no references to the Ascension, the giving of the Spirit or the return of Christ. The whole thing was collapsed into “my experience of God now.” I thought, “That’s really worrying. As a worship event (which this was a recording of), it’s completely un-Trinitarian.”

It’s terrible once you’re led to this, you start listening for it... In subsequent weeks I listened to the songs and the prayers and so on, and I found regularly the Father and the Spirit either hardly mentioned or not mentioned at all. It was terrible.

I then started looking at a Vineyard worship album. I went through every Vineyard album published over an eight-year period, something like eight years, maybe five to eight. I went through the lyrics to see how many of them mentioned the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, how many mentioned two, and if so which two, how many mentioned all three. It was shocking. When you looked at the whole corpus of songs, all the songs were fine. I have no problem with any of them in particular, but when you look at them as a whole, there was no sense of Trinitarian balance. This is what alerted me to the issue of, when we worship, is our worship fully Christian, or is it slipping into something that’s almost Unitarian in practice, or what Karl Rahner calls “mere monotheism.” If somehow we discovered that the Trinity wasn’t true, would it make any difference to the way we did anything? Would anyone even notice?

That was the thing that set off my flags and got me thinking that I needed to look into this and see if I can do something constructive about it, which is what I tried to do by writing the book [*Worshipping Trinity*] and talking to worship leaders and song writers and so on after.

JMF: After your teaching (and you’ve done a lot of work in it), what is it about Trinitarian theology that you find the most compelling and exciting?

RP: It’s hard to put your finger on one thing and say *that’s* the thing. In the same way, when I was a kid, I used to have a favorite color: green. Whereas now, I can’t abstract a single color. Green’s beautiful when it’s alongside of these other colors, but it’s the interplay.

If there was one thing that I keep coming back to about Trinitarian theology, as I conceive it, is this sense that in the person of Christ... It came to me through one of the concerns raised when I started saying we need to be more Trinitarian, intentionally Trinitarian, in the way we worship. Somebody said, “Yeah, but shouldn’t our worship be Jesus-focused, because we’re Christians and the Gospels are Jesus-focused, shouldn’t *we* be Jesus-

focused? I thought, “That’s true. We are Christians and we should be Jesus-focused.” Then it dawned on me, to be Jesus-focused is to be Trinitarian because it’s precisely in the incarnation of Christ that the Trinity is revealed. By definition, if you are focused on the Jesus who is revealed in the Gospels, the Jesus that the church believes in, if you’re that kind of Jesus-focused, you will be Trinitarian. You can be Christocentric Trinitarian – it sort of follows.

I keep coming back to this sense that in the person of Christ, God has completed this work of salvation in the Savior, inscribed in his flesh, our humanity is redeemed. In the risen body of Christ, God has done all that needs to be done to save us. Now, through the work of the Spirit, God is working to join people to Christ to participate in that salvation.

I keep coming back to this thought, and it keeps inspiring me, because it takes the pressure off. I think, I can have hope because it’s God doing this. It’s not about me doing this or anyone doing this. I look at the statistics of how churches are doing, and I think, this isn’t good. Then I think, God’s doing this. God has completed this work in Christ. There’s no way he’s not going to finish it. There’s no way that the Spirit’s been caught by surprise.

All analogies of the Trinity have their pros and cons. I like Irenaeus’ image: two hands of the Father. It has its downsides, but one of the upsides is it gives a lovely way of thinking about salvation. You have the Father, whose intention is to draw humanity and people to himself, so he does this by stretching out the hand of his Son. Then he reaches out the hand of his Spirit, and through the Spirit he draws us to Christ. Then through Christ, he draws us to himself. We’re held in this Trinitarian embrace where the Father, through the Spirit, draws us through the Son to himself.

I love that image and this sense that it’s God that does this. It doesn’t depend on us in the end. God, the Spirit, enables us to participate, and we engage, and it’s a subjective engaging with God in our relationship with God. But it’s not something *we* do. It’s not earning anything with God or achieving anything with God. It’s being enabled by God to participate. Even our response to God is, as Matt Redmond says, a gifted response, a response that God enables us to make.

JMF: If Christians don’t have some kind of understanding of the Trinity and the relationships within the Trinity and how we’re drawn to that and so on... (and many don’t – it’s common to go into a church that doesn’t have a Trinitarian point of worship or preaching. Even though they believe in the Trinity as a fundamental doctrine, most members don’t think about it and they wouldn’t be able to explain it if they were asked.) What do they lose? They’re Christian, they have faith, they’re saved by grace and they walk in

Christ and so on to the degree that they can. But what are they missing? What could they have, if they better understood?

RP: Their experience of God *is* Trinitarian even if they don't realize it, because there's no other way of encountering God, because there is no other God to encounter. When anyone has an encounter with God, it is the Triune God they encounter. But it can enrich their encounter of God, their subjective understanding and experience of that relationship with God, and it can free them up to walk with God in more liberated ways, to understand better the God who they encounter, the God who is at work in their life working out their salvation. It's still the Holy Spirit working in them even if they've never heard of the Spirit or can't conceptualize these things rightly.

It would enrich their relationship with God in many ways. For instance, it would enrich their engagement with God as a Father to realize that it's not through their effort to try and please the Father or earn status for the Father or somehow, if they misconstrue their Trinitarian theology, somehow placate the Father who's not very kindly disposed toward them. To realize that you don't have to placate God, God doesn't need placating. God loves us. This is why he sends his Son and this is why he sends his Spirit and draws us.

It enables us to appreciate more the love and grace of God and to take some of the pressure off that we have to earn stuff with God. But it doesn't change the objective fact that it is still the Father through the Son and the Spirit. That's the only way that they are able to engage with God in any sense at all, even if they can't think of it straight.

JMF: Isn't it true that there is no such thing as good in the world or love, mercy, all things good that *don't* come from Christ, that don't come from the Triune God into the world? It's not like people who are not Christian if and when they do good things...it's not like that comes out of some other universe not made by...

RP: Right. They're living in the same created order which is the good creation that the true God made. They're living as God's creatures in the image of God even if they don't realize they are. People shouldn't understand a doctrine of total depravity, say, to mean that everybody is as depraved as they possibly could be. I've always reacted against the misuse of the scripture that says, even the good things you do are as filthy rags... What the prophet means, what God means when he says that, is "You guys are so bad, you guys in particular, that even the good stuff you do is bad." He's not saying *everybody's* such that even their love and kindness, even *that's* filthy and disgusting in my sight. God isn't saying anything like that.

We can see genuine aspects of the image of God and the work of God

and even the Spirit working in and through people who don't yet know Christ, because they're God's creatures in God's world. Although the image of God might be broken in us, it's not completely destroyed. We would cease to be human if that was the case.

JMF: The only way to be human is to be human in Christ. That's all there is.

RP: Right. In one way of thinking about salvation, salvation is about the restoration of our humanity. It's about being human the way God made us to be human. Sometimes I think of it like this: Imagine our humanity is like a rubber glove. You might wash the dishes with rubber gloves... Christ, or the Logos, is like that on which we are modeled as humans. It's like a rubber glove molded on this hand, but the rubber glove has become torn and ripped and damaged.

So what God does in Christ is the very template, the very one in whose image we are made, he takes on – I don't mean *disguises* himself as a human – but he *becomes* flesh, and on the cross melts down this humanity, our humanity, and re-molds it around himself, remakes it, re-forges humanity in the resurrection. So in the resurrection of Christ, we see it's all about the glory of God in human flesh, in human beings. Salvation is about all of that, being human as God made us to be, because we need a bigger view of what it is to be human.

In Genesis, when God makes us, God makes us in his image. The word in Hebrew is *tselem*, the word used to describe the image of a deity. In the Ancient Near East you would have a temple and a statue of the deity in the temple. The statue of the deity was understood to be... They would go through a ritual, and when they went through the ritual, they believed that the spirit of the god would inhabit the statue.

Now, the amazing thing is, Yahweh forbids the use of any statues, any images like that. Because of the kind of God that God is, nothing like that, no statue that can't speak and can't act and do things, can image this God. But God authorizes in the earth his own *tselem*, his own icon, as it were, which is a human being, to be indwelt by the presence of God in the earth, mediating God's rule and dominion over creation. It's an astonishingly *high* view of what it is to be human. Amazing. And people say Christians have such a dour view that humans are just scum and worm and all that.

The Bible has a very high view of humans as God's icons through which God commissions humans that his glory, the presence of God himself, would be in humans. This is what's being restored. This is a glory lost in sin, and humans fall short of this glory. But in Christ it's a glory that's restored. So

being a Christian is all about being changed by the Spirit to share in Christ's humanity. It's about in Christ, through the Spirit, becoming more human.

JMF: Going back to the topic of worship... You've done a lot of work on Christian worship, and I don't know if I can put it in these terms, but could you talk for a few minutes about what we might call the good, the bad, and the ugly of Christian worship?

RP: Sure. There's a lot of good, there's a lot of bad, and there's a lot of ugly. I guess it's easier to talk about the bad and the ugly. One thing that concerns me as a person who thinks theologically and thinks Trinitarianly is all the stuff that *isn't* in worship, particularly in my own tradition.

I'm charismatic, evangelical, free-church ecclesiology, and the way we do things has plus points and downsides. One of the changes that's taken place recently is there's been a move where you used to have the minister who would lead the whole service, and often it would have a clear theological shape, a certain kind of terrain that you would cover. You'd always have confession of sins, thanksgiving, you'd have intercessions and so on. For various reasons, this has changed to a form of worship where you have a worship leader who is basically a singer and guitar player, and worship becomes more about singing one song after another, just linking songs, and that would be a worship time.

One of the problems with that it is in great danger of cutting out crucial parts of Christian worship, like confession, like intercession. And because the songs tend to come out of the same songwriting stables, you don't tend to get songs that deal with issues like lament, or confession, or the Eucharist, or baptism, or listening to the word of God and so on. Things that are central in Christian spirituality are gone, and very quickly you lose a sense of balance or shape.

In some of the more liturgical worshipping traditions, to me it's like *Lord of the Rings* – you have this vast landscape of terrain that you're covering as you move through it. There's a sense of movement as you go through a meeting or a series of meetings. Over the whole Christian year you have this shape of movement and engaging with different aspects of God and the story of God in Christ.

Sometimes it feels to me like we charismatics are in danger of being like locked in a broom cupboard under the stairs walking in circles, and we're covering such a small terrain there's not much sense of... What holds to link the songs together is often in the key, and that means I can go from one to the other... Are they songs that have blessed me recently? But there isn't much thought often given to the theological shape and the sense of what are

the kind of things that we ought to be engaging with here.

This is through no bad intent on the part of worship leaders. In my experience, worship leaders and song writers desperately want to help the people of God to engage with God. This is where their heart is at, but they have no role models in how that can be done. There's little help given to them through leaders or training courses. When I see the programs of these training courses for worship leaders, it's often all technical stuff about PAs, or it's technical stuff about the music, or it might be encountering the presence.

One of the dangers of contemporary worship, particularly charismatic, is it all becomes about my engagement with God now. Everything becomes collapsed into now. There's no sense of where we come from or where we're going, and this is bad for our spirituality, because most of our Christian spirituality and the way we were led to God is something we pick up through engaging in the practices of worship. The ways we think about God, the language we use to describe God, the kinds of things we think to talk to God about, and the kinds of things that would never cross our minds to talk to God about, we learn through engaging in prayer. We learn those habits and things through doing it communally. If our spirituality is being shaped in a deformed (not unchristian, but sub-Christian) way when we meet together to worship, then we are selling short our congregations.

Our people are being shaped in ways so that, just to take lament as an instance, if there is never any place for lament in our worship (unlike in Scripture where there is), then when people are confronted with situations where the appropriate and honest response, the faithful covenant response to God, is like Christ himself on the cross, to lament... If we're not giving people a vocabulary to know how to respond to God in those situations, they end up feeling bad or feeling like they're somehow unbelieving... "How could I have those thoughts?" It's pastorally terrible.

One of my goals is to help charismatics to rediscover a charismatic way of lamenting in the Spirit. Christ on the cross stands in our place and laments in our place. He prays, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Psalm 22. It's not in a sense of abandoning God – it's, "*My* God, *my* God, why have you forsaken me?" He's lamenting as a way of holding onto God in this situation. Christ does this, Old Testament saints do this.

I argue this in a paper and a book I've done on Lamentations.... One of the ways that the Holy Spirit helps us, is that the Holy Spirit, as creation groans [Romans 8] and as the church groans, lamenting the current state, groaning in frustration, groaning looking to the future, and groaning at

intercession – the Holy Spirit groans with us, groans with creation. As we groan, I argue, the Holy Spirit is doing the same thing. The Holy Spirit is groaning in frustration at the brokenness of creation, and so lamenting.

The Holy Spirit is looking to the future to bring to birth, like through the travail and pain of childbirth, a new future. The Holy Spirit, through the groaning, is praying by the will of the Father for creation to be liberated. The Holy Spirit can groan through our groaning. In the Holy Spirit, we can lament in the Spirit, so our laments and prayers are taken up by the Holy Spirit and infused with his and become, rather than cries of despair, transformed into groans that take hold of God and look to the future with hope.

There is a Trinitarian way of understanding what is going on and how lament is something that God himself through Christ and through the Spirit is engaged with, and through which we ought to, as faithful Christian disciples, be lamenting, groaning with creation and praying it forward into its glorious destiny.

93. LAMENT AND THE ROLE OF ISRAEL IN SALVATION HISTORY

Jesus' lament on the cross

J. Michael Fezell: We've been talking about lament in Scripture. When Jesus was on the cross he says, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Many times people look at that and see the despair included, but doesn't that imply the entire Psalm from which it comes, with its conclusion that resolves a sense of despair?

Robin Parry: Absolutely. When in the New Testament someone will quote from the Old Testament, often they might just quote a verse or even a phrase, but the hearers will know the Scriptures; they were immersed in the Scriptures, and the hearers will call to mind the whole context, the whole story, the whole Psalm or whatever. When Jesus says, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" we need to remember that Jesus would have known how the Psalm ended, and the Psalm ends with deliverance.

The book of Hebrews chapter 2 quotes from the salvation part of the Psalm and applies that to Jesus. In the early church, the Christ-followers saw it as appropriate to take the second part of the Psalm as applying to Christ and the resurrection, and Christ as the one who praises God in the congregation.

But we need to be careful not to collapse or to downgrade the despair or the lament of Christ on the cross as if he knew it was going to come out all happy in the end anyway, so he wasn't really lamenting. Christ isn't just putting on a show. He isn't feigning lament. He really is suffering in our humanity, he really is lamenting on our behalf. He is expressing precisely how he feels. It's the positive part. In Mark and Matthew, "why have you forsaken me?" comes right near the end. This has been building up through the whole experience on Calvary. It comes out near the end, "why have you forsaken me?" It's not just a passing thing and then he gets over it.

We need to beware of somehow collapsing the hope and the despair together — so he's despairing, but actually he's happy. He's lamenting, so we need to take that seriously, but also to recognize that Jesus has not given up on God. He says, "*My* God, why have you forsaken me?" This is lament within a relationship with God where he knows... for the joy set before him, as it says in Hebrews, he endured the shame of the cross.

This is an important tension to hold onto, that we have cross and resurrection. Alan Lewis does this wonderful thing on the theology of Holy Saturday where he says, Holy Saturday is situated between cross and

resurrection. In a way, it holds them apart, and it holds them together. On one hand, Holy Saturday means we can't have the cross without the resurrection, or the resurrection without the cross. We have to have the two, we have to hold them together, but we don't want to collapse them into some smudge. So it gives a bit of distance between the two. We need to hear them, he says, in stereo.

On one hand, we need to hear the cross almost as it would have sounded, as it would have felt, without looking back in retrospect from the perspective of the resurrection. But on the other hand, if that's *all* you do, that can't be a Christian way of looking at the cross. At the same time, you have to hear the cross through the resurrection, seen from that perspective.

This is instructive for how we should understand lament, and lament within the Christian life. On one hand, there's a space for lament. We don't want to collapse lament and salvation together, so that the lament isn't really lament. We need to give it space to be itself. In a biblical theology, it never has the last word. We are a people who believe in the cross and the resurrection. If you let lament have the last word, it's like saying, "Go there, but there's no empty tomb."

If you look at the biblical book of Lamentations, this comes out nicely in that Lamentations ends with the one voice that they're desperate to hear. The people in the book of Lamentations are saying, "God, come, save us, rescue us." The one voice that does not speak by the end is the one voice they want to hear, the voice of God. The book ends (in the canonical form, the form in which God has seen fit to preserve it for us) without the salvation. They're looking, they're calling, they're begging, and it hasn't come. But the book of Lamentations is also preserved for us in a canonical context, and we can't read it as if it's not part of these other Scriptures, which proceed and follow it.

The book of Isaiah picks up on Lamentations on numerous occasions. In Isaiah we see God's speaking, God's solution. To give one example of this: in chapter 1 of Lamentations, over and over again, we see there's no one to comfort her. Jerusalem is desolate, and there's no one to stand by her, no one to offer consolation. Isaiah picks this up. Chapter 40 begins, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God." Over and over again God says, "I am Yahweh, your comforter."

On one hand, you need to hear Lamentations to give it space to be itself, because God preserved it in that form, and the Bible doesn't rush in and say, "Quick, quick, quick, let's get to the hope, let's rush to the hope." It leaves the pain, the breathing space. But it can't let it stay there, and it wouldn't be a Christian, it wouldn't be a Jewish, it wouldn't be a faithful hearing or

recension of Lamentations to hear it just in its canonical form but not in its canonical context. We need to hear it in stereo.

Lamentations, in a sense, is Israel's reaction to its exile. It's looking back to the exile and it's looking forward to the restoration. It's a bit like Holy Saturday as we look back to the cross and forward to the resurrection. In some ways, as Christians, we can see Lamentations as the Holy Saturday literature of Israel. It's a way of trying to look back at what was, and what's been lost and what's been destroyed...it's looking around at the grave, at this destruction that surrounds them, and it's looking forward to a salvation that is to come but has not yet come.

Jewish worship does this brilliantly, because every year in the Jewish liturgical cycle, on the ninth of Av, the book of Lamentations is recited. On that day in the synagogue, people sit on the floor. There is no celebration, there are no readings from the Torah, it's a day of mourning and fasting. The next day it begins with the comfort thing from Isaiah, and it moves forward then, towards the liturgical cycle of Atonement. So Jewish people have brilliantly captured this insight of saying there's a time to weep and there's a time to rejoice, and we need to give space for the two, but we need to realize that the time to weep is situated within a bigger story, and that story doesn't end with weeping.

As Christians, we want to say the reason we have hope... We recognize that there's a cross, and that the creation is marked by brokenness, and that our own lives are often broken, but we know that it can't end that way. We know that it ends with resurrection, because the tomb is empty. As Stanley Hauerwas says, we can never be hopeless people even if we might despair (maybe despair is the wrong word)...even if we might lament, even if we might feel pain, even if we might cry out. To have an honest and integrated and faithful relationship with God, we need to do that. That's the appropriate human response on certain occasions, but if it's a Christian response, it is never hopeless.

The imprecatory psalms

JMF: In the Psalms, there's an honesty of a feeling, of expression... Often it comes across as anger toward someone who has hurt the psalmist in some way. It gives the freedom to feel what we actually feel, knowing that God has already dealt with sin, both ours and others, so there's a freedom to know that he's not going to condemn us for expressing how we actually feel. Yet the freedom to express that isn't an end in itself, and it doesn't leave us alone in our lament.

RP: No. The Psalms of lament usually move through that and beyond

that. Not always, but there are situations within a bigger context, and in a bigger context we move beyond that. Some of the Psalms are troubling — the imprecatory Psalms, particularly Psalm 137, smashing the children on the rocks and so on. How could that be an authorized kind of prayer? We could say various things about that, but one of them is, that it is how the psalmist feels, and it is a sense of honesty. Walter Brueggemann brings this up well in his work on lamenting Psalms. There’s a brutal honesty in these Psalms — not one we feel comfortable with, but he thinks it’s important to have space for that kind of thing even if you can’t end with that, if that can’t be where you stop.

JMF: I’ve had people ask about that... Sometimes it’s attributed to David...he’s “a man after God’s own heart” and yet he’s talking like this. How can that be part of the Bible and how can it be okay to feel that way? I think I’ve said worse than that. I don’t publish it for everyone to read, but sometimes when I’m in the car alone and there’s a traffic situation, I can get like that. Sometimes when I think of things that someone has done, not necessarily to me, but outrageous things that have happened of injustice, I feel these things. I’m not David, but I don’t think when we ask a question like that, that we’ve never felt like that. We’ve all said things that we would be embarrassed if they would be played back to a full auditorium.

RP: Often when you see in a Psalm the psalmist will say, “Lord, strike my enemies down and destroy them, wipe them from the face of the earth,” or something... Often, it’s not a sense of personal revenge that they’re after. The psalmist is speaking from a place of powerlessness. What the psalmist is *not* doing is they’re not saying, “I’m going to take vengeance into my own hands.”

JMF: Right.

RP: The psalmist is saying, “I am not going to take vengeance into my hands. I’m not in a position to do so, and I’m not going to do so. That is God’s role.” The Psalm is a stepping back by the psalmist saying, “I cannot do anything about this and I’m not going to. This is God’s place to do something about this.” That’s an important theological lesson for Christians to learn — as Paul says, “Do not seek vengeance, for the Lord says, it’s mine to repay.” Christians, like the Psalmist, need to learn that, even from those imprecatory Psalms.

The second thing we need to realize is, it’s not personal vengeance. They’re seeking deliverance and salvation. They’ve been persecuted by Assyrians or Babylonians... When they pray destruction on them, what they’re saying is, “Lord, save us.” The political reality is, what salvation would entail would be for our enemies to be removed. It reflects a sense of God’s

justice and judgment. These people have acted terribly, and what they have done is inhuman, and it is not inappropriate for God to judge them.

For a Christian to pray this, a Christian couldn't take it up in an unreflective way — we would have to read it through Christ, and we'd have to read it in the light of Christ saying, love your enemies, forgive those who persecute you, and so on. But there are still important lessons that Christians need to draw, even from these Psalms that at first sight seem so outrageous — they're actually prayers of powerless people who need God to deliver them from people who are treating them inhumanly, and they're being realistic about what that might look like.

JMF: In many cases historically, the enemies of Israel, didn't they do some of those kinds of things to the Israelites?

RP: It would depend when and who, but there were some atrocities; the Babylonian destruction is one instance. The people are kept in the city under siege, they're dying of starvation and disease, the cities are ravished, people are killed, exiled. It's devastating — not least psychologically, not least in the way they understood their sense of relationship with God and, "We're the people you've chosen, this is the land that you've put us in, this is your city, this is your temple, this is your king and now the king is captured." Their whole world is falling apart. It's incredibly traumatizing.

Even aside from the issue of people starving to death and people being killed, the Bible tends to be very down on imperialism. This comes out in many ways, but here we see the military, imperial power imposing itself on this little nation. The prophets and psalmists don't tend to warm to that. It's a critique of that kind of militarist expansionistic empire-building thing.

Israel in salvation history

JMF: Let's switch gears for a moment and talk about Israel in salvation history. Is the church a replacement for Israel in salvation history?

RP: No — although I have to say that for most of my Christian life, and for most of my theological life, I would have answered yes. I now think it's one of the things that has blighted Christian theology and Christian history, is this idea that the church somehow replaces Israel — that the people of Israel have been abandoned, they were faithless and now we're the people who are doing it properly, fulfilling their mission and so on.

This is disastrous not simply for the Jewish people — and it has been disastrous for them, as any study of the history of Jewish-Christian relations will show that Christians have treated Jews despicably over the centuries and often still do — not merely that, but it's been terrible for us, because we have lost the sense of who we are.

I will give a brief summary of how I would understand what the church is. Not all Christians agree with this, but the way I think it comes out scripturally is that here you have this story, of God creates the world and his desire in Genesis 1-11 is for humanity as a whole, it's for the nations, but creation has fallen, creation has broken, how is God going to deal with that? The way that God chooses to deal with this is through electing a man, Abraham, and the descendants who come from him — not simply for their own sake, but also for the sake of the world, that through this nation and through what this nation is about and their ministry, it's going to be somehow (and it's not clear how, at the start), God will bring redemption for the created order.

So we're set out in Genesis with this way of understanding what Israel's mission is about, and Israel is called in some ways like a new humanity. Abraham is a bit like a new Adam and his descendants living in the land, Adam and Eve living in the Garden of Eden. They are to live God's way in God's land, modeling righteousness and justice, following the laws; this is the calling they have. As Paul says, "because of the flesh," actually living the Torah doesn't happen. Over and over again they're a stiff-necked people. They can't do it.

Then the covenant curses come into play. In Deuteronomy and Leviticus, God says if you do not keep the covenant, these curses will come into play. These curses are not the collapse of covenant, they're not the breaking of the relationship, they're taking place within covenant. God's covenant is irrevocable. Paul says as much with regard to Israel in Romans 11. God's gift and God's calling and the covenant with the patriarchs is in place, it is irrevocable, and nothing Israel does can break that, but what it can do is incur all the sort of curses that take place within that.

So God starts to say, through the prophets, for Israel to play its role in creation, something has got to happen for Israel. Israel needs saving. So through Jeremiah, through Ezekiel, we learn of this... a new covenant that God will make with Israel where he will put his laws within them. Deuteronomy speaks of circumcising the heart. In Deuteronomy 30:6, it talks about after the exile, God will circumcise Israel's hearts and enable them to obey him. This is what Jeremiah speaks of as new covenant, and Ezekiel talks about putting the Spirit within you so that you'll obey my laws.

So we have this solution whereby God will redeem Israel from their exile and then the nations will come on pilgrimage, they will worship the God of Israel, and so on. These Old Testament (or whatever we want to call it) — those prophetic expectations of salvation are the key for understanding what New Testament says of the church and everything we're about.

Tom Wright put this brilliantly: Christ on the cross is standing in the place of Israel. He is like Israel writ small, I think he puts it like that. He is one man, Israel, and he bears Israel's exilic curses upon himself. As such, he is bearing the sins of the whole world upon himself because Israel is a microcosm representative of humanity. The sin of the world is focused on him, and in the death and resurrection of Christ we see the exile and restoration of Israel played out and taken to its climax.

In the book of Acts we see this worked out where lots of Jewish people start to come to recognize Jesus as their Messiah and receive the Holy Spirit, which is one of the signs of the new covenant. The Holy Spirit is given and poured out. Here we see Israel being restored in their midst. Somehow in the midst of time, in the midst of the old age, here is *the end of exile* being played out in the giving in the Spirit.

Then the Gentiles, the nations, with Cornelius and so on, come and worship Israel's God. This comes out clearly in Acts 15 with James and the Jerusalem Council. We have this picture in Acts and through the other New Testament documents – in the church, you have Jew and Gentile united into a single body, but they're not blurred together into some mush. They are both one in Christ, both accepted in Christ, because of the saving work of the Messiah.

But Israel is still Israel with its distinctive calling, and the nations, the Gentiles, are like the pilgrim nations in an eschatological foretaste. So the church is like a prophetic anticipation of the end of the age in which we see the promise realized of Israel restored, in Jews who accept the Messiah, and the pilgrim nations coming in, the Gentiles who accept the Messiah united as one body. But the Jews are still Jews. I think that Jewish believers still should be circumcised and follow food laws and so on, Gentile believers should not, because the Scriptures are clear that when the end times come, the Gentiles will be accepted as Gentiles; they don't have to convert to Judaism. Paul is emphatic about this. If Christ has brought in the new age, then Gentiles not only don't have to, they *must* not get circumcised.

We have a vision here of the church in which Jew and Gentile exist as Jew and Gentile side by side in one body, but without saying, as has happened in the history of the church, any Jew who becomes a believer has changed their religion and ceases to be Jewish and has to give up anything that looks distinctively Jewish. I think this is a complete misunderstanding of what the New Testament is about. It's failing to be the kind of church that Jesus aimed to bring about, of restored Israel anticipated — for the end times, when all Israel will be saved, which it says in Romans 11, and all the nations will come and worship, which is anticipated in the church prophetically.

94. WHAT ON EARTH IS JESUS DOING?

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

J. Michael Feazell: Thanks for joining us.

Andrew Purves: You're welcome.

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

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

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



them, but at the foundation of my theological formation there was this classical, orthodox, evangelical, catholic theology of the confessional church.

After all my studies were completed and I came to the United States, I married an American woman and

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So I tell my students, *grace* is a good word, but remember grace has a name, his name is Jesus. Love is a good word, but love has a name, his name is Jesus. Hope is a good word, but his name is Jesus. In other words, my hope is not in *hope*, my trust is not in *grace*. I do not try to live lovingly. What does that mean? What does it mean for me to live in Christ, who is my hope? Hope and love and grace and so on become concrete and specific and not just free-floating entities where content from the culture can tend to overwhelm them.

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

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

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

I have been professionally criticized for having too big a doctrine of Jesus

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

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

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

AP: My paradigm story here in answer to that question is Acts 9:5, Saul of Tarsus, this brilliant persecutor of the church. He's got the warrant from the court in his pocket, he's en route to Damascus, he's going to round them up, he's going to get them, and he's going to poof out of existence this nonsense that this Jesus who is dead is somehow raised. Paul is accosted, encountered by the ascended Lord—the only story we have of the ascended Lord appearing. All the other post-resurrection stories are of the resurrected Lord, but now in his ascended power he comes, and Saul is knocked to the ground. Paul's question is the core theological question— "Who are you, Lord?"

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

Because we are thinking creatures, we are then called to think about that as rightly and as faithfully as we can. That's what theology is. We try to think about the creative act of God claiming us in, through, and as Jesus Christ. There are better ways and less better ways, and even right and wrong ways,

to think about this. For example, this is a silly illustration, but not every sentence that has the word “god” in it is an accurate and faithful theological sentence. I could say, “God is a pink banana.” That’s not a faithful theological sentence. I could say, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.” That is a faithful theological sentence.

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

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

JMF: Let’s talk about the encounters.

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

We were sitting around the coal fire watching television, and this is not an allusion to John Wesley, but it was somewhere after 8:00 in the evening, and I got up to leave the living room. My lapsed Roman Catholic Irish mother was in an armchair by the fire. I stopped at her chair and said, “I’m bored with my life.” My mother looked up, “Oh,” she said, “Why don’t you go to church next Sunday?”

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

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

AP: It’s a big story, and it’s the story that in many ways now defines my

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

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

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

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

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

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

to destroy me, but I assure you, I have the victory. That was it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

For the want of another image...and I hope this doesn't sound self-serving or arrogant, but that book seems to have an anointing that I don't have any control over. It seems to have a life that God has given it for the blessing of busy, tired, middle-aged, underpaid, over-stressed, over-worked,

underappreciated, collapsing self-esteem pastors—it seems to have connected. I will take that for what it is. If it’s a blessing, then I am grateful.

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

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

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

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

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

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

What do you do? You throw on some clothes, you get there, you get to

the hospital, 4:30, Bill's in the room waiting. He hears your footsteps, he turns around, there's tears running down his face. "Bill, what's the matter?" "The baby's dead." He looks at his watch. "Oh, it's just coming up for time. The nurse said we'll get in in a minute to see Mary. Oh, and by the way, we want you to baptize the baby."

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

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

- 1) He prays for us. So this situation of family catastrophe and of ministerial powerlessness is being prayed for by Jesus.
- 2) Second, he sends the Holy Spirit. This is a charismatic environment. The Holy Spirit is here.
- 3) The third thing Calvin says, "And he gives us to the Father."

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

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

95. THEOLOGY FOR PASTORAL WORK

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

How does a pastor bring those two stories together?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I would encourage pastors really seriously in this regard. If you have no life in Christ, you have no ministry, because we read in John 15:5, "Apart from me, you can do nothing. Unless you are connected into me, the vine, you can do nothing." So the most practical, pertinent question I can put to a working pastor is, "What's going on in your life in Jesus?" Because if you don't have a life in Christ, you don't have a ministry. No matter how technically proficient you are in the skills of ministry, no matter how many

committee meetings you go to, your life in Christ means that you can go into these situations and you know who Jesus is, what he is up to in all of these contexts, and you can point to that, bear witness to that.

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

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

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

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

The question is for me, for pastors: "Will I pay attention to that life in Christ? Will I seek to grow more deeply in Christ?" Psalm 1 is Psalm 1

because Psalm 1 is doing something that no other psalm can do. Psalm 2 can't do what Psalm 1 is doing. What is Psalm 1 doing? Psalm 1 is the gateway, the threshold, the entrance into the book of Israel's response to the Lord, or rather the five books of Israel's response to the Lord. You have the Pentateuch, five books...the five books of the response, five books of the Psalms. Psalm 1 is setting up this response. It's a two-way psalm. Will you abide in the way of the wicked, or will you abide in the way of the Lord? I think that's the challenge for any Christian disciple. What does it mean more deeply, more convertedly, more faithfully to live into that reality that has already claimed them—to find me. To abide in the Lord and to make my home there.

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

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

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

The Greek word for overflowing here in other translations is sometimes translated "abounding." Abounding is an old funny word. I don't abound (especially as we get older) much anymore. The word means overflowing.

Paul uses it in Romans 5 to talk about grace. Overflowing. Three times he says, “Grace overflows.” Again he says grace overflows, and the third time he puts it in the superlative—grace super-overflows—it’s Niagara Falls of grace, not just a little trickle-down effect. It’s this huge grace, so that sin has no chance.

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

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

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

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

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

Sometimes you hear preachers say we’ve got to press on, we’ve got to work harder, go to more committee meetings, give more money, press on, press on. You know, “I guilt you, I guilt you, I guilt you,” and I’m tired of guilt. But if they’ve read the whole verse, “I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.” What is the first thing? It’s not that I press on to attain the prize of Jesus Christ. I press on because Jesus Christ has already taken hold of me and I am his prize. The Greek word here means “seized hold of.” It’s not just that Jesus Christ has taken hold of me, it’s Jesus Christ has *seized* hold of me. It’s an intensive. “I seize hold of the Christian

life because Jesus Christ has already seized hold of me.” I think of it as we’re grabbed by the scruff of our spiritual necks. We’re seized hold of intensively. When Jesus Christ has us by the scruff of our spiritual necks, we can buck and we even try to get out of it, but he has got us by the scruff of the neck. Because we are seized hold of, with thankfulness I am going to live this life the way he wants me to live it, and give it my best shot, knowing that no matter what, he has seized hold of me, and on that I will depend.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

To put it differently, the relations within the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are not relations of law or obligation. The Trinity is a communion of love—three persons, one being. The heart of God, if we can speak, the being of God, who God is, is God is love. God gives us law in order to help us live in an appropriate way. But the heart of things, the center of things is not law, but love. Not condemnation, but forgiveness. That's freedom. For freedom Christ has set us free [Galatians 5:1], not for guilt. For freedom Christ has set us free. Thanks be to God.

JMF: The gospel really is good news.

AP: Right. It's called gospel.

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

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

If you're in a Pietistic tradition, under the Wesleys perhaps, my Reformed

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

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

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

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

- Gregory of Nazianzus, 380s, the first systematic text in pastoral ministry in the history of the church.
- John Chrysostom, the Greek father from Antioch.
- Gregory the Great, 590, became pope. His book of pastoral rule was the book of pastoral care for the next 1000 years in the Western church.
- Martin Bucer, the most important pastoral writer of the Reformation age, his pastoral theology just being published in English for the first time.
- Richard Baxter, [who wrote] *The Reformed Pastor*...it doesn't mean the Calvinist pastor; it means the renewed pastor, the pastor in Christ.
- And the reminisces of my favorite, John McLeod Campbell of Scotland.

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

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

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

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

96. WE ARE NOT GENERIC

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

AP: You mean in the classroom or...

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

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

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

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

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

Eventually I discovered a group in Washington, D.C., called the Church of the Savior, an intentional formational community of discipleship led by a wonderful man, Gordon Cosby and his wife, Mary Cosby, and I went off to do a retreat. I was there four days, in D.C., the first 26 hours of which were in silence. It absolutely devastated me. I had never been silent that long in my

life. We went through a program, and I came back to my little country congregation in western Pennsylvania and got up on the Sunday morning after I arrived back and said, “Folks, I’ve had a major experience. I think I’ve just been converted, and I think I realize that I’ve got to have a relationship with Jesus and I’ve got to become a man of prayer. I’m just being really candid with you.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

I praise God for that because the borderline between theology and proclamation ought not to be that far apart. Theology and exegesis, the interpretation of Scripture, are for the proclamation of the gospel. Exegesis without proclamation is aborted process. As Calvin knew, theology is for the proclamation of the gospel. We ought to get to messing a little bit and into preaching, I think.

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

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

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

During my cancer seven and a half years ago, I was off for eight months. She was staggering. I was in the hospital for 14 days, she was to come in the morning, and we’d read the daily office of the Episcopal Church. Why do we do that? It’s structured, we like it. So come 8:00 in the morning, we’d pray the daily office, she’d chant the canticles...nurses, doctors coming and going in there, she’s singing it to them. At the end of the day, she would sing, pray,

even in prayer, and these wonderful blessings at the end of the day. I came to see that my rhythm in hospital was morning and evening prayer, and her strength and love and support have been... Nothing in my life and career would have happened without her.

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

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

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

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

Then we went back to his study for a while and chatted some more. About

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

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

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

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

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

I am a pastoral associate in her congregation. It’s a small urban congregation in Pittsburgh. So she’s my boss. That functionally means that when she’s not in the pulpit for one reason or another, I get to preach without

being paid. The congregation loves it when we're in the pulpit together...seems to (I don't know) indicate something...that we are together pulling in the same direction. She's a Calvin scholar by trade more than I am, and she's a good theologian. Sometimes it can get intense. Can I tell you one time when it got intense?

JMF: Sure.

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

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

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

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

AP: Right, we're free.

JMF: Why is that important to know?

AP: Because we are not generic. We are not particular instances of the genus humankind. There's you, and me. We are specific, particular, actual, real human beings with real autobiographies and histories, and we are complex people. We are people, and people's lives are different. Our histories

are complex. There are things we share in common, and much that's different. I speak of God with a Scottish accent (I hope I still do), and my sense of things is actually European...31 years I lived my life in Edinburgh in Scotland. I'm not American, I'm different...so, different heritages and different family dynamics.

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

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

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

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

AP: You belong to him because he loves you, because in Jesus Christ he has elected you to be his son, his daughter, and that nothing in this world,

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not even your foolishness and your silliness, can separate you from what God has chosen for you. You belong to God, and you are unilaterally and unconditionally loved. Now therefore, live in terms of that freedom. Live in terms of that good news. Honor what it means that you are loved and will remain loved because...I'm going to put it very specifically...in the freedom of his love and in the power of the Spirit, Jesus knows you by name.

97. LET THE LORD BE THE LORD

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

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

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

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

MM: It hurts my pride.

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

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

AP: Who is he? The great theological question is essentially a *who* question, not how did you do that, or what did you do, or can I do what you did? The essential question is, "Who are you, Lord?" — Saul's question on the Damascus Road. When we ask that *who* question, we discover that he is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and because he had a ministry in the past, in history, and we have the gospel attestation of that, we have the

records of the early church, we have some fairly strong ideas about what he was, what he was up to, the kind of things he did, what he stood for.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Our primary job is not to be psychological fixers. Our primary job, put in conventional terms, is to declare the gospel that Jesus lives, that Jesus died for their sins, in Jesus Christ they are forgiven, and to help them in the process of going into that reality so that they may grow up into Christ into

him in every way who is the head, and that they may live lives of holiness, of sanctification. We need to recover our core job description of ministers of word and sacrament — to bear witness to Jesus and to help our people grow up every way into him who is the Lord. We need to have the people skills, but these don't define our job. The theology of our life in Christ defines our job.

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

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

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

AP: Union with Christ.

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

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

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

Union with Christ to me carries something more of that profound personal transformation. The question is, will I live it? The question is, do I believe it? Martin Luther says somewhere that “I thought that the old Adam

drowned in the waters of baptism, but I discovered the miserable wretch can swim.” Until we rise again at the end of the age with Jesus, there’s a kind of a “yes, but”... also, “but not yet” tension in the Christian life, that we have the power and blessing of the Spirit, but this mortal body will die, yet to be raised. All things are not complete. In this life, and in ministry, it’s strange to say, the old Adam still creeps around, thinking that I can save my congregation, I can renew my congregation, I can be the savior of my people.

MM: That’s what they pay me for!

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

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

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

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

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

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

MM: Or is he unemployed up in the sky?

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

do we as a congregation, how do I as your pastor help us as a congregation get in on this?

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

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

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

AP: Get in on it.

MM: They all have a ministry.

AP: Two things will happen. When we are in Christ, bonded to Jesus Christ, two things will inevitably happen. You'll become a person, you'll become a congregation that worships in Christ. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, all of our prayers and worship go to the Father and the Spirit through Jesus Christ our Lord. But also bonded to him, we share in his continuing mission from the Father. So we're thrust out into the world. We become dialectically a people of worship and a people of ministry and mission — both/and. The trouble is, we have a lot of ministry and mission stuff going without a lot of worship stuff going. Sometimes we forget to see that in Christ we share in his communion with the Father and in his ministry from the Father.

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

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

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

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

There is some degree of caution — we also have the Lord in our lives.

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

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

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

MM: Aren't people a little reluctant?

AP: Yes.

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

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

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

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

on our life...

MM: It meddles...

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

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

MM: In the end he can be trusted.

AP: Yes, he can be trusted.

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

AP: That's contextual, because each local community has its own issues and its own life and ministries in response. So I don't want to slap on a grid and say this is always what will happen. But some things surely will happen... The preaching will not be dull, the worship will not be dull, and the people will be caught up in the ministry of Jesus in some regard. As grandparents, parents, schoolteachers, plumbers, guys that fix roofs, guys that dig holes in the road, doctors, lawyers, businesspeople, whatever they do... The criterion of holiness is not "how do we live for the Lord on Sunday morning" but "because we live for the Lord on Sunday morning (and that's not a throwaway, that's real), how then am I going to live for the Lord on Monday morning?" The criterion of holiness is what I do the rest of the week. That reality is taken into business, the marketplace, where consciously and intentionally I am saying the bottom line is my faithfulness to Jesus Christ. Where is he in this bank? Where is he in this business?

I'm not a great lover of dentistry, but it's a necessary reality. My dentist gets the list every morning of the patients, and before a patient has come through the door, he prays for every patient. That's a Christian dentist — that even drilling teeth and scraping plaque is done for the glory of the Lord.

Paul says do all things in Christ — not just Sunday morning or pious things — so drive your car in Christ, make love and have babies in Christ, grade papers, teach a class in Christ, pay your taxes in Christ. What does it mean to live in Christ in all things, so that we concretize this reality that has personally claimed us, and whose name is Jesus and who is at work doing what he is always doing — bringing in the reign of God.

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

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

MM: And his culture rejected him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

AP: Right.

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

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

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

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

I think the power question is to ask, *now* what would Jesus do? It’s not a bad question, I just don’t think it’s the most powerful question, but what is Jesus doing now? That’s a living Lord.

98. RELATIONSHIPS IN YOUTH MINISTRY

J. Michael Fezell: Our guest today is Dr. Andrew Root. Thanks for joining us today.

Andrew Root: 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.

99. 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 though 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.

100. ENTERING INTO THE FULL HUMANITY OF ADOLESCENTS

J. Michael Fezell: 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.

101. 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.

102. HOW THE TRINITY CHANGES EVERYTHING

Michael Morrison: Fred, thanks for being with us today. We're glad to have you on the program.

Fred Sanders: Glad to be here.

MM: We'd like to talk today about the Trinity. You've written a couple of books on the Trinity, and I'd like to explore with you a little about the significance of this doctrine for the Christian faith. In some ways, it sounds like it's just about God. There is three, there is one, and that's about him. What's it have to do with us?

FS: The doctrine of the Trinity is a statement about who God eternally is, and essentially is. The doctrine of God, in a way, is irrelevant to who we are. It's not about us, but about God. Connecting that which is true (and is what the doctrine of the Trinity is) to the gospel (or the message of our salvation, and God's turning toward us, and being himself for us as the Father who sends the Son and the Spirit) is my life message. That's the thing I'm all about, the connection between God and the gospel.

The Trinity is the doctrine of God. That's important to safeguard. It's not just about how God deals with us — it's about how God would have been if there had been no "us." It includes the doctrine of salvation within it, like the expansive biblical way of understanding the tri-unity of God, as the Father who sends the Son and the Spirit. If the doctrine of the Trinity were already a big doctrine to take care of as a theologian, it gets even bigger when you open it up to include also the message of salvation.

MM: It's not just a thought experiment about somewhere "out there." It has an effect on us today?

FS: Yeah.

MM: Historically, it's been a big controversy. Many of the controversies in church history have been about the Trinity. Why is it a controversy?

FS: The main controversy would be the fights around the establishing of the



doctrine of the Trinity. If you're persuaded that it's a biblical doctrine, as I am, then of course it was always there, as soon as the apostles began teaching and writing. For the church to come to the next level of clarity about it, as they did through the first few centuries of Christian thought, and classically jelling and coming together at the Council of Nicea, that was the main fight.

Christianity had gone along for some time trusting Jesus for salvation, and confessing the Lordship of Christ. In some ways, nobody had really asked the question of being. No one had raised the question about the essence of God. Think about even today: a normal Christian can go for a long time in a successful, productive Christian life, and never raise the more or less speculative question about, "What is the being of the Son of God?" That doesn't naturally occur to everyone.

MM: They're used to having a relationship with God, but not asking what's God's relationship with himself?

FS: Exactly. All the wonderful richness of relationship thought, and relational thinking, for all that's good about it, can obscure thinking about "being" itself. You can go a long time in your Christian life being a good Christian, and not raise the question of being, but once you raise it, you've got to answer it the right way. It was raised in the early fourth century, clearly and explicitly and thematically, with a little philosophical help, and an answer was given by Arius, the priest in Alexandria... His answer was that the Son is of a different being than the Father. That's the wrong answer. Once that wrong answer has been given, the right answer, once the question has been raised, must be given. The Son is of the *same* being with the Father. In Greek, *homoousios*, in Latin, *consubstantial*.

MM: The wrong answer actually helped produce the right answer.

FS: Right.

MM: How is it important for Christianity now, as the question basically was resolved at Nicea in 325? Is it still a live question?

FS: It's still a live question, partly because the doctrine of the Trinity is the Christian doctrine of God. It's the biblical doctrine of God, if by Bible, you mean the whole Bible, Genesis to Revelation. Read the whole thing. Take a step back and ask yourself, what does this disclose to us about the eternal identity of God? The Christian answer is that the one God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That's the short answer. It's why the early creeds have that basic Trinitarian shape as the most conspicuous thing about them.

Yet, it's not stated clearly in any one passage of Scripture. It's a vast, comprehensive synthesizing kind of a doctrine. You don't get it clearly stated with all the details and particulars tagged onto it in any one place in Scripture.

Jesus doesn't show up and announce, "I come to you preaching the Trinity of God." He preaches the kingdom of God. He does so in such a way that he is the one who has the authority of God and the proclamation of the kingdom of God, and he does it in the power of the Spirit.

When you look at that and think about it, you end up coming up with the doctrine of the Trinity. Nevertheless, the doctrine of the Trinity is not on the lips of Jesus, nor does Paul stop in the middle of a letter to the Corinthians and say, "Now concerning the eternal being of God in three persons, I would not have you ignorant." There's never a place where you get a chapter-length, Rabbi Paul treatment of this doctrine.

MM: He does, at the end of 2 Corinthians, have a three-part benediction. But he doesn't use the word Trinity. Just talking about three things doesn't necessarily mean these three are one.

FS: That's right. Similarly, though Jesus doesn't go from town to town preaching the message of the Trinity, the Gospel of Matthew has 28 chapters of a lot of teaching from Jesus, and the key events narrated in his life. It ends with a surprise ending: "Go and baptize in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit," — it's stated in those terms. Not the Father of the Son, but the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit. That either is a bad ending for the Gospel... "Who put that in?" (There's no textual or critical evidence that it was added at any point. It's got full textual integrity as belonging there.) You either think that's a bad, weird ending for the Gospel, or you think, "The whole point of what Jesus was doing and saying naturally culminated in this statement by the risen Lord: of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit as the name of God."

MM: Is Jesus saying, "I'll take this a new direction," or is he saying, "This is the direction I was going all along?"

FS: I like to think of it as the direction he was going all along, though that does get us to the fact that, when you're dealing with the ministry of Jesus, and the New Testament witness to it, it is the turning of the ages. It's the moment in the progressive revelation of God where all the promises reach their fulfillment, and a mystery is made known. A mystery that was kept secret from long ages is now revealed. There is something exciting about the New Testament as the point where that mystery is made known and reflected on.

MM: Jesus said, "After I'm resurrected, then you'll understand" [see John 13:19]. There is this watershed moment at the resurrection, and this passage of Matthew comes after the resurrection, so he's saying, "Now I can tell you what it's been about."

FS: Yeah, it's not a total surprise, the Father and the Son and the Holy

Spirit, that language. In Matthew 11 is a point in Matthew's Gospel where Jesus is reflecting on the failure of his message. It's an odd thing to talk about Jesus's failure, but he's reflecting on the fact that the word is going out, and it is not being received fruitfully. There's lots of stuff there. Quotes from Isaiah, it's the theme of that middle part. He talks to his Father about how God has revealed these things to babies, not to the wise and the educated. Then he says (This is right before he says, "Come to me you who labor, and I will give you rest."), "No one knows the Father except the Son, and no one knows the Son except the Father" [Matthew 11:27].

Some critical commentators say, "This is a bolt from the Johannine sky. Why is the Jesus of the Gospel of Matthew talking like that? No one knows the Father, but the Son." I think there are two reasons. One, the historical Jesus probably talked like that. You just don't get a lot of the reporting of it in Matthew. Secondly, literarily, it sets up what's going to happen in Matthew 28. Jesus is talking about the not-yet receivedness of his message. It's a mystery locked up in God. No one knows the Father but the Son. No one knows the Son but the Father. The only way to get into that club, and get to know either of them, is to get an invitation from one of them.

We're talking about how clearly the Trinity is revealed in Scripture. It's interesting to me that, at that point, Jesus does not explicitly name the Holy Spirit. He says the Father and the Son. "No one knows the Father but the Son. No one knows the Son but the Father." Then you have to wait another 17 chapters to get it rounded out, or filled out, with the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

MM: There's a new element in the proclamation.

FS: When it's completed, yeah. When it's fully made known... You could do neat things, like saying, How does one get in on this divine secret, if only the Father knows the Son, and only the Son knows the Father, how do you get in? The answer, unspoken in chapter 11, is spoken in chapter 28. It's the Holy Spirit.

MM: When Jesus was there in person, it would be him, but now that he's left, you need the Holy Spirit.

FS: Yeah, there's some sense in which Jesus in the course of his ministry was sort of hogging the Holy Spirit. [laughing] There's that sense in which the descent of the Spirit on Jesus in the Jordan was kind of a pre-Pentecost, or a down payment on Pentecost, or it was the indwelling of the Spirit in the one, in the God-man, that would then be vouchsafed to us in the completion of his work.

MM: Some of the church's understanding of that came about as they

began to understand that Jesus was God. What sort of person was it who spoke this, and who did this? That was what Arius was denying. He had the name “God,” but Arius was saying that Jesus wasn’t really the same God. What kind of evidence helped the early church come to a conclusion that Arius was wrong on that?

FS: Arius had a peculiar belief. We’re used to a “Jesus is either God, or he’s just a man” dichotomy, but Arius opened up a middle territory. He would not have said that Jesus was merely a man. He thought that Jesus was a highly exalted creature, kind of the ultimate creature, the creature through whom all other creatures were made. It’s a strange middle zone. It maps more onto the theology of Jehovah’s Witnesses today than it would to someone who thinks that Jesus is a great teacher, but merely a man.

It’s tempting for me, as an evangelical, to go to the Bible and find passages which demonstrate the deity of Christ. I think they’re there. I’m spoiling to have that argument. I think I can win it. The early church fathers also knew those verses, and had lived with them, and could argue from them, and did argue from them in the debates around Nicene theology.

The real, crucial doctrinal breakthrough was when they argued that salvation itself was at stake in the recognition of the full deity of Christ. That is to say, let’s imagine that Arianism is true for just a minute. Sometimes when I do a thought project like this, I’ll switch chairs. When I’m teaching, I’ll go stand in another corner. I’ll say, “I’m going to spend five minutes explaining a damnable heresy here for a minute. This is not me talking as myself. I just want to do justice to it, and spin it out for you.” I did that after I saw some student notebooks where they wrote down everything I had explained as if I were teaching it.

I won’t move chairs here. Let me just say that if Arianism were true, the situation would be that the one high God, who is too exalted to be among us, sent this great creature, through whom he had made everything else, the Logos (not the eternal Word, but the very, very old Word), and that this mighty spirit being undertook salvation for us, suffered for us. If you step back from that and say, “If that’s the case, what kind of salvation was made available to us through the sacrifice of this other creature?” It raises all the problems that people tend to raise these days with regard to classic atonement theology. If Arianism is true, then God is punishing a third party for something between himself and the second party.

It also raises questions about what would that kind of punishment do? What would the experiences of this incarnate not-god accomplish? You could say it would accomplish some kind of salvation, just not the kind of salvation

envisioned by the Christian faith.

To put it personally, if sin is, among other things, a personal problem with God, and we need to be forgiven and personally reconciled with God, then only God can do that. Right? It would make no sense... It's an issue between us, this guy over here doesn't have anything to do with it (even if this guy over here, the Logos, is somehow, in some sense, my creator, like if everything was created through him). It just gets into a strange mythological situation that doesn't solve the problem that we're talking about. We're talking about personal reconciliation between God and humanity.

MM: That third party just doesn't fit.

FS: Yeah. The doctrinal insight that if Jesus brought about salvation, and if salvation is what we think it is, then Jesus had to be fully God. It's interesting that the breakthrough and the clarity of the doctrine of the Trinity, of confessing it well doctrinally, is also a breakthrough and an insight into the gospel. It's not "we know what salvation is, but let's talk about the being of God for a while, and anathematize each other over those kinds of things." No, this insight into the nature of what Christian salvation is helped drive this greater clarity about who the Christian God is.

MM: Could you explain a little more about how that clarifies salvation? Is it what we're saved from, or what we're saved for, or how we're saved?

FS: It probably has effects in all those areas, but I was just thinking about the personal character of salvation.... If we had other problems, we could have other solutions. If the human predicament were that demons were oppressing us, then God could have sent Michael the archangel to solve the human predicament and bring us salvation. We would call that salvation. We're beat up by demons? God beats up the demons that were beating us up. Now we're saved. But that's not our problem. There's demonic stuff happening, but that is not the root of the human predicament. The root of the human predicament is personal estrangement from God, and so only God can save us. He can't send Michael. He can't empower us from within to solve our own problem. There's all sorts of things that God will not do as salvation, because they don't address what we need saving from.

MM: Since Jesus is our Savior, and only God can save, therefore Jesus is God. It's not a proof-text approach, but more of an overview.

FS: Yeah. It gives you a commanding position from which to be able to view the proof-texts properly. You can go to passages that talk about the deity of Christ, and say, "That's why it says that. That's why John's Gospel starts up in the stratosphere, because it's going to talk us through the nature of salvation."

It's stronger. There is kind of a blind way of moving around proof texts in order to construct a doctrinal edifice. That has its weaknesses. When you get inside the doctrine and have some understanding about why it's doing what it's doing, most of the proof texts stay in place. You have a better understanding of why they're there. It's the difference between checking the boxes on something, and understanding why you're checking the boxes.

MM: At the council of Nicea, the Holy Spirit wasn't discussed much. It was mainly about Jesus. The Holy Spirit entered the discussion later, toward the council of Constantinople. How does the Holy Spirit figure into that same kind of reasoning, that they concluded that the Holy Spirit is God? Was that also because of his role in salvation?

FS: I think so. You don't have a lot of this in the creeds themselves, so the creed of 325, the creed that's actually at the Council of Nicea, just says, "And we believe in the Holy Spirit." That's it. It was a very eventful 60 years or so between that and the second ecumenical council, Constantinople, in 381. There you get what we now call the Nicene Creed (which is actually the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381, but nobody wants to say that, so we all say the Nicene Creed, and by that we mean the 381 creed), and it has a much fuller, robust theology of the Holy Spirit, especially with an eye on his divinity.

What does it say? You could just take the idea of Nicea, that the Son is of one substance with the Father, homoousios with the Father, and you could apply that to the Holy Spirit and say, "There's God the Father, and the Son is homoousios with him, and so is the Holy Spirit." For lots of reasons in the busy fourth century, there was a resistance to doing that. Negatively, politically there were groups within the church who weren't sure about the deity of the Spirit when it was argued in that way, and the orthodox (Gregory Nazianzus, Basil of Caesarea) and those guys (especially Basil) wanted to be able to build a consensus and say things that everyone could agree with. Gregory Nazianzus got mad about that and said, "You need to use the homoousios, or you need to be clear on the deity of the Spirit here."

There might be a good reason for not doing another homoousios in the creedal language: it seems to make the Spirit sort of the next Son. It seems like, Take all the decisions you made in Christology, and port them over to pneumatology... Some of it is transferable. The Son and the Spirit are both God. But if you use the same exact creedal, doctrinal language about it, it obscures the difference of the Holy Spirit, the distinctness.

In the Nicene Creed, we end up with, "We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord..." You move this heavy, divine name for the one God and put that in the Holy Spirit's category. "...and the giver of life." Wonderful biblical

theology. The Spirit is the one who gives life, "...who proceeds from the Father, who together with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified." "Lord and giver of life" clues you into the fact that there's a similar soteriological motive for the inclusion of the Holy Spirit in that argument.

Here's how I might describe that doctrinally: It's not just that God the Father and God the Son incarnate worked out a transaction of salvation between them which somehow gets applied to us in some human way. The inclusion of the Holy Spirit in the soteriological argument means the application of redemption is also a divine act, without which we couldn't have the gospel as we understand ourselves to have the gospel.

MM: You said that they wanted to maintain the distinction of the Spirit as different from Jesus. Why is that difference important? If they're all God, why have this distinction, or why is it important?

FS: You could ask that question about the Father and the Son as well. If they're all God, why have the distinction? Some people ask, "Why did God make it hard? Why not have a simple theology?"

MM: Well, because he's up there, and Jesus is down here...

FS: Yeah. Then with the Holy Spirit in particular, it's important to recognize the distinction between them, because if you've got a Father-Son distinction, and then you loosely or sloppily lump the Holy Spirit into that with some parallel language, you get the deity of the Holy Spirit, but it comes at the cost of not attending to his hypostatic distinctiveness, to his personal particularity. Bluntly, you could end up with "God and Sons."

If it's just parallel, there's the Father, and his Son, and his other son who's not a son, but is a Spirit for some reason... If you have that, a number of problems result. One is we're Trinitarian, and we're Christo-centric, and those things shouldn't be in tension with each other.

We're focused and centered on Jesus Christ, the God-man incarnate. We do that in a way that doesn't de-centralize the Trinity, right? We're centered on Jesus, who is centered on the Trinity. There's only one way to the Father. There's no way to the Father, except through the Son. Well, if the Spirit is simply a parallel other son (who we don't call a son for some reason because we know better), it seems like he could be another way to the Father, and they all get along and everything, and it's all one happy triangle. Still you would have that problem of the Father. Should I get to him through the Son, or through the Spirit? That would be a problem.

MM: Very interesting. Thanks very much, Fred. We look forward to seeing you again.

FS: Thanks, Mike.

103. ADOPTION AND PRAYER IN THE TRINITY

MM: Fred, thank you for joining us again. We'd like to continue the discussion about the Trinity that we had earlier. I wanted to explore a little further with you about something you wrote in your book *Deep Things of God*—that God being a Trinity is inviting us into the life of the Trinity. Could you explain that in a little more detail as to how we are invited into his life?

FS: I used that kind of language, invited into the life of God, to set the standard high for what salvation is, while knowing that I'm flirting with or skirting on mystical sounding territory, which I don't mean to affirm, but just because some people have made extravagant claims for the amount of assimilation to God that is possible for creatures, I don't want to have to back off a high view of salvation because of that.

Here's what I mean by invited into the life of God: I mean that in the eternal being of God, there is a Father-Son relationship that takes place in the Spirit, and that Christian salvation is participation in that Father-Son relationship. There are lots of ways we could talk about being saved, being redeemed and forgiven, a lot of language we can get from Scripture about that, but this really central metaphor of being adopted by God the Father, to become sons of God, gets talked about in different ways in Scripture.

John has a particular theology of sonship, and Paul has a particular theology of sonship. They don't contradict each other. They harmonize at a higher level, but there's wonderful agreement there that what's happening is we are adopted as sons. We go from a position of not being the children of God to being the children of God in the biblical sense of being adult male heirs. It's not we're God's cute little babies. It's that biblical usage: We are the ones who can inherit from God, who stand in that inheriting relationship. The reason that we are adopted sons is because the incarnate Son went from being the eternal Son to the incarnate Son to make possible our inclusion as adopted sons.

MM: You talk about inheriting. What are we inheriting?

FS: That is a great question. What's a good classical answer? We are inheriting the blessings that are Christ. All the riches of salvation have been heaped up in Christ and stored there, and that our inclusion in Christ means that those are all made over to us, so justification, blessedness, peace with God, all of those.

MM: Normally an inheritance requires the death of someone. In this case, it's a metaphor for receiving something.

FS: Yes. Biblical thought is never thinking about the death of the Father, so it's never going straightforward with that metaphor, and even where Hebrews gets interested in that question, it will talk about the death of the testator, pointing to the death of Christ, because, at no point, is the idea of inheritance the idea of the passing away of the Father and the passing on of that stuff into the possession of the offspring.

MM: Part of that, also, is our relationship that we are adopted as children of God. What kind of relationship do we have with God?

FS: Our relationship as saved, our relationship by faith with God, is a relationship of sonship. That's an intimate relationship that the Bible wants to make known to us. It's more than what you would reasonably expect the relationship between a Creator and his creation to be. Just in the abstract, an almighty Creator who produces a creation is going to stand in a lordship or mastery relationship to whatever is created, so you could make a list of things that we intelligent creatures owe God by nature and by the nature of our createdness, and it would be appropriate to talk about all those things in language of being subjects of a master. The New Testament, with great excitement, announces something beyond that and says all of that is still true. We still stand in a relation of creatures to a Creator, but we're also taken into something more intimate and something that we would not have the right to expect just by deducing it from our createdness.

There used to be a fight... Maybe the old fundamentalists fought about this with the liberals — is everyone a child of God, or are just the redeemed the children of God? I'm sympathetic to the straightforward answer that is easy to construct from Scripture, that sonship to God is a category of redemption in Scripture, and so to be a son of God is to be saved, and, therefore, those who are not saved are not sons of God in the way that the Bible is talking about it.

MM: Right. Ancient Israel was called the children of God, but in a different sense than Christians are.

FS: Yeah, I think so.

MM: One of the things that we seem to inherit or we're participating in God's nature is what Second Peter talks about, that we've become participants of the divine nature [2 Peter 1:4]. What are we participating in?

FS: I want to emphasize that we are participating in the relationship of Father to Son in the Spirit. It's always hard to get the Holy Spirit in there in a clear way. The Spirit's the least analogically clear person, but as long as you insist that you can't have that Father-Son relationship without the Spirit relationship in there somehow, that's what I want to emphasize that we're

into.

Some people would take the word nature there in Second Peter in a very direct way to say that we participate in the... would you even say... the being of God, the divine nature itself. I can't square that kind of reading of the word nature there with the high view of the divine nature that I think is presupposed in the rest of Scripture.

MM: Right. God is God and we're not.

FS: We never overcome the Creator-creature distinction, even when we're brought into something more intimate than you could expect from the Creator-creature distinction.

MM: One aspect of our personal relation with God is prayer. How is the Trinity involved, or our understanding of the Trinity involved, in how we pray?

FS: Nice distinction you made there: how is the Trinity involved, and how is our understanding of the Trinity involved, because those can run on very different tracks. As a theologian, I've lifted the hood and looked at how things work under the hood, I can say the Trinity is completely involved in prayer. Nothing works in Christian prayer, Christian prayer can't even be defined as distinctively Christian, unless it's approaching the Father, in the name of the Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus taught his disciples to pray, and he started them in this school of prayer with the language, "Our Father," so every time we approach God as Christians and say, "Father in heaven," it would be reasonable for God to object, like to interrupt our prayer and say, "Oh, I'm your Father? Does that mean you act like a son, that you reproduce my character in filial fashion?" There's a commentary that William Tyndale wrote on the Lord's Prayer, where he puts in God's mouth this kind of argument, and the person praying has to immediately respond, "No, I'm not saying I'm your son. I'm saying I have his password, because he gave it to me, and I have been instructed to approach in this Christian way with filial boldness."

MM: We have no right on our own.

FS: Yeah. That little tag, "in Jesus' name," that evangelicals at least habitually end prayers with, is not just the right formula, or the sealed with a kiss, or however you're supposed to end a prayer to know that you've ended it. That little tag is really the key to the whole thing: praying to God the Father has to happen in Jesus' name. That's what is going on when we approach God that way. All of this is only in the Spirit, by the power of the Spirit, the Spirit of sonship, the Spirit of adoption, the one who makes this prayer to the Father possible.

That's what's going on under the hood. Now, most of us don't think much about internal combustion and what's actually happening to motivate our vehicle as we go. The question of how our understanding of the Trinity influences our prayer is a trickier question, and individual results vary.

I always try to present prayer to the Trinity as an invitation to go deeper into something that we're already experiencing, because I teach in lots of different churches on the Trinity, and I don't want to do a "drive by" and harm people's prayer lives by saying something for 30 minutes in the pulpit, because a lot of us are praying. We're Trinitarian Christians, and we're praying simply to God, "God," and not having a Trinitarian thought in our head in the moment of the prayer. If I teach a little bit on the Trinity, people could accidentally get the impression that they haven't been addressing their prayer envelopes properly, and they're going to a dead letter office of some kind, that they just write something to God and it hits the post office in heaven, and Father, Son and Holy Spirit stand around going, "It's not addressed to me. I'm not opening it."

That is not what's going on, but the more that you are successfully praying as a Trinitarian believer to the triune God, a deeper understanding, a closer attention to the biblical New Testament patterns of prayer, leads you deeper into something that you're already experiencing.

MM: What's the difference between praying to the Trinity and praying to the Father?

FS: That's good. Praying to the Father is biblical, and praying to the Trinity just barely is, so if you're trying to stay low to the ground and follow the biblical patterns of prayer... I used to be very cautious about this, too. I didn't want to make anyone's prayer life get messed up just on the basis of a little bit of teaching I did. A little learning is a dangerous thing. If you take the whole course, I think we'll come out okay.

I used to say, "However you're praying is fine. There are no secret formulas. You don't have to hold your hands a certain way to get the prayer to go through." But then I started saying, "But there is a way to get an A on the theology test and to pray in line with clear biblical guidance, and that is to pray to the Father, in the name of the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit." That's the A on the theology test. Then you're not going to be surprised by biblical patterns of prayer that you see. You're not going to read Paul and think, "Why does he bend his knee to the Father in heaven? Why doesn't he pray to Jesus? Why doesn't he pray to the Trinity?" We know God is Trinity.

That's the main thing. The biblical pattern of prayer is not to say, "Oh, Trinity," but to say, "Father, in the name of the Son, in the power of the Holy

Spirit.” Praying to the Trinity would be praying objectively to the Trinity out there. It’s not heretical. It’s not wrong. I suppose it works. But the biblical pattern of Trinitarian prayer is to pray more from within the Trinity, to the Father, in the name of the Son, as one who is caught up in the middle of that relationship between Father and Son, in the power of the Spirit.

In congregational prayers or open prayers that we overhear from each other in the church, I do my best not to be critical of those. When people begin thinking about the wonders of the Trinity, they’ll start praying to one person of the Trinity, then their mind will go on a little journey, and they’ll say things to another person of the Trinity, and they don’t always edit the sentences as they’re going. It’s extemporaneous prayer. You’ll hear terrible things like, “Father, thank you for dying on the cross,” or, “Jesus, thank you for sending your son,” and the theologian in me wants to get up and immediately censor everything, something like, “No more praying until you get your doctrine right.”

But I don’t think what I’m hearing is really heresy, and I won’t interrupt somebody. They have thoughts about the Father, thoughts about the Son, and thoughts about the Holy Spirit, and in the freedom of prayer, they go on a little mental spiritual itinerary. They move from the glory of the Father, to the glory of the Son, and they just haven’t made the sentence right. Ideally, the sentence would also come out right, but I no longer think I’m hearing heresy in the act.

MM: Right. Just not well stated.

FS: If asked, I will say, “No, Jesus did not send his son. No, the Father did not die on the cross.” There are names for all of this in a catalog of heresies. Do not affirm those things.

MM: And those people would probably agree, when they heard back what they had said.

FS: That’s right, and if you ask them the right set of Socratic questions in the right order, they could get an A on the test.

MM: Right. As you were saying earlier, the prayers get through anyway. God looks on the intent, not the precise wording.

FS: Yeah. That’s why I love the opening question you asked, what does the Trinity have to do with prayer? Everything. What does our understanding of the Trinity have to do with prayer? Our understanding of the Trinity is an invitation to a deeper grasp and practice of what’s really happening in prayer. It rises and falls.

MM: Right. Much of Christian life can be lived without technical terminology about the Trinity.

FS: In *Deep Things of God*, one chapter is called “Praying with the Grain,” the idea being that there is a certain directionality, a mediation built into Christian prayer, and to know more about the Trinity and to pray more in line with, or alignment with, or with the grain of that mediation, is to turn every act of devotion into a little microcosm of the relationship to God that we have in Christ.

MM: It’s a reminder of the different roles that are involved there. Sometimes we need a reminder of the Spirit’s role in our life.

FS: Yeah. It’s a rehearsal of it, which is one of its strengths. I’m a big fan of extemporaneous prayer. I’m that kind of evangelical who is mainly into that kind of freedom of unscripted prayer, but one of the great benefits of scripted, traditional, liturgical prayer is that someone sat down and thought this all out, and you get to rehearse the right order, and if you do that enough, then even your extemporaneous prayer will fall into the right form, while still having the kind of freedom that I think is appropriate to the spiritual life.

MM: There is a big difference between some of the evangelical churches with extemporaneous prayer and this highly liturgical, scripted prayers. You’re saying there’s a place for both. You’re in the evangelical tradition and so am I. How can the scripted prayers help us expand our understanding of the Trinity?

FS: Well, depending on which scripted prayers you’re talking about, if you’re dealing with the ancient liturgies or their transformation in the Reformation period, through people like Cranmer and some of the Protestant liturgists, then what you’ve got is some really, thoughtful, careful, biblical exploration that repays close study. That’s different from the kind of expressive prayer you get in more extemporaneous settings.

It’s not like there are only two types. I’m a low-church evangelical by conviction rather than by accident, and in that setting, you do get these moments that are more scripted. There’s the congregational prayer offered by someone in leadership, an elder or a pastor, and while those should have elements of freedom appropriate to the rest of the worship service, they should also be more thoughtful. I am concerned if a pastor or an elder prays a poorly structured prayer that doesn’t do justice to Trinitarian theology that I know he knows.

MM: A part of the differences are simply a matter of training, experience? Different people have different levels of understanding of Trinitarian language and prayer itself?

FS: Yeah. Then, there’s the distinction between common prayer and whatever the opposite of that is – private prayer, I suppose.

MM: One feature about the Father-Son relationship, as Jesus said in John 17, is the Father loved him from before the foundation of the world, and that seems to be a way in which God's nature is very relevant to us. Has God simply told us to love one another, or is it because we are his children that there's an organic connection as to how we are to relate with other people?

FS: I think it's the latter – that what was made known in the Father sending the Son and the Spirit is... If you imagine away salvation itself, and then keep imagining away all the conditions of it, creation itself, if you take that moment of abstraction and think, what if the world had never been made? What if creation wasn't here, what would there be? There would just be God. This is a grand, strange thought experiment. It's counterfactual, totally hypothetical. If there were only God, would there be love? The Trinitarian answer is yes, there would be love. God is love, and so God didn't get tired of not being able to love and decide he'd better create a world. "I know I have all this potential in me to be loving. If only there were something to love."

One of the points of the doctrine of the Trinity is it helps secure and fill out our understanding that God is self-sufficient, and ideally that doesn't make us picture God as a stingy, "I take care of myself" great loner, but it magnifies grace by saying God, who not out of any need, not out of any greed, not out of any plan for self-actualization, or improvement, or growth, but purely out of grace, purely out of love choose to make a covenant partner.

MM: That magnifies his love. He's not getting anything out of it. He doesn't need this relationship. We do. Well, we didn't exist. But once we existed...

FS: That's how much we needed the relationship: Without it, we don't exist. God's not in that kind of trouble.

MM: That kind of love is brought to us through the Spirit. The Spirit's been involved in love all along.

FS: Yeah. That's right. The Spirit is hard to talk about, and there is a sinful way of ignoring the Spirit, and there is a theologically irresponsible way of leaving the Spirit out of your considerations, and so we should avoid that. However, there's also a biblical reserve about speaking about the Holy Spirit that I think we violate if we draw a triangle with three points, and point to the third one and say, "Equal rights for the Holy Spirit," and insist on talking equally, and talking with equal clarity sometimes about the Holy Spirit. I don't think that does justice to the way that the Bible makes known the personhood and the deity of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit doesn't show up even in the Gospel of John very much

until about chapter 14. John heavily invests in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. Then there's Father-Son language all over the place, a dense tangle of Father-Son language, and a few references to the Holy Spirit, but not much until the action of the ministry of Jesus is over. Then chapter 14 kicks in, and we're taken into this inner space where Jesus begins discoursing about the Spirit, and he says some amazing things, and he talks a lot about the Spirit from then on.

There's something biblical to bringing in the Spirit, not as an afterthought, but as a later introduced topic, where it's made explicit.

MM: Jesus says the role of the Spirit is to point to Jesus. "He will bring all these things to your remembrance," and there is no "fourth person of the Trinity" to point to the Spirit.

FS: Yeah. I grew up in a Pentecostal church, and one of the things we said in that church was the people who talk most about the Holy Spirit aren't necessarily the ones who have the most Holy Spirit. The ones who are most in the power of the Spirit are the ones talking the most about Jesus — and that's Pentecostal self-talk, right?

Having said that, there certainly is a way of ignoring, neglecting and having no ideas about the Holy Spirit that is wrong, and there's a "Spirit forgetfulness" that needs to be overcome, but I'm not always worried about the Holy Spirit, and I don't feel like I have to include an explicit mention of him in every reference I make to the Father and the Son. There's biblical warrant for not doing it.

Similarly, this is not how I run my prayer life. To my knowledge, there's no explicit prayer to the Holy Spirit in Scripture, so if you're having that kind of "I want exact text on this subject," there's a sense in which it's not biblical to pray to the Holy Spirit in a direct way. The rule is: you can pray to anyone who is God, so you've got three options. Four, if you include general prayers to God as being implicitly Trinitarian.

MM: Of course, they always pray in the Spirit.

FS: That's right. That's more biblical than loudly insisting on directing our prayers to the person of the Holy Spirit. That's trying to be more interested in the Holy Spirit than the Bible is.

MM: Thank you very much for being with us. I've enjoyed it.

FS: It's great to be here.

104. FROM “WHAT” TO “SO WHAT?”

Michael Morrison: Steve, you’ve been a pastor, and you describe yourself as “a practical theologian.” To some people, that seems like a contradiction of terms. Theology doesn’t seem very practical. How do you see theology as practical for the church?

Stephen Seamands: Well, Mike, I don’t think I would be teaching this stuff if I didn’t think it was practical. Sometimes I say to my students the reason I love theology is because it *is* so practical.

That’s why theology arose in the church in the first place, not so that academicians and theoreticians could sit around discussing and fine-tuning ideas. It was out of the life of the church, protecting true doctrine from false doctrine. It was so that you could disciple people when they came to faith in Christ. You had to tell them about what they believed and what you believed as Christians. How do you evangelize without being able to talk to someone about the faith? Those are the kinds of things. It’s about nurturing. It’s about bringing people to faith. Those are the things that theology is about. So it’s really practical, and it’s supposed to undergird everything that we do in ministry.

MM: I noticed in your book, *Give Them Christ*, that you talk about how it’s not just a “what” but a “so what.” You’re trying to bring out some practical implications of doctrines instead of just trying to prove that Jesus became flesh. Yeah, he did—then you try to answer *so what*: What difference does that make for us?

SS: Right. In this particular book, Mike, I was really concerned that pastors help people understand. We teach them a lot about the *what* while they’re in school, and most of them get that. They understand it, but when they become pastors and preachers of churches, what people really want to



know is, well, so what? Jesus became flesh and dwelt among us. So what? What difference does that make? So in this book I was trying to help them move from the *what* to the *so what*, and that’s where I think doctrine really gets exciting and inspiring when we begin to think

about what difference does this really make?

MM: Maybe comment on the incarnation. It's nice that Jesus became a human, but then there's the *so what*. What difference does it make me in my job or in my marriage and day-to-day life?

SS: One of the great and foundational human questions that people have asked for centuries is: Does God really care, or is God just far removed somewhere? Did he create this and just pull away from it? But the incarnation means that he came and actually became one of us so that he could get next to us and so that he could understand what it feels like to be human, not in just a theoretical kind of sense but he walked in our shoes.

There's a poet, William Blake, who says "now think not thou canst sigh a sigh and thy Maker is not by. Think not thou canst shed a tear and thy Maker is not near." Jesus has become a human. Eyeball to eyeball, heart to heart. He knows what it's like to be human, to be lonely. He knows what it's like to get angry sometimes about things, to feel sorrow. He wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus, and he saw what it was doing to the people.

So that fundamental human question, does God care, has been answered for us in that he became flesh and dwelt among us. As Eugene Peterson puts it in his translation of that verse, John 1:14, "he moved into our neighborhood." He got next to us. Now I know that, and I can never be the same because of that. I know that he knows.

MM: Right. I was thinking of his struggle in Gethsemane. He's not just faking this, going through motions, but it was something internal.

SS: He felt, at times we've felt, God-forsaken. We've felt all alone, and he cried out, "my God, why have you forsaken me?" He's felt that as well.

MM: Right. Philip Yancey wrote a book on *Where Is God When It Hurts?* Where is he?

SS: He's in the middle of it. He understands. Alfred North Whitehead says he is "the fellow-sufferer who understands." He can understand, so that when I come to him, I'm not coming to somebody that's aloof, far removed, or has no clue. That's good news, it seems to me.

MM: So we can see his life and learn something about our own life at the same time.

SS: Yes. That's another thing about the significance of the incarnation. First, it's a compliment to humanity, in the sense that God says, "I want to become one of you. I choose to take on flesh and dwell among you." What higher compliment could you give to humanity than to say, "That's how much you mean to me. I join myself to you."

Also, Jesus comes to reveal to us what it means to be fully human. In him

we see, and we don't just hear someone talking about, what it's supposed to look like. Others might come and give you a discourse on the dignity of labor, but here is someone who comes and works in a carpenter shop with his hands. He embodies that for us. We see it. We get a person-to-person vision of that, which speaks to us more than any other. We need that as human beings. That's how communication is best done. We see in him the embodiment of what it means to be human, what it means to love, what it means to be free.

We also see the revelation of God. What's God like? That's another great human question, isn't it? For us Christians, it's really not "what is God like?"—it's more, "Is God Christ-like?" and in the face of Christ we see him.

MM: So Jesus is showing us both humanity and God. So do we expect God to look like humanity?

SS: Well, not exactly [laughing]. He actually embodies both, but he does suggest, I think, that God's plan is that you and I might share in the life of God. That you and I might become joined to God and raised, you might say.

MM: You're saying he's showing us true humanity, and he as a true human shared in the life of God, and that we can also, through him.

SS: Right. Through him—he's the pioneer. The writer of the book of Hebrews says he's the forerunner of what that new humanity is supposed to look like, that lives in God and dwells in God and walks with God. That didn't work out so well with Adam. We turned from that original plan that God had for us, and he's kind of reinstituting that.

MM: Romans describes him as another Adam. Humanity is started again—in this model [Jesus], rather than the old one.

SS: Right. The second Adam.

MM: Jesus can show us what it means to live a human life in dependence on God, in a way that we couldn't see in the Old Testament from God speaking on Mount Sinai, for example. (Maybe that's where people got the idea of the aloof God, and he's just far off, and we couldn't relate.)

SS: I think God had to establish those boundaries and to show us, first of all, that "I'm not one of you." We have such a propensity to make God in our own image, and that propensity to bring God down to our level. God was teaching his people all along that no, you can't do that. There's this appropriate distance. But then in the New Testament, when Jesus comes, he comes near.

MM: On one side he says "I'm not one of you," and the next time he says, "I can *become* one of you." He blesses us with his presence. But with him as a human we see his struggles with pain, sorrow, sin, and suffering. He didn't sin himself, but he could deal with it, and he did deal with it. He

stopped suffering for some people. Why didn't he just stop it for everybody?

SS: I think our basic human inclination is to think, well God ought to get rid of suffering. Truly, suffering is suffering. It's awful. God's way of dealing with suffering is a little different—at least the Christian vision of that. Simone Weil said that the extreme greatness of Christianity is not that it looks for a remedy for suffering, but a divine use for suffering. In Christ God enters into suffering himself. He chooses to become one with us in our suffering—takes it into himself, you might say. On the cross in his human nature he suffers, and he cries out, “My God, why?” Then, as a result of that, he is able to redeem suffering and now uses it for the redemption of the world.

It's a different vision of suffering. It doesn't solve all the problems related to the problem of suffering. There's still a lot of *why's* that we ask, about why certain things happen to us, why things happen in our world, why there's so much suffering. The end of the story says there's going to be a time when there's no more tears and no more pain, but God seems to be in the business of being more interested in redeeming it and using it for his purposes than just simply seeking to eliminate it and protect us from it.

MM: There will always be these why questions. We don't always know why, but now we're having a different perspective on it, of how this can be used for some good.

SS: Right, and also just knowing that he enters into suffering.

MM: He's been there.

SS: That doesn't make the problem necessarily go away, but sometimes when you can't trace God's hand, you can trust his heart. I think it helps us to trust God's heart to know that he's one with us in our suffering. I think of Joni Eareckson Tada who (as probably many know) has been a quadriplegic since she was 17 as a result of a diving accident. She talks about how when your husband has just left you, when your son has committed suicide, when you've just become a quadriplegic, trying to figure out reasons and answers is pointless. At a point like that, she says, the only answer that satisfies is the man of sorrows. Someday we'll get a full answer, but until then, she says the man of sorrows is enough—to know that God enters into that and doesn't keep himself from suffering. That speaks to our heart even though it may not answer all of our questions about the enigma of suffering.

MM: Even the symbol of Christianity is a cross—a reminder of not just simple suffering but excruciating suffering. So there is a practical significance of what we see there. It could be a doctrine, could become sterilized, but yet there's a practical result as we understand what was going on there in the crucifixion. That that can help us be encouraged. It doesn't take our suffering

away. But as Paul described, we're sharing in the sufferings of Christ.

SS: I have sometimes shared with people about Christ and his suffering and helped them to reframe their suffering in the light of his greater suffering, their afflictions in the light of his greater affliction. It seems that “reframing” helps them put their suffering in a perspective that they couldn't before. It's profoundly comforting, even though it doesn't solve the mystery.

MM: The suffering is still there—and it's not just that Jesus suffered *more* than we did. But he suffered with purpose, and somehow we can participate in that purpose.

SS: Yeah. I like to think that his scars, his nail-scarred hands, have become radiant now—radiant scars. It's interesting that he has a glorified body, but he still has the scars. Those marks of his suffering are there, and it seems like they're always going to be there. Even when John looks to see the lion, he doesn't see a lion—he seems a lamb as though it had been slain [Revelation 5:5-6]. So even in John's vision of heaven, Jesus still has those scars. But now they're radiant scars, and it seems that in our lives, God can take the suffering, our scars. If we'll give them to him, he can work to transform and redeem. Then our scars become radiant, too, and useful for the redemption of others.

MM: It reminds me of the Gospel of John. John refers to Jesus' crucifixion as his glorification. It was part of his glory that he was willing to sacrifice, to suffer.

SS: Suffering and glory are bound up together in the Christian vision, and this is counter-intuitive and mind boggling, and not the way our culture tends to view suffering. Suffering is something to be eliminated. You've got a headache. You take a couple of Tylenol or whatever. You get rid of it. That's what we would think, so we assume that that's what a loving God would do: eliminate suffering. But God's thoughts and ways are different. He wants to work and use suffering. The cross becomes the means of redeeming the world.

MM: Right. Whereas our suffering can't redeem the world.

SS: No, it can't, but it can be used redemptively in our lives and in the lives of others. I mean in the sense that God can take a person, for example, who has been through the wrenching pain of a divorce and bring them out, and then they become someone that God uses to minister to other people who are going through a divorce. So that doesn't get wasted, as it were.

I had a woman several years ago in Canada share about how God had taken the garbage in her life, the suffering, the pain, the things that she wished had never happened. The garbage had become like a compost pile. You throw garbage in a compost pile—rotten eggs, banana peels and leaves and

coffee grinds, whatever. She and her husband had just made a compost pile. She said, a year from now, when we go about fertilizing in our garden, around the shrubs and all, she said there won't be any fertilizer you can buy anywhere that'll be as near as good as that compost. She said it will be like pure gold.

I thought, that's what God seems to want to do with our garbage. He can take it, if we'll give it to him, and use it and turn it somehow into gold.

MM: We want to get rid of it, but he wants us to keep it, and he'll transform it.

SS: With his thorn in the flesh, Paul said take it away, and he prayed. He said it's a messenger of Satan. It was not a good thing, whatever it was, but God says, no I want to use that, because in your weakness my strength is made perfect. Paul says, I glory in that now. [2 Corinthians 12:7-10] That's a pretty counter-intuitive vision for the average American today, isn't it?

MM: In your book you mention that the apostles "preached the gospel backwards." It was an intriguing phrase. Maybe you could comment a little more. What's backwards about this, the way the apostles preached?

SS: We used to think of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and what I meant by that was, particularly if you look at the preaching of the apostles in the book of Acts, there's a strong emphasis on Christ's resurrection as being at the heart of everything, and fundamental. So what I meant was they, after his resurrection and after their proclamation of that, they then looked at the cross and his life, and interpreted all that he had done in the light of the resurrection.

For example, his death. I don't think they would have understood it to be redemptive and salvific if he was still in the grave. He had died, and that was the end of it. His word from the cross, it is finished, for example, takes on a different meaning. If he is still dead, we'd say, that's the end.

MM: *He* is finished.

SS: Done and he is finished, whereas now "it is finished" is the shout of a victor. It's accomplished, finished—but that makes sense only in the light of the resurrection. So that's what I meant by "they preached backwards," in the sense that they looked at his whole life ministry in the light of his resurrection, and it only then makes sense.

MM: The resurrection is good news for him, but how is that good news for us as well? That's the *so what* question.

SS: It establishes that he is Lord—the resurrection and the lordship and the divinity of Christ. It's good news because it helps us to really understand who Jesus is in that regard, and so I encourage pastors to call people on Easter Sunday, when they preach, to answer the question who is Jesus, and

to submit to him as Lord, because the resurrection establishes that.

But the really good news about the resurrection is that it means that new creation has begun. In the Jewish mind, resurrection from the dead was something they associated with the very end of the age. That was when God was going to make all things new. They were a little bit confused and discombobulated not because Jesus had been raised from the dead so much, but *when* it happened: It had happened in the middle of history, not at the end. So they had to readjust.

What that means is that new creation has already begun now, and so it's the guarantee that God is going to make all things new. It means that it has begun now. It can begin in us. We are new creatures in Christ, but it's also about the whole of creation. It tells me that God is on a mission to redeem *everything* that he created. I need to join him in that mission now.

MM: Salvation is bigger than just me.

SS: Absolutely. It's about all of creation. Paul writes in Romans, chapter 8, that all of creation groans and travails. It's on tip-toe, waiting. When he returns, new creation is really going to kick into full gear, as it were, but that process has begun now. So the guarantee, that that's where we're going to go, is already now. That's good news.

MM: That can also affect how we look at the creation around us now.

SS: Right. We ought to be preparing this world, ourselves, for its eventual destiny. That applies even to things like the environment. It leads to a Christian focus on creation care, because that's what God wants for all of creation. We need to kind of get on the road to that now.

MM: After Jesus was resurrected, he ascended to heaven. He sat at the right hand of the Father. What's he doing for us now?

SS: For a lot of people, the ascension is a meaningless doctrine. They believe it. It's in the Apostles' Creed, you know, and so forth.

First, you have to ask what it meant for him. Then you figure out what it means for us, but what it meant for him is that he's restored into the fullness of the presence of God once again, something that he laid aside in some measure when he became incarnate. He was present at one place and in one time. He was limited by space and time when he walked here.

Going back to heaven means that now he's in the fullness of the presence of God, and that means he can be everywhere and in all times at once now. He's no more limited. The good news is: that means that Jesus is always present now. He's everywhere. He said in the Great Commission, Don't forget: I'm with you always. That's bound up with the ascension, because heaven and earth overlap, as it were. Heaven is all around us, as it were. It's

more of a dimension than a place. Jesus can be everywhere, and that means he's with us now, even as we're having this interview. He's with me moment by moment when I get in my car and drive home. I can begin to recognize his presence and live in his presence every moment of every day. That is good news. That's just one thing.

MM: I was thinking of his ministry of mediation, as our intercessor.

SS: Yeah. We're told that one of the main things he's doing now that he's at the right hand of God he's not just twiddling his thumbs, but Hebrews [7:25] says he ever lives to make intercession for us. He is interceding at the right hand of God. This is a posture of standing in the gap for others.

So if that's what Jesus is doing, and we are somehow connected to him and joined with him through union with Christ and through being raised up with him, then we join with him in that work of intercession for others. One thing Jesus does is he takes a little bit of that intercessory burden that he has for everything and puts it on us as particular people for particular persons, situations, countries, cities, churches and so forth. We then become these mediators, as it were. We join with him in that work of intercession.

MM: So the feelings that we have are really from him working in us.

SS: Right. It's amazing the different kinds of ministries and burdens. Out of those burdens flow all kinds of different concerns and ministries that people have for particular things.

MM: The story of Jesus—we've sketched out where it has gone, but we also see something in the future part of the story: his return. That's going to have a huge practical importance for us then, but does it have a practical importance for us now?

SS: If you read the New Testament, most of the discussion of the second coming and the return of Christ is really not about trying to figure out when it's going to happen, or even what it's going to look like when it happens, but most of the instruction and the teaching has to do with our lives now. For example, the call to holiness. He who has this hope, John says, purifies himself as he is pure [1 John 3:3]. This hope of his return prompts us to become like him. We're going to become like him.

MM: If we like what he's like. Then it's going to have some influence on what we like and do now.

SS: Exactly. So the second coming is a call to holiness. It's also a call to faithful service. The parables that Jesus tells about the guy who goes away on a trip and the people are back home working. They don't know when he's coming. The ones that are said to be good and faithful servants are the ones who are just doing their job faithfully waiting for his return. They're not trying

to figure out the day or the moment he's going to come back, but they're commended mainly because they were faithful in little. So there's a faithful service.

There's also a call to patient endurance. You're awaiting his return, but a day is like a thousand years [2 Peter 3:8] and you don't know. So you need to be patient. It's a spur to be patient.

I would also say joyful confidence, because we know Jesus is coming back. We're waiting for a *person* to come back most of all, aren't we? Sometimes we get so focused on the signs of his coming, but the thing that's most exciting is that *Jesus* is coming. That word *parousia* that they use to talk about the Second Coming was a word that had to do with someone's personal presence. It's a reason for joy to know that Jesus, our risen Lord, will come back.

MM: I think some people look forward to Christ's return because they are interested in what he can do for me. I've got these problems in my life, and I want them to be fixed. That'll be fixed by Christ's return, so I want him to return. They lose sight of the relationship with him, that he's the one we're waiting for. He is the big reason that it's going to be a joyful time.

SS: Right, and I think it's an indictment on us when many Christians don't talk much about the Second Coming. It seems like folks either over-believe in it, in the sense that that's *all* they think about, and most of the time they're trying to figure out dates and seasons and times and all that. Then in many sectors of the church, though, you just don't hear hardly anything about the Second Coming.

I think that that shows how little we really miss him, because I think we'd talk more about it if we missed Jesus. We'd want to be with him. We'd want him to come back, because we'd want to see him again. Just like we might talk about a loved one who's away. I wonder if that's an indictment on our love relationship with him.

MM: That we need to be developing that relationship now.

SS: Yeah, that we'd be eager. It's the eager expectation of his return, and it's a blessed hope. It's a blessed hope that we have.

MM: That is interesting, but we are out of time. So I thank you for being with us.

SS: Yeah, it's great to be here.

105. MINISTRY IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

Michael Morrison: Steve, you've written a very interesting book on *Ministry in the Image of God: The Trinitarian Shape of Christian Service*. There's a lot packed into each of these words. What I found particularly interesting is, as a starting point, maybe we could talk about the image of God. How are you developing that or where are you getting this from? Am I supposed to look like God does?

Stephen Seamands: Yeah, that's what Archie Bunker used to say. Remember on *All in the Family*, he said, "Well, I was created in the image of God. That means God looks like me." When you think about those words in Genesis, chapter 1, verse 26, God says, "Let us make man [Adam] in our own image," and then it says, "in the image of God God created us, and we were created, in the image of God he made us." Then he talks about male and female being created in the image of God as male and female. I'm suggesting in this book that we were created in a Trinitarian image of God. Let the "let us" suggest the Trinity there.

MM: "Us" being some plurality.

SS: Exactly. The plurality in God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – and so then God creates us in that Trinitarian image, with a Trinitarian imprint. If we're going to understand what that image is, we've got to think not just about... Sometimes theologians have thought about the image as like just a capacity that we have that differentiates us from animals, like our ability to make choices or our ability to reason. No, that passage understands that there's a *relationship* that constitutes the image. Just as the persons of the Trinity are created in relationship or in relationship to each other, we've been created in relationship. In a sense, it seems to be saying that to have the image of God, you need more than one. You need male and female.

MM: For God it's three, for humans it's two.

SS: Right.

MM: In a way, humans need the third, we need God in us, too.

SS: Exactly. You think of a family: you've got a mother and a father and a child. You've got that fullness of the image that you can't quite have in just one person per se.

MM: As one person, can't we be persons? Does it take other persons to make us persons?

SS: The Trinity would seem to indicate that to be really a person actually is to be incomplete, in the sense that it does take another, an "I" and a "thou," to truly be a person. Even the names of the Trinitarian persons, Father and

Son, for example, imply relationship. You can't be a father without being in relationship, or a son. To be a person, does mean, at least according to the Trinity, if we let the Trinity helps up to find what personhood is and looks like, means that I am in relationship to another. I'd make a distinction between being an individual, which you can be, I can be, in of just myself, as opposed to being a person, which means I am myself in relationship to you. I can't just be "me, myself and I" anymore.

It's interesting the first time the word "my" shows up in the Bible. I don't know if you've ever thought about this, but it's actually when God creates Eve and he brings Eve out to Adam. Remember what he says – the old guy turns into a poet, doesn't he? He starts, "This at last is bone of my bone," there's the word *my*, the first time it shows up in the Bible. Even to be able to say *my*, he can only say *my* when he looks at her. It would seem to suggest that to be me, I need you. To be a person I need another.

MM: That the meaning of my life, at least in part...

SS: Is in relationship. We tend to think of ourselves in a very individualistic way. I can be myself. I can be me just by being me. It'd be nice to add a few other people; that makes you healthy and kind of rounds you out.

MM: Especially if they do what I want them to do.

SS: Exactly. We tend to think, "Well, those are optional, though, to being a person." Whereas, I think the Trinitarian vision would say, "No, I am myself only in relationship to you. Adam can't say *my* until he sees her – until there's a thou." It takes an I and a thou to be fully personal.

MM: This image that God has created me to be isn't complete until it has these relationships.

SS: Right.

MM: Maybe that leads into the concept of ministry, that there are relationships.

SS: Right. That has profound implications for ministry. Often, the places where people really fail in ministry are in their ability to form and to function well in relationships. Relationships are at the heart of what makes ministry work. It's interesting in the field of counseling, for example. They've discovered that often it's not what a counselor says to someone or a technique they use that fixes the problem or helps the person. Or it's not the kind of therapy approach that they bring to the table as a counselor. Is this a cognitive therapy or whatever. It's actually the forming of a relationship with this counselor. It's the relationship itself that seems to heal.

MM: There's something healthy about that.

SS: There's something healthy about that. This says to me as a Christian leader that I need to be one that's working first of all, at growing in the ability to be healthy in a relational way. Most of us tend, if you put us on a spectrum of being too attached to others, to being too separated or aloof from others, most of us because of our lives we tend to gravitate toward one extreme or the other. I tend to be not too attached. I tend to be too aloof. I tend to want to separate too much, to be alone; to be a lone wolf sort of guy. In ministry, the challenge for me, then, is to work on that and deal with that in myself, and to learn how to move toward people more.

For some people, they have the other problem. They tend to be maybe almost co-dependent on their congregation or someone. They almost become an extension of someone else, and that's not healthy. To be working toward healthy relationships in ministry, to be in relationship. For me, an important part of my ministry has been being a part of a small group of three or four other like-minded persons over the years, realizing God can't do all he wants to do in me if I'm just going to insist on "me and Jesus." Even though I have an important life of prayer, that's something I do as just an individual. I need to be in relationship, in close relationships. I need that community, a small group-type of community to really become the person I'm supposed to be.

As the last thing I would say about us ministers and people in the ministry is that we need to attend to our families and understand the importance of our family unit. We can't sacrifice our children and our spouses on the altar of our ministry. We've got to be intentional. Sometimes, maybe one of the most powerful and best things we can do, for example, as a pastor of a local church, is just to be a model of what a healthy family looks like, as a husband and wife and also as a father or a mother with children. If that's the heart of God and if relationship is at the heart of things, we've got to take it seriously.

MM: That also means sometimes saying *no* to what the congregation wants and saying what the congregation really needs is an example of this family involvement.

SS: Right. Yes, there's a price to pay for that, but if I let productivity and if I let function, for example (and usually those are the kinds of things that create a lot of congregational demands on us – we want you to do this or do that) – if I become the kind of person who measures my own self on how well I produce or what I do for others rather than who I am in relationship to others, then I'm a part of that problem. In order to make relationship at the heart of things, I think you're right, its going to mean saying no to some things in our lives.

MM: Your book is titled *Ministry in the Image of God* and you've talked about ministry, but it seems like what you're saying isn't exclusive to ministry at all.

SS: Right. Actually this is the heart of reality. When you go with the flow of the Trinity, it's like you have the whole universe behind you. That applies what I just said, what we've just been talking about relationship, that applies to a business person in their place of business. It applies to a coach working with a team. Same principles work. They're universal, I think.

MM: By seeing the Trinitarian interrelationships as our model, then it gives us perspective with which to view our own work and relationships, and that perspective can clarify some of the things we need to do.

SS: Right. If you'll think about the Trinitarian relationships, particularly based, I think we get a window into this in the Gospel of John, where Jesus talks often about his relationship with the Father and so forth. You see full equality. The persons of the Trinity are distinct but they're equal: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. You see joyful intimacy between these persons. They love each other. They delight in each other. They delight in the otherness of the other.

Then you also see this glad submission. They surrender. The Son says, for example, "I only want to do what I see the Father doing." His desire is to submit to the will of the Father. The Holy Spirit comes along and says, "I don't want to glorify me. I want to glorify Christ." Each person; there's a sort of quality of laying their self down for the sake of the other, and they get their identity as persons not through self-assertion but through self-denial, which is counterintuitive, not the way our culture would tell us. They lay themselves down and then they find ... as when Jesus says, "If you want to find your life, you need to lose it," he's talking about what's been going on through all eternity in the Trinity.

MM: Right. Paul writes it in Philippians 2.

SS: Yeah.

MM: "Look at Jesus."

SS: Exactly.

MM: "Model this. That he became nothing to serve us."

SS: Right. That's how they gain their self-identity, as it were, by laying themselves down, not by asserting themselves.

MM: The Father serves in this way; the Son serves in this way and there's service everywhere.

SS: Yeah. We tend to look at another person as somebody to fear or someone that's a threat to us.

MM: A rival. Yeah.

SS: The Trinitarian persons, there's no competition among them because they're all about giving themselves over to the other for the sake of the other. In doing that, they find their joy. You find some of these characteristics. There's also a deferring characteristic where the Father says to the Son, "Judgment, I'm probably the one that should do that but you do it." They place things, they give it the other, they defer.

MM: Even though there's like an equality and agreement. There's also distinction there.

SS: Yes, there is. That leads to a Christian understanding of differences being significant and important. The Christian vision isn't that there's going to come a day when we're all going to get absorbed into one.

MM: Some Eastern religion.

SS: Right. I think Richard Neuhaus calls it sort of a tapioca pudding of homogeneity; we're all going to get put back into that. But the Christian vision is there always be three, and so it prizes distinctives. Even around the throne in the book of Revelation, there's people there from every tongue and tribe and nation. That's led to Christians wanting, for example, to translate the Bible into the vernacular of every culture rather than wanting just one language to be the language that everyone has to learn and you can't translate the Bible; it's got to be in that language.

MM: Right. It's interesting. The Koran has to be in Arabic.

SS: Exactly. Interesting that even in the Koine Greek here you've already got a language that the founder of the religion didn't speak. Jesus would have spoken Aramaic. You've already got that principle. I think it goes back to the Trinity, because those distinctions that matter. Differences.

MM: Again, that's a relationality.

SS: Within relationship, yeah. Yeah.

MM: Sometimes we have difficulty in setting some boundaries for ourselves and we put expectations on ourselves. Maybe we think that other people have these expectations of us and we're trying to match up to what we think they're thinking. That seems really destructive.

SS: Right. To learn to accept who we are and to be who we are, and not to try to be someone else. I think there's an old Jewish story about the rabbi that when he gets to heaven, he says God is not going to ask me why weren't you Moses when you lived on earth. He's going to say, "Why weren't you you?" For whatever his name was. There is sometimes a tendency for us to try to let other people tell us who we're supposed to be – or sometimes we do it to ourselves. Sometimes those of us in ministry spend five or ten years

trying to preach like to somebody else.

MM: Right. Get one of these books and say, “Why am I not more like this fellow?”

SS: I remember years ago when I was a student in school. We had a few Billy Graham impersonators among the student body. We tried to preach like Billy Graham. “The Bible says,” or whatever. What the Trinity would say is “be who you are and prize that, and lay down your attempts and quit hating yourself for the person that you are.” Sometimes we’re our own worst enemy. There’s a right kind, a good kind of self acceptance that comes out of a Trinitarian vision where I accept the person that God has made me to be that’s distinct from you or anyone else.

MM: Different giftings.

SS: Yeah. I don’t try to be a 10-talent person when I’m a 3-talent or a 1-talent person. To simply be who I have been created to be, that’s what the Trinity would say I ought to do. That’s very liberating to me.

MM: Free to be who you are.

SS: Yeah.

MM: In your book, you tell a story of one of your students who wasn’t making the grades that the student wanted to make.

SS: Right.

MM: It was just a fascinating reaction there. Could you tell us?

SS: Yeah. I’d given her a B+ on a paper. Actually she was in that very chair right there. I can remember a number of years ago when this happened. She came in and wanted to know how can I do better on this. As we began to talk, I knew she was doing a lot that semester. She was working. She was doing some counseling. She had some issues she was working through, so there was a lot going on in her life. I said to her, “I think at this point, for this semester, that a B+ is a good grade for you to get. You’ve got to accept your limitations.” She looked back at me and she said, “Oh no. I can’t do that. I’m an A student. I’ve got to have As.” I said, “You know, it’s not a sign of weakness in a person to accept limitations. Sometimes it’s a sign of strength and maturity.” “No, no, no.”

She went back and forth, and finally I just got tired and impatient with the whole thing. I said, “What do you think Jesus thinks of your B+?” She sort of got quiet, she’s a little sheepish, but she said, “I’m afraid to ask him.” I was sort of surprised at that and I said, “Why are you afraid to ask him?” Her answer shocked me. She said, “It’s because I’m afraid his standards for me will be lower than mine.” Sometimes we have these perfectionist standards that we’ve set for ourselves. Or that maybe we had a parent who

demanded that from us or whatever. We put those on ourselves. Sometimes I think to accept ourselves, we've got to smash that idol that we've made. It's because it becomes a false god. We bow down to it. We could feel OK about myself if I get that A. That's a part of the virtue of true self acceptance.

MM: It's a false image of God.

SS: It is. Yeah, it's a false god.

MM: It's interesting how we try to out-perform God.

SS: Right. I think maybe going right back to Adam and Eve, somebody told us we could be like God and we believed the lie, and it's gotten us into this idea that somehow we could in fact be perfect, the super person that we're not. That's a part of the delusion that we run to. It's our pride system.

MM: The whole book is in a way that we *are* like a god. We were created already to be like that but that's the temptation. Maybe it's the individualism and relationship difference again.

SS: Right. Yet I think that sin is in a sense refusing to accept our proper being like God, but that's mean, and sort of striving for a way of being like God that we were never designed for. It's not in keeping with who we are, but as a part of our fallenness and our brokenness and it's a part of the delusion and the lie.

MM: All right. Thanks very much.

106. WOUNDS THAT HEAL

Michael Morrison: Steve, you've written a book, *Wounds That Heal*. As you describe it, this book is written more for ordinary Christians. Everybody's been wounded in some way or another, and this book can touch them, and is written in a way for them. Maybe you could start by talking about the title *Wounds That Heal*. You're saying that my wound is eventually going to heal?

Stephen Seamands: Yeah, the possibility is there. It's important to emphasize the subtitle of that book, which is *Bringing our Hurts to the Cross*, because I wanted to show how the cross answers the need for human sufferers and wounds to be healed, as well as a place where human sinners can come to get their sins forgiven. Often, when we talk about the cross of Christ, we focus on how it addresses the problem of human sin, and that is, of course, the primary New Testament keynote – Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures – but we're not just sinners; we're sufferers.

MM: That people have sinned against us?

SS: Yes, we have sinned, but we also have been sinned against. The cross actually addresses both needs. What I was trying to show was how the cross profoundly speaks to us as sufferers as well as sinners. Because, even though we're both, the sufferer and the sinner have a little different need. That is what I was trying to focus on, and to suggest that there is healing power in the cross of Christ for our wounds. That's right out of Isaiah 53, "By his stripes we are healed." By his wounds we are healed.

MM: His wounds help heal our wounds?

SS: Right.

MM: How do we, as the subtitle says, "bring our hurts?" Our hurts aren't a thing we can pick up to bring there. As a metaphor, how do we do this?

SS: It's important, first of all, for us to own the hurt and the pain, and to recognize, yes, I've been hurt. I've been sinned against. Sometimes it's hard for people to do that. Sometimes they want to let someone else off the hook, you might say.

MM: We say, "Oh, it was nothing."

SS: "It was nothing," or, "They didn't really mean that," or, "Maybe I deserved that." Consequently, sometimes it takes a while for a person to admit, "I've been sinned against. I've been hurt." That's really a preliminary step. Then, I think it's important in bringing our hurts to the cross to begin to think about the cross in terms of how Jesus, himself, was hurt, how Jesus, himself, suffered on the cross. The different ways in which he suffered.

For example, maybe I've experienced a lot of shame in my life. Maybe

somebody shamed me, or said things to me that put me down, and I experienced a lot of shame. To understand that Jesus was shamed. We tend to think of the excruciating physical pain that he went through on the cross, but in the ancient world, it was the shame of crucifixion that was actually the thing that was most dreaded.

MM: Because this flogging wasn't private, the process wasn't private.

SS: Exactly, it's done publicly out there, and this person is put out, hung up there, you might say, and their family, and their village, their town, all of those would be implicated in that. It was a way to shame that person. Often they left the person up there after they died, and the wild animals would come and pick the flesh off their bones. It was awful. The writer of the book of Hebrew says, "For the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross despising the shame."

To know, and to think about Jesus: he was lonely. He was betrayed. He was forsaken. He even felt God-forsaken. All the ways in which he suffered, I think it helps as you think about your hurts, you know, put them in the context of his hurt.

MM: He's been there; he's felt that.

SS: He's experienced that. That helps us to reframe our suffering and our anguish in the light of his. I think that's maybe a second step, is to stand before him, and look at him, see what he suffered. Then, often there are things that to bring our hurts to the cross, Jesus on the cross forgives. He says, "Father, forgive them." I think that's a kind of a model, and I would say that probably the greatest barrier that keeps people from receiving healing from God, is un-forgiveness. We are going to probably need to say that to someone, "I forgive you for what you did to me."

MM: That's the hardest thing to do.

SS: Exactly. I like to explain it like this: in order to let Jesus touch his wounds to our wounds, we've got to be willing to forgive that person, or give Jesus permission to begin that process of forgiving. Lord Jesus, I don't think I'm willing to forgive them, I'm hurt so much, but I give you permission to begin to do that work in me.

MM: I like what you said, "As a process." Something we recognize the need for, it just doesn't happen right away.

SS: Right. Forgiveness starts with the will, primarily. You make a choice, and sometimes you only have about 20 percent of your will. You say, "Jesus, take my 20 percent and add your will to mine. There's a process where little-by-little. I think that's a key element. Sometimes we've got to ask ourselves, "Have I kind of put a wall around myself? I got hurt and I decided, 'Never again,' and so I'm using a wall to protect myself." Sometimes, in order to

experience his wounds touching your wounds you've got to give Jesus permission to tear down that wall, to dismantle that wall. That's become sort of your shield.

MM: Then it feels risky.

SS: Yeah, it feels risky to let that down. Sometimes people have lived with a wound so long that it's become cozy. Their victim-hood has become their identity. It's become comfortable. They don't know what they would do without it even though it's destructive and painful.

MM: Part of their life.

SS: Yes, and so those are all questions, that as I work with people in helping them bring their hurts to the cross, I have to help them work through it. We're trying to get rid of the things that are keeping Jesus from touching his wounds to their wounds. Then, to actually invite him to do that.

MM: Sometimes when people sin against us and we are hurt, we still need to have some kind of boundary.

SS: Right, but it's distinct from a wall.

MM: There's still a boundary there.

SS: Healthy boundaries are important in relationships. Sometimes, after we've been hurt especially, we need a time when we pull away. Like a dog that's gotten hurt in a fight – retreat and lick your wounds for a while. There's a legitimate time and a place for that. Sometimes in ministry (I'm speaking of myself), I've had this "I'll just be a good soldier" mentality too often, and I fail to take the time to pull back and realize, "I've been really hurt and I need to own that and bring that to the Lord, and not just try to keep going on like nothing happened."

MM: Which some wounded soldiers would try to do.

SS: Exactly. We tend to do that. We don't like to admit that we've been hurt. We don't like to admit we're weak. So there's a legitimate time for a good kind of boundary setting. Maybe part of the reason I got hurt in the first place was because I didn't set good boundaries. I've got to learn sometimes to boundary myself from certain kinds of people, certain kinds of situations. That's a part of becoming a healthy person.

MM: Thank you. There are some abusive relationships, not just marriages can be abusive, but congregational settings can also be abusive, but forgiveness doesn't mean perpetuating that.

SS: Right, certainly not. How does a battered wife forgive? Does that mean that she allows herself, "Now I've forgiven this person who battered me, do I turn around and let them continue to do that?" No, you don't perpetuate that. You forgive for the past, but it may mean standing up to that person and being really firm for the first time in that relationship.

Forgiveness doesn't mean you become a perpetual punching bag, or that you don't sometimes demand that justice be done in a situation. If someone swindled you out of a lot of money, maybe your business partner took advantage of your trust and so forth, I don't think that taking that person to court is incompatible with forgiveness. Some people would think, "Oh, how could you do that?" You're not taking them to court to try to get revenge, but you do have a legitimate right to justice. You would still need to forgive them for what they did, but it might be appropriate to take them to court where if someone did something to break the law that hurt one of your children, for example, to see the state punish that person for that, that's not incompatible with forgiveness.

MM: In many cases, maybe all, maybe that is the best thing for that person.

SS: Right.

MM: That they do experience some justice, right?...

SS: You're holding them accountable. Sometimes I've seen abusive people use forgiveness as a bludgeon.

MM: Oh, "You're supposed to forgive me."

SS: "I did that to you. You're supposed to forgive me now."

MM: "If you were a real Christian."

SS: Yes. That becomes a form of manipulation and power. That's where you need a person who stands up and says, "No." Sometimes a person has a hard time doing that. People who are in abusive relationships, that's become their way ...

MM: Over, perhaps, years.

SS: Yes.

MM: A pattern.

SS: They may need some help. Someone else to come alongside them to help them walk through standing up to someone.

MM: They can take those hurts to the cross and realize that, "Okay, Jesus has been there. He's been in abusive situations."

SS: Right.

MM: Then, what?

SS: There is a healing light that flows from his wounded side and his hands. As we've forgiven, his healing presence can come into those situations, and so that dimension of healing, I think, happens as we bring our hurts to the cross. He does touch our wounds with his wounds. The grief, and the sadness, and the pain, I think, can get absorbed into his broken body.

MM: He helps carry some of these burdens.

SS: Yes, and then, I think, finally, just as his own wounds have become

radiant scars (like I like to call them), I believe he can begin to take that wound and when it begins to be healed, he begins to take it and use it for his purposes. That which Satan meant to use to destroy you becomes a channel of God's healing grace to others so that now he's using you in an area of ministry, for example, that relates to the very pain and the suffering that you went through. He redeems it for his glory.

MM: Just as Jesus has been through it and can help us, if we've been through it, then we can help someone else. But it's not always the same specific hurt that can be generalized as the feeling of abandonment.

SS: Right.

MM: Kind of a general one.

SS: Yes. I think suffering, in general, does sensitize us to the hurts of others regardless of what the hurt was. I think that it makes us less judgmental of others. It gives us more compassion, in general.

MM: What about when we've had hurts that aren't attributable to anyone in particular? We've got cancer, for example. We've suffered in a hurricane, it came through and blew down our house, killed our son. We can't blame anybody. Is that harder to deal with?

SS: Sometimes it is, because to forgive someone, there has to be a someone. There needs to be a something out there. Sometimes situations like that are the hardest to deal with, partly because it's harder to focus on someone there. Although I would imagine if that had happened, I might have to talk to someone about whether they're mad at God about that, and maybe they need to ...

MM: There's someone involved.

SS: Exactly. Maybe they need, it seems strange to say this, because we don't think of God as hurting people, but do you need to forgive God? What I would mean by that is God sometimes allows things to happen to us that we think he should have not allowed to happen, so we're mad at God about that, so sometimes the person we have to forgive is God. We have to stop holding anger and bitterness toward God for that. We've got a clinched fist. You're upset with him. You need to bring that to him. Bring that to the cross as well.

MM: I imagine that is more difficult.

SS: Right. It is interesting, though, Scripture says that on the cross he endured the hostility of sinners. Jonathan Edwards preached that great sermon, "Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God," but I think on the cross it was God in the hands of angry sinners. I think we were there saying, "Crucify him, Crucify him." The anger that we felt over things that happened. There is a sense in which he's carried that.

MM: He's been through that, too.

SS: He understands. Christ is a safe place where you can bring your anger at God, too.

MM: Our anger at him is nothing new?

SS: Exactly.

MM: He's big enough to handle it.

SS: Right. You think about going from Palm Sunday to Good Friday, and why they turned on him. Because he didn't act like Gods were supposed to act. He didn't do what they were wanting him to do. We have to sometimes own that, and I'm mad at you about that.

MM: He was not the kind of hero we were looking for in our particular circumstance.

SS: Absolutely.

MM: Even those wounds, in time, for some people they don't heal. Maybe they don't bring them to the cross. When we see how the cross intersects our particular hurt, then it does become transforming and healing for us.

SS: Right.

MM: As you said, then we are able to better help others who are going through something similar. In some ways it's like the title of your book has come around full circle there, that our wounds become wounds that heal others.

SS: Right. Yeah, we become healed helpers. What was the name of that book by Henri Nouwen...

MM: It was *Wounded Healers*.

SS: We become wounded healers, don't we?

MM: Right, but we are also healed.

SS: Exactly, and that's the amazing thing about how God works, that he takes evil and suffering and he uses it to accomplish purposes, to bring good out of it, to bring glory out of it, so Joseph can say, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good." You get stunned and awed at God's ability to work his purposes in spite of, and in the midst of. I think the challenge in our lives is to let God have our sorrows – to not waste them – to see that they can be used for his purposes. It's not that God caused them, but if we'll give them to God, he can redeem them.

MM: But we have to trust him.

SS: Right. The cross helps us trust him.

MM: Thanks for discussing that with us.

SS: Thank you.

107. JOHN MCLEOD CAMPBELL AND GRACE

J. Michael Fezell: Dr. Thimell, thanks for being with us today.

Daniel Thimell: Delighted to be with you.

JMF: I wanted to begin by asking you to talk about your Christian journey and how you came to be a Trinitarian theologian.

DT: It was during my time at Westmont College, particularly under the tutelage of Ray Anderson, when I began to reflect more deeply on my understanding of Christ. I had come to know him as Savior years earlier, but it was during those wonderful classes that I took from Ray Anderson that I began to discover the theology of John McLeod Campbell, a Scottish pastor and theologian who, when he would make his pastoral rounds, discovered that his people didn't have any joy in believing.

JMF: What was his time frame?

DT: McLeod Campbell was a pastor in the early 1820s, in Scotland. He found that as he made his pastoral rounds, the people would dread his coming because they were afraid that he would inquire after their spiritual condition, and they felt so unworthy. He found that they had no grounds for rejoicing in God, and he thought this strange, that here we had this wonderful good news of what God had done in Christ, but the people were not finding any joy in it.

JMF: Sounds somewhat like today, doesn't it?

DT: It has amazing parallels to today. He found that the problem was that they were so wrapped up in themselves and in their adequacy to be "eligible" for grace. They understood that Christ had done something wonderful on the cross, but all their doubts were as to themselves: Have I repented enough? Am I sincere enough? Have I believed enough? Am I worthy enough?



So he sought to direct their attention away from themselves, hunting in themselves for some kind of worthiness, and instead pointed them to Christ and to see how God felt toward them, and to see what God and Christ had already accomplished for

them.

This really switched on some lights for me. It helped me see that in Christ, we have a full revelation of God; that God has come in our humanity to disclose his heart to us. In Christ we see a God who loves us unconditionally, who will go to any length to bring us back.

JMF: Why is that hard to get our minds around?

DT: Because it's counterintuitive. In our society and world today, everything is based on performance, whether it's the job we have, perhaps the relationships we have, we're always trying to *win* a relationship. We're trying to *earn* a job, earn a raise. So when we're told that God loves us unconditionally, that we're already loved and accepted by him, that's astonishing.

Grace is an alien word in our culture. We think that we must *do* certain things, perform certain things. We must bring a certain amount of merit so that God will accept us. So when McLeod Campbell began to proclaim the gospel that God and Christ had already done it all, his people were astonished, and some of them felt liberated for the first time in their lives, and others began to murmur and complain.

Eventually he was forced to leave the ministry of the Church of Scotland for daring to preach a universal pardon available through Christ. But he went on to become one of Scotland's finest theologians with his work *The Nature of the Atonement*.

JMF: So Ray Anderson brought this to your attention as part of the class?

DT: Exactly. He helped us see that Christ reveals the Father, and we began to appreciate the depth in God as being a Triune God, that within God there's this Father/Son relationship that's been existing from all eternity. God is a God of relationships. Ray also emphasized the fact that the Holy Spirit is another of the three persons in that communion.

JMF: So if there's relationship in God, then that translates over into how everything is made, including us, our relationships with God and with each other.

DT: That's a crucial point. Within God, God being from all eternity a triune communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, experience an abundance of love through all eternity. It was out of the overflow of that love that God through Christ brought the world into being. We were made in love, and for love.

After the fall, Christ the Creator becomes the Redeemer. God comes to reclaim that which he had made. He was not willing to live without us. In love, he went all the way to be incarnate in our humanity, in our skin and bones, to live life as we live it, with the same temptations we face, the same struggles. Yet through it all, Jesus was faithful to his Father. Then he died our death and rose in triumph in our humanity. Now he presents us in himself as

those who are loved by the Father, who have been redeemed.

JMF: Didn't Campbell have a great influence on Thomas and James Torrance?

DT: He did. Campbell had been branded a heretic by the Church of Scotland in his day because at that time, the Church of Scotland was enamored by the high Calvinist idea that only some are predestined to salvation and that Christ only died for some. Calvin himself (but that's another story) taught that Christ died for the world. But McLeod Campbell, when he began to state that Christ's atonement was universal, that he died for everyone, raised the eyebrows of his peers and he was defrocked from the ministry.

But later, he was awarded a doctor of divinity by the University of Glasgow before he died. By the time he died, the majority of the Kirk, as we call the Church of Scotland, had come around to his point of view of a universal atonement.

Both Tom and James Torrance loved the writings of McLeod Campbell. They found particular help in his emphasis on the priesthood of Jesus, that Jesus not only did a priestly work by his death on the cross, but that he represented us in his humanity, that our humanity was assumed by Jesus so that as he lived his life, we were there in him, and when he died, we died, when he rose, we rose.

Paul writes to the Colossians, in chapter 3, "You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." This is a present reality, because Christ goes on bearing our humanity. We're included in the priesthood of Jesus. "When I go to pray," James Torrance was fond of saying, "I'm not left to struggle God-ward with my prayers hoping that I'm worthy enough or pious enough or good enough to get a hearing, but rather, Jesus Christ ever lives to make intercession for us, as Hebrews 7 puts it so memorably." This dimension of the priesthood of Jesus has been emphasized greatly by the Torrances. It helps us understand our ongoing relationship to God today.

JMF: Most people have the idea that Jesus was human while he was here on earth, but after he died and was raised, that he's no longer human; he's fully God but not fully human anymore, but that works against the scriptural witness.

DT: It does. One of the most memorable passages is 1 Timothy 2, where Paul writes to this young pastor he is mentoring and reminds him that there is one God and one mediator between God and man, *the man* Christ Jesus. He puts it in the present tense. Jesus' mediation today with the Father is as a human. He goes on being human. This is important because the humanity of Jesus is our bridge to God. It's through his humanity that we're included in the life of God and the communion of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.

It's through the humanity of Jesus that I can come right into the Father's arms even though I don't deserve so glad a welcome.

JMF: So getting back to your journey, these things were brought up, you were introduced to them through Ray Anderson, and then how did things go after that?

DT: After serving in the pastorate for a few years, it was my privilege to go to Scotland in 1985, where I studied under James Torrance. These were transformative years for me. James Torrance was a wonderful man of God, Christ-centered, a tremendous warmth about his pastoral way, but he brilliantly reflected on the nature of God as a triune God and as a communion of persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

He also made much of the fact that in our life in God, grace is the first and primary thing, that God's expectations of us are the second thing. The first thing is his grace. As J.B. (To his face, we called him Professor Torrance; to one another we affectionately called him J.B.) said, you could summarize a paradigm for the Christian life as being grace, law, consequences. God's grace comes first, and then he enables us to keep his expectations through his grace. Then as a consequence, we live our lives in Christ. It was a very freeing thing to see and experience this.

JMF: I love Paul's letter to Titus, where he says, "Grace teaches us to say no to ungodliness." Often what we hear is, "say no to ungodliness," but Paul's point is that it isn't *law* that teaches us to say no to ungodliness — it's grace, the fact that we're already accepted, forgiven, and clean in Christ, that is what teaches us, that's the springboard toward saying no to ungodliness.

DT: Right. Grace is the basis for our life in God, not our works. Paul says to the Galatians that he's astonished that they're deserting the gospel, that having begun in the Spirit they wanted to continue in the flesh, that having received the free grace of God, now they thought they were on probation or that they were on performance, that they had to somehow or another be obedient enough or keep enough rules in order to be in good with God. Paul wants to draw them back to the gospel of grace in Christ.

JMF: The place where the rubber meets the road with that, we might say, is when a person has sinned.

DT: Yes.

JMF: Maybe they've sinned again. Maybe they've done the same thing they've been struggling with for decades or whatever. There's a sense at that moment of, "I am never going to overcome," and there's a sense of, "God has left me. I am forsaken," but that's where the real gospel can meet us with hope and joy in the face of our sin.

DT: That's important. One of the greatest enemies of the Christian life is

our preoccupation with ourselves, our unworthiness and our failings. Luther said that the condition of the sinner is that he is *incurvatus in se ipsum*, he's curved inward on himself. That's the bondage we face sometimes because of our brokenness. We don't look up to God and his grace—we look inside ourselves and we see our hurts, we see our failings, we see wrongs we've committed, and we feel despair.

But the gospel invites us to look away from ourselves to what God in Christ has done. It was while we were yet sinners that Christ died for us, when we were powerless that Christ died for us. Our life in Christ continues after conversion, where we're continually upheld by the faithfulness of Christ, continually upheld by the grace of Christ.

That's why Paul writes to the church at Corinth. He says in 1 Corinthians 1:30, "Christ is our wisdom, our righteousness, our sanctification." He is all of those things. If we try to find it in ourselves, we'll only be discouraged. Sometimes this is an ongoing thing. We don't get a magical mastery over all our sins when we suddenly get the right insight or when we hear the gospel of grace. We're broken people, and that brokenness will not be completely healed until the next life.

JMF: Doesn't that mean that there's a significant difference between our faith and Christ's faith? In other words, what we tend to do is say, "My faith is weak. I want to believe what you just described, and yet I find a hard time believing it, because you don't know how bad of a sinner I am," but we're dealing with, not the quality of our faith, but Christ's own faithfulness. Our trust is in him, not in our faith.

DT: That's a vital point that isn't emphasized enough today. This was one of the great teachings of Tom Torrance. Early in his career, in 1957, he wrote an important article called "One Biblical Aspect of the Concept of Faith." He pointed out that in the Bible, particularly in the Psalms, there's this continuing contrast between God who is faithful, true, stable, and unchangeable, and man, who is frail and changeable as a flower that is vital and full of life one minute and withering and blowing away the next.

The Bible encourages us to take refuge from our own frailty and instability in God, who is faithful. Tom Torrance points out that this is continued in the New Testament with the emphasis on the faithfulness of Jesus. That's why Paul says, "When we are faithless, he is faithful. When we are vacant of faith, he is full of faith. He is faithful."

Paul says in Galatians 2:20, "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I but Christ lives in me. And the life I live, I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." Paul was not impressed with his own faith, but he was very impressed with the faith of Jesus. Paul

didn't have the feeling that it was the vitality of his spirituality, or his faith, or his sincerity that guaranteed him a place in God, but he was very impressed with the faithfulness of Jesus. That's what kept him going.

JMF: That's freeing and comforting to know, that it's entirely the love of God and his faithfulness toward us, Christ's atoning work for us, that we depend on and rest in. We don't have to (as Tom Torrance puts it) look over our shoulder all the time wondering if we're doing good enough, believing well enough...

DT: That's right. A centurion went to Jesus, his daughter is desperately ill, but he says to Jesus, "I believe, help my unbelief." Jesus didn't say, "Go away until you get more faith."

JMF: Yeah. The church does sometimes...

DT: Right. But he could come to Jesus in his brokenness and his half-belief and say, "Lord, I don't even know if I believe. My faith is so fragile that I'm just desperate." Jesus met him right there and wonderfully healed his daughter.

JMF: You wrote an article that was published in *Princeton Theological Review* called "Torrance's Theology of Faith." In that, you use an illustration, along the lines of what you just said, about a drowning man.

DT: This is a vivid way of putting it. Calvin describes faith as an empty outstretched hand, and the place of a sinner before God is like that of a drowning person. That person is going down. They're losing their life, and there's nothing they can do to save themselves. The lifeguard can come and save that person, but the person needs to stop struggling. Instead of taking swimming lessons at the time, he needs to relax in the arms of another who will carry him to safety.

The analogy that Tom Torrance used, which I find to be a vivid one, he employs in his *Mediation of Christ*. He said when his daughter was very young, he would sometimes walk her some place, and she would put her tiny weak hand in his and she was secure in the strong hand of her daddy. He says, "That's the picture of faith." It wasn't the strength of my daughter that kept her secure, that guided her to the right places, it was simply my strong hand around her weak hand. He says, "In Christ's faithfulness, we're being undergirded by the faithfulness of Jesus every day of our lives."

JMF: So getting back to...you had gone to Aberdeen, you had studied under James Torrance, and how did things go from there?

DT: It was during that time that I began to study in depth not only McLeod Campbell, but also Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin. I was seeking to understand how one's understanding of God affects one's understanding of salvation and of the Christian life.

Aquinas has many wonderful things to say. He was one of the great

theologians of the church. But when it came to his understanding of the gospel, he began to insert conditions. He said that God will meet you if you meet him halfway: “If you do what’s in you, if you try your best, if you’re sincere enough, if you confess enough, if you comply with the conditions the priest sets forth, then you can receive grace.”

Aquinas was convinced that Christ had done a great work on the cross, but he argued that God meets us halfway, and the classical definition of that position is semi-Pelagianism. Pelagius taught that we’re saved by works, but Thomas Aquinas said that’s not quite right. We’re not saved by works, we’re saved by works-plus-grace, and that’s known as semi-Pelagianism.

I wondered how he would have such an understanding that our works contribute to salvation. I wondered what in his doctrine of God led him to that position. I discovered that he was heavily influenced by Aristotle, and his understanding of God was one of absolute will, and God who decreed the way he’s going to work with the world. God can do whatever he wants, and he decided to set up a situation in which those who perform sufficiently along with his grace would receive salvation. To my mind, that didn’t square with the gospel, didn’t square with the God revealed in Christ.

Then I moved on to look at John Calvin. John Calvin has a much more Christ-centered theology. He understood grace as being totally unconditional. He points out that when John the Baptist said, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” that John was saying that because the kingdom of God has come with all of the grace that Jesus is bringing, you are enabled to live a new life in Christ. Repentance wasn’t a condition of salvation—it was a way of living out the new life in Christ.

Calvin was much more helpful because he had a Christ-centered understanding of God the Father. His doctrine of God led to a much better understanding of salvation and the gospel. The problem for Calvin, in my view, is that he had an understanding of God’s grace being limited from all eternity to certain elect ones, and those were the ones who received salvation. In that respect, he departed from his Christ-centered point of view, because you don’t find a God who only loves certain ones in Christ. You find Christ opening his arms and saying, “Come to me, *all* you that are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” And, “God so loved the *world* that he gave his only Son.”

Last, I looked at McLeod Campbell, and I saw that McLeod Campbell was an advance over both Aquinas and Calvin because he was thoroughly Christ-centered in his understanding of Scripture and of God.

JMF: When James Torrance retired, you ended up teaching in that position for a semester.

DT: I’m still amazed to think of that. It feels pretentious to even admit it. But after I had completed my study under Professor Torrance and I had

gone back to the States, he retired and he telephoned me and invited me to come and teach his classes. I was astounded and overwhelmed, but it was a wonderful experience to come back and stand in the classroom where he had stood. Not imagining that I was in any sense his equal or a worthy replacement, but joyfully proclaiming the same gospel and the same theology and quoting him without apology, frequently.

JMF: But you only stayed one semester.

DT: Right. I could have stayed longer. They were still in the process of finding a professor, but I had the longing to get back to the States and back into the pastorate again.

JMF: You were on a leave of absence from the church.

DT: Yes. There was a church that I was serving in North Dakota at the time which graciously allowed me to have that time, and I felt I couldn't keep them waiting, so I returned back to the States.

JMF: We're out of time, but it's been enjoyable. Thanks for being with us.

108. CHRIST ATONED FOR EVERYONE

J. Michael Fezell: You're particularly interested in the theology of John Calvin as well as the theology of Karl Barth. Could you, in a nutshell (even though that's quite a tall order), give us a little comparison between the two?

DT: Barth, when he saw the bankruptcy of liberal theology, realized that it had nothing to give to the people. When he saw Kaiser Wilhelm's aggressive war policies in World War I, he returned to "the strange new world of the Bible," and he began to discover a transcendent God, not a domesticated little house pet that liberal theology had made him to be. He began to rediscover in the writings of Calvin and those in the Reformed tradition a tremendous emphasis on grace and a much higher view of Scripture.

Calvin has a great deal to offer the Christian church because of his strong emphasis on grace. He has a wonderful discussion in chapter 3 of *The Institutes* when he talks about the difference between legal and evangelical repentance. Legal repentance says that if you turn from your sins and if you're sorry enough, if you turn over a new leaf, then God will reward you with salvation. This is the kind of teaching that was being presented in the church before the Reformation. It's our performance, our obedience, our self-reformation that merits us or makes us eligible for God's grace.

Calvin said no, that's legal repentance, that's a denial of grace, that's a denial of what God has done in Christ. He said that a proper answer is "evangelical repentance," or gospel-based repentance: a lifelong turning from sin and growing in Christ through grace. Repentance is a gift of God. It's not something that we bring in order to earn or win God's favor. This is a wonderful emphasis on grace.

Calvin, through much of his theology, is Christ-centered. He says the only way of restoring pure doctrine is to hold up Christ and all that he is. However, when Calvin comes to the question of why all don't respond favorably to the gospel, why when the gospel is preached some say yes and others say no, and having already emphasized that it's all about grace, he said "the answer must be that some were never intended to receive grace."

Although I take issue with him there, in Calvin's defense, it was the way he was reading Scripture. He thought that Romans 9 to 11, where God says, "Shall the potter say to the clay, why hast thou made me thus... I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy," he thought that it was scriptural, that God for some mysterious reason decided from all eternity that he would save A and B and C, but he would not save X, Y, and Z. This was not based on

anything that God would see in their life, any goodness or performance or anything. It was his mere will.

When Barth read this part of Calvin, he said, “He has departed from Christ here! He’s not reading the gospel through the lens of Christ anymore. He’s departed from his professed Christ-centered aim.” Barth said a proper doctrine of God’s call and God’s predestination is given us in Ephesians, where Ephesians says we’re predestined *in Christ*.

If we have a Christ-centered doctrine of predestination, we don’t have a God of a double decree, a God who arbitrarily decides to save some and damn others for all eternity, but a God who loves everyone and sends Christ to die for everyone, and who underwrites everyone’s responsibilities in the life and cross of his Son. Barth represents a significant Christological correction, if you will, of John Calvin. There’s much to appreciate about Calvin; I have to disagree with his understanding of election.

Calvin did teach that Christ died for the world. If you read his commentary on John 3:16, he says world means world, the world of all lost sinners. Christ died for all sinners. He taught two incompatible doctrines: 1) That Christ died for the world and 2) that God never planned to save the non-elect, that he only planned to save a few certain ones by name.

Later, the high-Calvinists (as they are sometimes called) tried to resolve that conflict in Calvin’s teaching by making him consistent. They revised his theology to say that God only planned to save certain ones and they’re the ones Jesus died for and none other. They were the least happy with Barth, with his Christological correction of Calvin. They wanted to retain the God of *will*, the God who was pure *will* and who can do whatever he wants, and if he only wants to save some, they should consider themselves lucky and the rest of them can go to hell because they deserve it anyway.

JMF: That doesn’t reflect the will of God as he’s presented in Christ. Christ presents a completely different picture of who the Father is and what the Father’s will is.

DT: Yes. He says, “He who has seen me has seen the Father” [John 14:9]. There isn’t any other god lurking behind the back of Jesus. The Bible says in Hebrews, “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our ancestors by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son whom he appointed heir of all things.” [Hebrews 1:1-2]

Jesus Christ is the Word of God made flesh. He is the full revelation of God. We don’t need to fear that there’s some bad news somewhere else. Jesus Christ and his unconditional love for the woman caught in adultery, his forgiveness of her in telling her to sin no more, and acceptance of a greedy

tax collector, showed that God is a God of unconditional love and mercy who welcomes every sinner into his embrace to receive his salvation already won for them. Barth represents a significant advance on the thinking of Calvin (even though there's much in Calvin that is rich, and I still appreciate and learn from).

JMF: Barth is sometimes called a universalist. Where does that come from, and what is it based on?

DT: A person could go on the internet or could read some theological dictionaries and learn there that Barth is a universalist. I can say to you with full confidence that that is simply not the case.

When I was a student at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, I was privileged to take a Barth seminar taught by Geoffrey Bromiley, the co-editor of the *Church Dogmatics*, who translated most of its volumes. He knew a little bit about Barth. I chose, for my paper in his class, the topic "Is Barth a Universalist?" I went chapter and verse. I looked through all the passages I could find in the *Dogmatics* where he speaks to the subject.

Barth was convinced of a universal *atonement*. Barth believed that Jesus Christ assumed the humanity of every single human being and that when he died, they died, and when he rose, they rose. He paid the price and won a completed salvation for them. There is something in the human heart that is used to thinking, "There's something I need to do. There's a five percent or a ten percent I need to contribute. Yes, Jesus did this wonderful work on the cross and he died for my sins, but that's not quite enough."

Often, the gospel will be preached by a well-meaning evangelist in this way. They'll describe in moving terms about all that God has done in Jesus, about how Christ lived an absolutely faithful and upright life, he endured the contradiction of sinners, was always upright, how he died a brutal death and how that is a substitute for our sins and he has paid it all. But having said this is what Jesus has done, then they will say, "now this is what you must do."

JMF: In order to "get in on it."

DT: You need to turn from sin, read your Bible, go to church. All these things are enjoined upon Christians, but they're not conditions of salvation. It's not as if I have to do certain things in order to be worthy of it. I'm included in Christ because 2000 years before I was born, he lived my life and died my death and rose in triumph. When he rose, I rose.

People who are used to thinking in those conditional terms don't understand it when Barth says that it's complete. People think, "If he says it's complete and that there's nothing that I have to do in order to earn salvation, then he's a universalist." But that's not what he's saying. He's simply saying

that we can't earn the salvation. It's a completed gift in Christ.

But he also says, in many places in his *Church Dogmatics*, that if we deny the Lord who bought us, that if we refuse to acknowledge that in Christ God has done it all, then we can be nailed to that denial for eternity. For Barth, the sinner in hell is the ultimate insane person. He's denying reality. He's denying that Christ died for him. It isn't that the price hasn't been paid—it's that he's unwilling to accept it.

An illustration has sometimes been used that helps clarify what Barth is saying here. There's a story (that I've been told is true) of a man who is convicted of murder, sentenced to life in prison. Some years later, the governor decided to commute his sentence, and so the governor issued a pardon. It said so-and-so is hereby pardoned for his crimes and may be set free from prison. This pardon was brought to this prisoner. It was already completed. There was nothing he could do to earn it, or win it—his name was already on it.

But that prisoner refused. He said, "No, I've done the crime and I'll do the time. I will not accept this pardon." Legally, he could not be forced to leave that prison even though the pardon was there for him. Hell is a monument to the person who says, "My will be done, not thine, O Lord." This is what Barth is saying.

After I finished that paper and turned it into Professor Bromiley, he wrote a note on it, that it indicated a careful research of Barth typically lacking in studies on the subject. Many people have not given Barth a fair hearing because they've heard some scare story, "Oh, he's a universalist."

JMF: Cornelius Van Til comes up, a quote from him or Francis Schaeffer, when you do a Google search.

DT: Yes. Van Til was very warm toward Barth, or maybe you could say hot behind the collar. He wrote a book titled *Christianity and Barthianism*, which gives us some idea of how he saw the two standing, even though Barth believed in the Trinity, the incarnation, the substitutionary atonement of Christ and the inspiration of Scriptures, and yet he's described as being someone who has departed completely from Christianity.

Van Til was so unhappy with Barth's rejection of double predestination and his emphasis on a universal atonement that he approached Barth, I would have to say, with a closed mind. Even though he had a fine mind, it was closed when it came to Barth.

JMF: Most of us suffer from that one way or another from time to time. (laughing)

DT: I know. I'm very open to my own ideas. (laughing)

JMF: Scripturally speaking, 1 John 2:1-2 talks about how Christ’s atonement reaches not just our sins, but the sins of the whole world. Colossians 1:20 talks about how God is in Christ reconciling all things.

DT: Yes. And 2 Corinthians 5:19, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.

JMF: These words are not particular. World actually means world. All things means all things.

DT: That’s right. Whenever you have to add italicized words to a verse in order to make it square with your theology, you’re in trouble. Whenever you have to say, “God so loved the world *of the elect* that he gave his only Son.” (laughing)

JMF: Even there, the definition of elect is rooted in Paul in Ephesians 1. Christ is the elect, and we all are elect in him.

DT: Right. God loves all of us equally. He cherishes each one of us equally. He, as it were, carries a picture of each of us in his wallet. Each one of us is dear to God. When he went to the cross, all our faces were on his heart. He is overwhelmed with joy so that the heavens rejoice when one sinner returns to him and receives the salvation already won for him.

JMF: Yeah. And [on the other hand] there’s a refusal that we’re free to make [**DT:** Yes.], like the fellow in prison—he refuses the pardon. Who can explain that? He likes it better in prison, it works better the way he is, or something. But for whatever reason, he refused it. Maybe his sense of justice. Who knows?

DT: Sometimes it’s that, but often it’s a sense of pride. “I’m not going to kneel before this man [Jesus] and confess that he did what I could not do. He died my death and he paid the price. I’m a dignified person. I don’t need to humble myself and accept Christ as Savior.”

But the Bible talks about someone trampling underfoot the covenant. It says how should we escape if we neglect so great salvation [Hebrews 10:29]. Paul, having given this wonderful statement of the universally completed atonement, says, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself,” and then he says, “We beseech you on behalf of God, be reconciled” [2 Corinthians 5:20]. In other words, you’re already reconciled, the war is over, but you need to be reconciled in your own heart. You need to receive that which is already completed for you. So to declare a completed atonement, to say yes, when Jesus hanging from the cross said, “It is finished,” does not mean universalism. It does not mean that we can say, “That’s fine, then, we can just go our merry way.” No. It means that we’re encouraged to believe, to receive, to accept.

JMF: The passage, “How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation,” I grew up hearing preached the opposite of its actual meaning. The idea was, How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation in the sense of neglecting to obey the rules and keep the rules that are going to give you this salvation, as opposed to how can we be saved if we neglect the very thing that has already saved us.

DT: Right. That would be, as you implied, turning that verse on its head, because it’s talking about this wonderful salvation where God in Christ has done it all. A true salvation, one of grace. Jesus hanging from the cross said, “It is finished.” He didn’t say, “We’re almost there, and if they just do their part, if they just keep enough of the laws...” He said, “It is finished.” It’s completed. It’s far beyond our poor power to add or detract. All we can do is humbly accept it and live a life, as John McLeod Campbell says, of joyful repentance.

JMF: A lot of times we’re given the impression that you are saved by grace and that’s the starting point, but then if you want to maintain that position, you need to obey well enough or it will be taken away from you, you’ll lose it.

DT: It’s as if God pulls the old switcheroo on us.

JMF: Yeah—bait and switch.

DT: At first it’s all grace. That’s the good news, but now here comes the bad news. Now you’re on probation for the rest of your life. Now you better do this and you better not do that, or else.

The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is consistent. He is always a God of mercy and always a God of grace. Grace is not just the beginning point of the Christian life. It’s the continuing basis and foundation for our life in Christ. The Christian life is not based in my attitudes or my actions. It’s based in the life of Christ.

The Bible describes a Christian as one who is “in Christ.” Paul says if someone is in Christ, he’s a new creation. He says, “You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ.” I’m hidden with Jesus. Paul says, “I’m seated in the heavenlies with Jesus” in Ephesians 2:6. He’s given us every blessing in Christ.

My life in God is grounded in Christ. He’s the basis for my acceptance before the Father, not my performance. This was the Galatian heresy, that you begin in grace and then you maintain it by works. This is not to say that works don’t matter, or that obedience doesn’t matter, that living a godly life and doing the will of God is irrelevant. It’s to say that it’s not a basis for keeping your salvation.

JMF: So how does that work together?

DT: The answer to that lies in Christ. 1 Corinthians 1:30 says he is our sanctification. That's an interesting statement, because the other point of view that you mentioned would have to deny that, and would have to say "No, I'm my sanctification. Jesus does justification. He's the one who gets me right with God, and then I do the sanctification. I make myself holy. I make myself good enough. I keep myself in salvation."

JMF: We even use the Holy Spirit in that mix by saying the Holy Spirit leads us, but if we don't follow, then we don't have sanctification.

DT: If we understand that Christ is our righteousness and he's our sanctification, I think this helps us. When I come to God in Christ, I'm accepted for who I am in Christ, not for who I am in Dan Thimell. Not because I've been so good or worthy or earnest or consistent, but what I had to offer him, as Bill Gaither said, was brokenness and strife, and he accepted that. I'm accepted *for who I am in Christ*. In Christ, I'm accepted by the Father. In Christ, I stand holy before the Father. I stand pure before the Father in his humanity.

Justification, we're sometimes told, it's "just as if" I had never sinned. A better definition is: to be justified is to be accepted for who I am *in Christ*. Because I was there in him. My humanity was carried by him throughout his life and in his death on the cross. I got this from James Torrance, and I'm unashamedly using that as a central point in my own belief. To be justified is to be accepted for who I am in Christ—and then to be sanctified is what? It's to *become* who I am in Christ.

The amazing good news of the gospel is that Jesus Christ is your future because he's your past. My whole life is enclosed in Christ. I'm hidden with Christ in God. I'm not tremblingly tiptoeing on the precipice every day of my Christian life. Rather, I'm living joyfully in Christ, realizing that sometimes I let him down, sometimes I struggle with the same old sins, sometimes I look inside me and see ugly attitudes, sometimes I say hurtful things, sometimes I'm not as faithful as I ought to be to my calling.

But when we are faithless, he is faithful, Paul says, for he cannot deny himself. I'm included in him, and he's faithful. One day I will stand before the Father and he will throw his arms around me and say, "Well done, good and faithful servant," because my life was included in Jesus.

JMF: When Paul says that this new life is hidden in Christ, he means what he says. It's hidden even from us. Most of the time, we don't see it. It reminds me of a passage Paul mentions: we look in the mirror, though we see a poor reflection. We don't see who we really are in Christ—we see what you were

just describing: a person who falls short, a person who is weak, the person who doesn't measure up. But Scripture assures us that Christ has already made us new. He has hidden that new person in Christ, waiting to be revealed at the time when we see him face to face and we see ourselves, really, as he's made us to be in him, face to face for the first time.

DT: Right. If we want to see who we are in Christ, we need to look at Christ. The mistake is, we look at ourselves, and then we get discouraged. This is what it means to walk by faith and not by sight. We're always tempted to walk by sight, and we look in that mirror, and we look a little too closely in that mirror. We get depressed and discouraged, and Satan whispers in our ear, "You're not worthy of the gospel. You're not worthy of being a minister, you're not worthy of being a Christian." And we're *not* worthy.

JMF: Right.

DT: When the prodigal son comes home to the father and says, "I'm no more worthy to be called your son," the father is saying, in effect, "Whoever said this was about worthiness? You never were worthy, but you're my boy, and I love you. I've always loved you, and my forgiveness is here for you." We don't walk by sight, but by faith in Christ. The secret for living the Christian life is to abide in Christ. To look in Christ, to gaze on Christ, to live our lives out of the resources we have in Christ. Paul says, "I am crucified with Christ. It may not look like it, but I am. I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, I do live. It's a vital, vibrant life, but the life I live, I live by the faith of the Son of God. I live by his faith, and he loved me and he gave himself for me. I'm his." [Galatians 2:20, expansive paraphrase]

109. CHRIST'S COMPLETED WORK

J. Michael Feazell: Why do most Christians seem to think that Christianity is primarily about right behavior?

DT: There are probably a number of reasons. One is that a lot of the preaching they're exposed to assumes that. A lot of preaching is works religion. It's advice on how to be a better parent, how to be a better father, how to be a more effective Christian, how to pray better. All these how-to sermons leave one to think that Christian life is mostly about performance.

God does care about the life we live. He does care about the kind of parenting that we engage in and these things. But when we put the focus on the *how*, we make it look like Christianity is a matter of performance. We should be focusing on *who*. We should be focusing on *who is Christ?* What has he done for us? How has he included us in his life? Then we should see that as a basis for the Christian life.

Another reason that most Christians are focusing on behavior is that we live in a performance-based society. Raises are based on performance. Relationships are based on performance. We're used to that. It's in the air we breathe, it's in the water we drink. It's natural for us to interpret the ways of God based on the ways of humanity.

JMF: There's a difference between salvation, which is by grace, and behavior, while it's important, is not what our salvation is based on.

DT: Right. The life we live is a *response* to grace—it's not a condition of grace. It's not, "If I live well enough, then God will be nice to me, he'll be good to me, great things will happen to me." But rather, because God in Christ has done it all and continues to present me acceptable to the Father through what he has done for me, that's the basis for my Christian life.

The behavior of the Christian life, the obedience that we're called to engage in, in the Christian life, can only be carried out through God's grace — only through the presence of Christ in my life can I live the life God calls me to live. It's appropriate to preach on living the Christian life so long as we're Christ-centered. Paul Scherer, the great Lutheran preacher, a generation ago told divinity students at Yale, "When you're preaching, wherever you are in your text, make it across country, as fast as ever you can, to Christ." I think we need more Christ-centered preaching.

If Christ is the Alpha and Omega, if he is the basis for our life in God, then why do we try to base it anywhere else in our preaching? If we offer all kinds of advice on how to live, and fail to ground it in Christ, we're preaching works religion.

JMF: What do we mean, by grounding it in Christ? What most Christians tend to get from the kind of preaching you're talking about is: "Christ is the role model, I need to measure up to the way Christ is"—so that is centered in Christ from that perspective. "How do we live like Christ did in order to be accepted by God?"

DT: That's where the model is centered in Christ but not really the way of living, the secret of living the Christian life. Then it becomes "he did his part, I do my part."

JMF: Right.

DT: In the Bible, Christ is not simply an example. He *is* an example; he has left an example that we should follow in his steps, Peter writes [1 Peter 2:21]. But Christ is also the basis for our life. He's also the one through whom I can live the Christian life. Christ is the author and the finisher of our faith. He's the one who begins our Christian life and he's the one who completes it. Paul says, "I'm crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me. And the life that I go on living in the flesh and my humanity, I live by the faith of the Son of God" [Galatians 2:20].

Christ is that living reality in my life. It's not like he's standing far off with his arms crossed, waiting to see if we're good enough for the next goodie to fall from heaven, but rather, he's my constant companion — the source of my life, the source of all the love I need, the source of the faith I need, the kindness I need, the faithfulness I need, the persistence I need.

JMF: We tend to think that if I am being faithful and I am being patient, then Christ is living in me. But if I'm not being that way, if I'm not measuring up to the standards of God, then Christ isn't living in me. So unless I'm measuring up, Christ isn't in me, and I should measure up better, in order for Christ to be living in me. What's wrong with that?

DT: The Christian life is not an on-again, off-again kind of thing like that. The Bible describes the Christian life as entering into eternal life — that he who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. We pass from death into life when we come to Christ. Eternal life is, by definition, one that is unbroken, that goes on forever.

God says, "There's nothing that can cause you to fall out of my wagon. You're mine. I'm committed to you, and the life I've given to you is for keeps. You're always going to be my boy, you're always going to be my daughter, and nothing can change that." The life we live is not an anxious life. It's not a nervous life or a fearful life. It should be a joyful life because God in Christ has done it all, and he's going to get me safely there, and whether I'm up or I'm down, God will continue to live in me.

In the traditional English wedding ceremony, marriage is described as a covenant, not a contract. A contract would be, “If you perform well enough, then I’ll perform well enough. You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours.” Many people, even though they go through the marriage ceremony and promise undying love, in fact, see it as a contract. When the other person pleases them less than someone else, when the other person lets them down or they get sick or become disabled, they say, “I didn’t love them anymore. I needed to find someone else to love.”

But in the marriage ceremony, we’re promising to love the person for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part. It’s an unconditional promise. How can we make that kind of unconditional promise to a fallible person, a weak person, a frail person?

How can we as weak, frail persons make that kind of promise? The apostle Paul tells us in Ephesians 5 when he says, “Love one another as Christ loved the church, who loved her and gave himself for her.” It’s the sacrificial love of Christ that is the basis for our life together in marriage. It’s through Christ that I can forgive when my spouse says something hurtful or does something that’s not right. I can be forgiving because God in Christ is forgiving through me. This model of a marriage is the same way that God treats us in all of life. He treats us unconditionally. He loves us for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health.

Most people know the great love chapter — 1 Corinthians 13. It says, “Love bears all things, hopes all things, believes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.” We often include it in the marriage ceremony. One time I read that passage in a wedding ceremony, and one of the groomsmen came up to me afterwards and said, “That was a really cool poem, where did you get it?” I said, “It was from the Bible, and it’s describing the love that God intends to be the basis for marriage.”

Having made these wonderful statements about love, we need to ask ourselves, “What does the Bible say about God?” The Bible says, “God is love.” He’s the only source of love. Since God is love, I can re-read 1 Corinthians 13 and say, “God hopes all things, believes all things, endures all things. God’s love never ends.” That’s the basis for the Christian life — an enduring love that persists despite my weakness, my failings. Sometimes I don’t feel particularly pious, sometimes I don’t feel as devoted to God, sometimes I do things that let him down, that I’m embarrassed about, but God continues to persist in his forgiving love, and continues to say, “You’re mine, I married you forever, this is for keeps.”

JMF: So the gospel is about a relationship — the good news is who God has made you to be in Christ, not good news about a potential bonus if you

meet certain requirements.

DT: Right. Christ completed that work. He said from the cross, “It is finished.” We are offered a relationship based on what Christ has already done. James Torrance used to say, “Faith is the dawning awareness that God in Christ has done it all. He’s completed it. He’s lived our life and died our death and risen in triumph, and I was there in him when he lived and died and rose again.” It’s a completed gift. He offers me a relationship based on his completed work. My life in God is a relationship.

There’s a typical pattern in the letters of Paul. Paul moves always from grace in Christ to responsibilities in Christ. The first half of his letters talk about the wonderful things that God has done in Christ. So you have in Ephesians, “We’re predestined in Christ, we’re seated in the heavenlies with Christ, God has given us every spiritual blessing in Christ.” It’s already ours in Christ. No one can ever take that inheritance from us.

Then he moves on to saying, “Husbands, love your wives. Bosses, watch out for your workers, take care of your workers.” There are responsibilities that flow from that, but I carry those out through my life in Christ — not in order to *get* it, but because I *have* it.

JMF: He’s reminding us, “Here’s who you are in Christ — because you are a child of God, because you are in Christ — therefore act like it.” He never says, “Act this way and then God will do such and such for you.” It’s always, “Here’s who you are, so act like that, behave like that.”

DT: Right.

JMF: The behavior doesn’t change or affect who you already are in Christ by what Christ has already done.

DT: Right. A good loving parent may have a child who disappoints her and at times does things that she would not want her to do, which bring great pain to her heart, but she says, “I still love him. He’s still my son.” God is like that, only far more so. God is the source of true unconditional love that never ends. Sometimes a parent will finally, after repeated disappointments, give up and throw in the towel. But God never does. The Bible says, “Nothing shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Who is he that condemns? Christ has already done it all” [Romans 8].

JMF: The parable of the prodigal son is an excellent illustration of that. Within the story, the son has done...you can hardly think of worse things in that culture to do. He’s repudiated his father’s fatherhood...

DT: That’s right – he said, “I can’t wait till you die, give me the money now.” That’s pretty crass.

JMF: And he’s blown the inheritance... he’s wasted everything.

DT: Right. On terrible living.

JMF: But the father never says, “You’re not my son anymore.” Even though the kid, when he prepares his little speech, he in effect is saying, “I know I’m not your son anymore. I just want to be one of the servants so I can get something to eat.” He’s still selfishly looking out for an angle. He’s not even repentant in that sense — he’s looking for an angle. “Father, I have sinned, but...” His take on that is, “Just let me be one of the servants so I can get a meal.” The father doesn’t even listen to his speech.

DT: Right. He says, “It’s not about performance. It’s not about what you can do, because you can’t do it.”

JMF: It’s about who you are, because that’s who you are.

DT: “This my son was lost and now he’s found.” “This my son.” He’s always been my son, you’re still my son, we’re going to throw a party because it never was about your worthiness or your performance.

We can picture him...he’s off in the far country breaking his father’s heart every day by the way he’s living. We can picture the father every day going out on the porch and scanning the horizon, seeing if that’s the day his boy is coming home, because he’s never stopped loving him, never stopped having a place for him in his heart.

JMF: Yet, all of us can identify with the older brother who says, “This is the most unfair dumb thing in the world.”

DT: Right.

JMF: And we can hardly identify with the younger son.

DT: That’s because we’re far more aware of the sins and failings of those around us, than we are of our own.

JMF: Yeah.

DT: We’re experts in the faults of those around us.

JMF: If we are experts in our own, we’re so depressed we can’t believe that something like that could be true.

DT: Right. In both cases, whether we’re looking at others or looking at ourselves, we should be looking at Christ. That’s the problem.

JMF: Which is why Christ told the parable.

DT: Exactly. Jesus said one day,

Two people went to the temple to pray, and the one person prayed, “Lord I’m really cool. I thank you that I’m not like this wretched sinner over here. You know, I’ve always kept the rules.” And the other man said, “Lord, I’m a sinner. I have blown it. I have done terrible things, and Lord be merciful to me, a sinner. I have nothing to offer you, I just ask you for mercy.” [Luke 18]

Jesus interpreted that story. He said that the second man, not the first, went home right with God. It wasn't performance. It was receiving mercy.

JMF: Yeah. Robert Capon talks about that in his book about parables. He says the problem is that we love that parable and we say that's beautiful, I like that. But we don't want the forgiven admitted sinner to come back the following week with the same prayer. We want him to come back with the other prayer that now says, "I've been doing all the right things."

DT: Yep. But we never graduate beyond our need for grace. We never stop needing God's mercy. We live our lives by his mercy and by his grace, by the life of Christ in us.

JMF: We feel guilty doing that. Because, after all, *we* wouldn't forgive someone, and we don't forgive ourselves, for doing the same thing over and over.

DT: Right. There's a limit. We've had it, you know? That's the way we treat other people. We might be very understanding and forgiving for many, many times, but there comes a point where that line is crossed, and we give up. But when Jesus compares humans and God, he'd say, "If you, being human, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven..." God's love is far greater, it's much more than ours. So much more, that it's unconditional. The Bible says the gifts and the calling of God are without repentance. He never takes them back.

JMF: Aren't we afraid to rest in that? We've sinned, we know it, we're full of guilt, shame, doubt, frustration, and anxiety, and we are afraid to say, "This is already taken care of. I don't need to dwell on this and worry about it... I need to move on and trust in and rest in the grace and forgiveness of God and in my relationship with him, which is separate from the consequences of what I might have done as far as having to 'reap what I have sown' in the sense of sin hurts."

DT: There are consequences, and God doesn't always protect us from the consequences of our actions. If we drive drunk, we may cause an accident, and that accident won't be reversed the minute that we're sorry. There are still those consequences, but God has forgiven us.

JMF: We have to learn that salvation is different from the natural consequences of our sins. We're going to experience those, but we don't need to fear that God has dumped us, given up on us, forsaken us, and that our salvation is in jeopardy because of the sin. That's where we mix the two...

DT: I think we're always projecting our human experience onto God and thinking that he is like people we know. And just as other people finally lose their temper and lose their patience...

JMF: And especially me.

DT: Right, especially myself. God must be like that. We've also learned that if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Beware of the Bernie Madoffs who promise you an enormous return on your money. So if somebody comes along and says, "God will love you no matter what. God's mercy is there for you — no matter what you have done or do, it is still there for you," we say, "Wait a minute. You're feeding me a lie. It sounds astonishing, it's scandalous."

Paul described the gospel as a scandal, a stumbling block. It was a scandal to both Jews and Greeks for different reasons. The gospel surprises us, collides with our common-sense understanding of things. Often, we're far more aware of our failings than we are of the goodness of God, far more aware of our sins than we are of his mercy. So we need to look away from ourselves to Jesus.

It's remarkable, when you look at the time when Christ was arrested and Judas and Peter both, in essence, committed the same sin — they both betrayed Jesus within hours of each other. One of them despaired and took his own life and the other, Peter, returned to the Lord and received his mercy. There was no basis for Peter to be forgiven — it was blatant what he did. He didn't deserve another chance, he even swore, saying, "I've never met him, I've never known that man," when he was asked "surely he was with that Galilean." But Jesus loved him. He never gave up on Peter. He never gives up on you or me.

When bad things happen

JMF: When something bad happens, we tend to think, "This is evidence that God is punishing me for my failure to measure up. He's against me and turned his face from me, and what hope do I have, because obviously I'm under his curse?" Sometimes that's what someone at church tells you — there is no causeless curse, you know.

DT: God's getting you. He's getting even with you here.

JMF: Right.

DT: Sometimes we have that kind of a God, who's a mean ogre with a big stick or something. It's because we're so focused on our own sin that we fail to look at God through the eyes of Christ. We fail to look at him through Christ. We substitute another god for the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

JMF: So what do we do with the bad things that happen to us? How do we cope with that in terms of who we are in Christ?

DT: That’s a crucial question, because as Jesus said, “In this world you have tribulation.” Sometimes we’ve been so interested to get people to accept Christianity or to come to Christ that we make promises that the gospel does not promise. “Come to Jesus and all your problems will be solved.” “Come to Jesus and you’ll never have a difficulty. He’ll take care of everything. You’ll never have a problem, never have an adversity, never have a sickness.”

But this is not true. Paul, the greatest missionary this world has ever seen, the author of the most books of the New Testament, said that he had a terrible experience, a painful experience — there was this jagged thorn in his flesh and he kept praying to God, “Take it away.” God said, “No, my grace is sufficient for you, for my grace is made perfect in weakness.” Sometimes God says that to us. He says, “yes, you’ve experienced brokenness, you’re experiencing a terrible thing that’s happening to you in your life and you are asking, ‘God, just take it away from me.’” But God says, “That’s not my plan.”

In my own life, my late wife, Adrienne, was battling cancer. She was a godly woman, a humble Christ-centered person. When we found out she had cancer, we did everything we could. We took her to the doctors, we tried medical treatment, but there was no treatment for her cancer. We prayed, knowing that God had healed many people and that there are verses in Scripture urging us to pray to God if we’re sick and ask for healing. So we prayed over and over again for healing.

In the course of my wife’s illness, she had to have surgery seeking to remove that cancer, and they removed one of her eyes. The hope was that that would contain the cancer, but it didn’t. Later, it was clear to the doctors that there was no cure for her.

One day when I was praying, asking for healing, I didn’t hear an audible voice, but I heard an inner voice that I believed was the Lord speaking to me saying, “Dan, you’ve asked for healing over and over again for her.” He says, “But you’ve never asked what is my purpose in all of this. I want you to know, I could heal this cancer now, but she would continue to be sightless in one eye, she would continue to be less than whole in this life. Or I could heal her completely. And I’m going to heal her completely.”

That wasn’t what I wanted to hear. But God has a mercy that sometimes is a severe mercy. Sometimes it involves taking us through pain, through difficult experiences. God can deepen our love for him, deepen our compassion for others, and deepen our understanding of life when we walk through these painful experiences with Jesus, who continues to have nail-scarred hands.

The humanity of Jesus not only means that I'm included in Christ's life now, and that he represents me to the Father and all those good things. It also means he continues to bear our scarred humanity. Jesus, who appears to the disciples after he rose again, still had scars in his hands. My Jesus has scars. He tells Thomas, who doubted that Jesus had really risen again, "Behold the nail prints in my hands." In other words, you'll know me by my scars.

Jesus understands. God understands our pain. He understands our difficulties. He knows about our scars. He walks through those scarring episodes of life with us, brings us comfort, brings us mercy, but doesn't always give us that detour. God doesn't guarantee us an untroubled passage from here to heaven, only a safe arrival.

110. THE TRINITY, UNITED WITH HUMANITY

J. Michael Feazell: The doctrine of the Trinity is something that, for many Christians, is an abstract thing... it's "I don't know much about it, and what difference does it make?" What difference *does* it make?

DT: The Trinity is tremendously relevant to everyday life. It's true that some people, because it seems abstract or puzzling, can't get their minds around it and so they say it's an article of faith, and leave it at that. A member of my congregation that I served in southern California was raised in a Unitarian church, where they don't believe in the deity of Christ or of the Holy Spirit — there's simply God out there who made everything. But once she discovered the joy of a Trinitarian understanding of God, she said to me, "God seems so much more personal to me now."

The doctrine of the Trinity tells us that Jesus Christ is not an *emissary* of God — he's God himself, condescending to step into our life, take our humanity upon himself, to experience our pain, struggles, temptations, and challenges. Through it all he was faithful to his Father, faithful to his purposes, all the way to dying and rising again for us. So the first thing the Trinity does, is it makes God personal to us.

Another key aspect of the Trinity is that the Trinity preserves for us an understanding of God as *love*. If God is a solitary being for all eternity and then created a world, how can we understand that God would be loving? We can understand that he might decide to treat us in a way that we might think is nice, but can God know what is love, if he's a solitary being? But the Bible says that the Father loves the Son, and the Son loves the Father. There's a relationship of love, of union and communion between God the Father and God the Son that has been going on since all eternity past. The Holy Spirit participates in this tri-unity of love with the Father, the Son, and the Spirit experience. The Trinity is the foundation for the doctrine of the love of God.

It's also important for the knowledge of God. If God had not come to us as a human, in Christ, then how do we know what God is like? Jesus may have said some inspiring things about God which we all like, but how do we know he's right? Maybe someone else would come along with a different picture of God, and who's to say? But if Jesus is God himself come among us to open his heart to us, then God becomes personal, touchable, believable. So the Trinity is a very practical teaching.

Sometimes we get caught up in concepts that don't help us. A good way to talk about the Trinity is as a communion of three persons — the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who all share the same reality from all eternity.

They're inseparable: you never have one without the other two. It's a communion of three persons — the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. It's not as if God was two persons and then at Christmas suddenly God morphs into three. God always was three, and God the Son becomes man the first Christmas.

JMF: For most people, you can understand Father, Son, and Spirit. But the idea that Father, Son, and Spirit are one God is troubling. How can people be helped with that?

DT: We know they are one because it's declared many times in Scripture. Jesus said, "I and the Father are one. He who has seen me has seen the Father." He was declaring a one-ness between himself and the Father. How can they be one? One powerful teaching that the church has had for many centuries goes back to the Cappadocian divines—the doctrine of *perichoresis*. *Perichoresis* is saying that the three persons of the Trinity interpenetrate each other. They mutually indwell each other.

This isn't just some neat idea that some theologian thought up in an ivory tower one day. Jesus said, "The Father dwells in me and I dwell in the Father." There's a mutual indwelling, and when we understand that the Father, Son, and the Spirit are spiritual or spirits, we can see how they could interpenetrate each other, or mutually indwell each other. In this way, among other things, you not only have the oneness, they all interpenetrate the same reality, but we also can understand how when we encounter one person of the Trinity, God the Father, or God the Son, or God the Holy Spirit, we're really up against all three. You can't separate them.

JMF: There's also the term "hypostatic union." How does that fit with who Christ is and who we are in him?

DT: The hypostatic union refers to the union of God with humanity in the Incarnation. Some people think of Jesus as being God in a man, and they explain the puzzle of the incarnation of Jesus being God and man by saying, "The Spirit of God came and descended on Jesus, and that's the incarnation." That is *not* the incarnation. We Christians believe, based on Scripture, that God dwells in *us*, but we're not an Incarnation, we're not the Incarnation. The Incarnation was a union of the person of the Word, Jesus (as we call him since his life on earth), with humanity.

This is an amazing idea — that God united himself with the human race. There are some challenges to that, because we don't normally think of ourselves as being one bundle of humanity. We tend to think of, I am an individual, you're an individual, you have your problems, I have mine. We think of ourselves as independent of one another, as autonomous actors. There is a sense of individual identity and individual responsibility, but the Bible also sees us as being part of one bundle of humanity so that what affects

one affects all. The Bible says about the sin of Adam, “One died, therefore all died.”

When Christ united himself with humanity, he didn’t unite himself with a particular man who lived in Judea long ago—he united himself with the humanity of the entire human race. That’s why sometimes we refer to this doctrine as “the all-inclusive humanity,” because he includes all of us in his humanity, so that his representation of us is not just a legal one, where we agree to let him represent us, perhaps, or God agrees to treat him as if he is standing in for us, but he includes us in himself, so that what happens to him happens to us, so that he has lived our life, but we were there in him. He’s died our death, but when he died, we died. When he rose, we rose.

This is why Paul writes to the church in Colossians chapter 3: “Set your sight on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God, for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” You have died. Christ died long ago, but when he died, you died. We’re included in his humanity.

JMF: If we’re already in union with Christ, he’s already drawn us into himself, and as part of humanity, we’re seated with Christ at the right hand of the Father, our life is hidden with him and so on. How does *repentance* work with that? If we’re already included with Christ, where does repentance come in, and what is its role in the context of that relationship?

DT: We often think of repentance as being a condition of grace. We sometimes say, for example, “That person did something mean to me, and I’m not going to forgive him unless he’s sorry and unless he changes.” That’s the way we’re used to treating other people. But the amazing news of the gospel is that God doesn’t say, “After you repent, after you change, then I’ll forgive you.”

If we could transform ourselves, if we could turn over a new leaf, then Christ didn’t need to come — he should have just come to earth to congratulate us. In fact, we’re not able to repent unless he comes in and transforms us. On one hand, Christ already lived our life, he took us up into his life, but on the other hand, we’re now called to respond to the gospel. We’re called to say *yes*. We’re called to say, “I confess Christ died for me. I confess: when he died, I died.” Repentance is a lifelong process of becoming who I already am in Christ. Repentance, rather than being a condition of grace, is a response to it.

JMF: We often talk about participation in the life of Christ. How does that work?

DT: Participation is a relational term. It’s talking about living in a relationship with Christ. The Bible records that “God created man, male and female, created he them.” Adam and Eve’s being as humans was as a being-

in-relation. They were created as male-and-female, not just as a male over here and a female over there, but as persons in relation.

We're relational beings. God is a relational being. God is a God of relationships as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We're invited to participate, to live in a relationship with One who has already included us in himself in his life, death, and resurrection. We're called to say *yes*, we're called to believe, and yet paradoxically, our believing is a gift of God. Our believing is a sharing in the faith of Jesus. "The life I live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." [Galatians 2:20]

JMF: When we talk about faith being a gift of God, is it a gift that he gives to only some people? Not everybody believes, so is it a gift he just gives to some, or is it a gift he gives to all, and they don't accept the believing or the faith? How does that work?

DT: This is one of the oldest questions that the Christian church has discussed — and debated for many centuries. Some have said, "God decides who gets the gift of faith, and if you're predestined to believe, you'll believe, and that's that." Others have said. "No, God doesn't have anything to say in it. All he does is lay the offer out, and then we decide whether to believe." Both sides have an element of truth, and they're both mistaken.

It is true that faith is a gift of God. It's God's grace. It's not because I was pious enough or good enough to make the right decision, make the right move, have the right attitude to God. It's also not that God pushed certain buttons so that some people believe and become Christians, and the others don't.

If I believe, it is because God has granted me faith, but I need to embrace the faith that he offers me. There's no way around that. If I become a Christian, it is because God draws me. The Bible says, "No one comes to me unless the Father draws him." So if I come to faith in Christ, it's because the Father drew me. He wooed me. Augustine says, "God is the infallible seducer." He draws us to himself. I became a Christian when I was seven years old. I went for it and confessed Christ as my Savior. But it was the Holy Spirit who drew me to God at that time.

What about those who don't believe? If God gives faith, and other people don't believe, God must not have given them faith. At that point we have to say, "No, that's not quite right." The Bible has passages that make clear that there still is the responsibility to believe, to say yes. For example, in 2 Corinthians 5 when Paul says, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." On one hand, that's complete — grace is already there for us. We're already reconciled, in that sense, by what Christ has done. But in the next verse he says, "Therefore, we beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled

to God.” So we are called to be reconciled. We’re summoned to believe. We’re summoned to say yes. We’re summoned to take up our crosses and follow him.

The Bible holds us accountable. It says, “How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?” And, “He who believes in the Son of God has eternal life and he who believes not does not have eternal life” in John 3. So I summarize that question about how some believe, and some not, by saying that in the Bible, if I believe, blame God, if I don’t believe, blame me. If it looks like I’m trying to have my cake and eat it too, that’s simply the witness of Scripture.

JMF: Some people say that it’s dangerous to put too much emphasis on grace, and that the primary emphasis needs to be on godly living, and grace is a part of that. But if you put too much emphasis on grace, then it’s dangerous, and you’ll fall into antinomianism. There seems to be a great fear of that among some people.

I’ve seen talk shows where there are people representing various streams of Christianity, and some have said, “If we take away hell as a means of scaring people into doing the right thing, then everything will fall apart. We’ve got to have some kind of a hammer to hold over people’s heads to make them behave right,” as though that’s the primary issue. [They think that if] you get carried away with all this grace talk, everybody’s going to run amuck and do what’s right in their own eyes.

DT: It’s well-meant as a genuine pastoral concern, that whatever is preached should have a good impact on people’s lives. I understand that. At the same time, I get concerned when we make pragmatic concerns our primary criterion. We’re looking for “what works.” We want to have leverage to use on people so we can get the results we want. We’ll preach hellfire to scare people into living the right life so they don’t do bad things.

The Bible does speak about last judgment. It speaks about hell as being the destiny of those who reject Christ. But when we use that lever and say “If you step out of line you’ll go to hell,” we not only are contradicting the gospel (which declares that it’s by grace that we’re saved, not by works), we’re also damaging people’s spiritual lives by creating a mean God who is not a God you’d want to draw near, but an angry God with fierce streaks on his face who detests the individual. The pastoral consequences of that are bad.

Sometimes we want to use levers with people to try to raise money for the church. We’ll say, “If you give, then God will give you even more money back. If you give \$100, God will give \$1000. If you give \$200, he’ll give a million, and so forth.” And it seems to work! People say, “That would be great! I’ve got some financial difficulty. I’ll give.” But this makes God into

more of a Coke machine than a loving Father — a God who you have to make deals with — a God that you have to connive with financially.

But God loves to give good gifts to his children. We don't have anything to offer him. He has all things already. When we get concerned, when we use pragmatic concerns to determine theology, we always end up damaging the people's relationship with God, damaging their understanding of God. It makes them draw further away from God rather than be closer to him.

JMF: In the Old Testament, there are examples of where Israel disobeys and God sends a plague or a punishment on them. How are we to understand that in terms of the New Testament, when we find Christ presenting God as full of grace, mercy, and compassion? When we find something bad happening in our lives, we look at the Old Testament and we think "God is sending this punishment on me because I've sinned." How are we to look at that?

DT: You'd get different answers if you asked various people. This is an area that we don't hear about much nowadays, but to my mind the Bible speaks of not a spectator God, but an active God — a God who is involved in life. The Bible says, "In all things God works for good to those who love him." God is working in all things. God was working in the thorn in the flesh that he sent to Paul. Calvin explained that by saying that there are two causes behind things that happen, there's a divine cause, and then there could be what he calls a secondary cause.

Some individual might go to harm someone and attack that person. God didn't push a button and tell that person, "Go and attack that person." But God is nevertheless working in that event to bring about good. He's not stumped by history, he's not stumped by what evil people try to do. The classic example of that is the cross, where the Bible makes clear that Jesus was crucified by the set foreknowledge and purpose of God. Evil men perpetrated it, and they're held accountable. God didn't push a button and tell them to murder Jesus. But God, in his providence, takes the worst thing that could happen and turns it into the best thing that could happen. The execution of the innocent Son of God is turned into our eternal salvation.

When bad things happen, God is working for our good. The Bible says, "Whom the Lord loves, he chastens." We need to ask God to give us a teachable heart when we're going through a difficult time. We can ask for help, we can ask for deliverance, but we can also ask, "Lord, what are you trying to show me through this?"

JMF: Are you working on any projects right now that we can look forward to?

DT: I've been working on a book on our life in Christ. That's been a

tremendously exciting topic for me, because all of our lives as Christians are taken up into life of Christ, and I want people to see what a difference that makes for their marriage, what a difference it makes for their life before God as they're trying to grow in godliness, what a difference it makes for the things we're called to do as Christians — to see that in all things we're called to abide in Christ and draw from the life of Christ in all that we do.

The Bible says, “Christ in you is the hope of glory.” Paul says, “I can do all things through Christ.” One Christian was telling a friend that this was his life’s motto — “I can do all things through Christ.” The friend looked at him, scowled, and said, “You mean you can’t do anything without Jesus?” He said, “Yeah, I can go out and make a big mess of things and stumble around,” he says, “but if I want to do something worthwhile in life, I need to do it through Christ.” I’m working on that as a project.

JMF: Many people look at the concept of “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” as being from the perspective of “I will ask Christ to help me with everything I do,” and help me do this, help me do that. As long as I’m asking Christ to help me do everything, then I am participating with Christ, I’m doing all things through Christ who strengthens me. But if I don’t pray that and I’m not thinking about that, then I’m not living in Christ — so therefore you need to be praying the way I’m praying, otherwise Christ isn’t in your life.

DT: That turns a good promise of Scripture into a formula. I don’t think that’s the point. We have died. Our life is hidden with Christ in God. I am included in Christ, and I can’t extract myself from that union. I am intertwined with the life of Christ in my life.

JMF: That’s the foundation of our hope, isn’t it? If any point rested on how well we do something and it wasn’t entirely by the grace of God (what he’s already done and made of us in Christ), then that’s the point where we’ll fall short, and it will all fall apart.

DT: Right. I also think that we need to be careful that we don’t bring in Jesus as a means to our ends. You know, I can do all things through Christ, so I’m going to ask Jesus to help me with my plan or my project. We need to open ourselves to the Lord and ask, “What are *you* trying to do in my life?” Then we need to depend on him to help us accomplish *his* purposes.

JMF: Yeah. It’s like praying, “Lord, please make the Cubs win.”

DT: Exactly. Let me hit a home run.

JMF: Let the slot machine hit the jackpot.

DT: Exactly.

JMF: As we finish up, what is something that you would most want people to know about God?

DT: I would want them to know that in Christ, God is closer to them than the air they breathe, and that God loves you tenderly, unconditionally, and he is ready right now, right where you are, to take you to a new level in your life. He's already forgiven you, he invites you to trust in his forgiveness, he's already secured for you a place in heaven. Believe it. Live your life out of Christ and spend your journey with Jesus — enjoy and entrust knowing that God will never, ever let you down.

JMF: That makes me have to ask this — What if I'm a rat? How do I cope with my rat-ness in light of what you just said?

DT: If you're a rat, you're a part of a rat race, because all of us have some rattiness to us. [Oliver] Cromwell once was having someone paint a picture of himself, and the painter was painting a rather idealized portrait. Cromwell stopped the artist and said, "Paint me warts and all." The Bible paints us warts and all. God knows those flaws. He knows flaws that you and I have, that we don't even realize, and he still cherishes us. He loves us dearly, like a loving father carries a picture of his son in his wallet. God, as it were, carries a picture of us in his wallet. He knows all about those flaws, and he still loves us and cherishes us infinitely.

JMF: That's what makes the gospel good news. Not the hope that maybe someday I'll measure up to some kind of perfection, but the fact of what Christ has already done.

DT: You're already loveable, and he wants to transform you into the image of Christ, and if it takes 1000 years, that's fine. When he's through transforming you into the image of Christ, Christian, he won't love you any more than he does right now.

111. GRACE LEADS TO GODLY LIVING

J. Michael Fezell: Professor Torrance, thank you for agreeing to meet with us.

Alan Torrance: It's a pleasure to be here, Mike. Thanks for coming.

JMF: We want to begin by asking about a word that I'm sure my grandmother would not know what it means, but she knows what it's about. Could you talk about the Incarnation, and why it's important for Christians?

AT: The Incarnation concerns the heart of Christian faith. If I didn't believe the Incarnation, I'd pack up my bags, resign my job, and go and do something useful. The Incarnation affirms that God is with us as the person of Jesus Christ. It's fundamental to the knowledge of God. In the person of Christ we have God disclosing God's own being to us. But it's not just that in Christ God comes to us as God. God comes to us as *man*, and taking to himself a human-knowing of the Father.

When we affirm the Incarnation, we also immediately affirm the Trinity, because the knowledge that's given to us in Christ is a human knowledge of the Father, and Jesus knows the Father in the Spirit. We are taken by that same Spirit to share in Jesus' knowledge of the Father. But that's not just a human knowledge of the Father—we've been taken into the knowledge of a Father that belongs to the eternal Son, in and through the incarnate Jesus.

Without the Incarnation, we don't have anything that begins to resemble a full and final and adequate knowledge of God. But it's not just the knowledge of God that the Incarnation's vitally important. The doctrine of salvation is contingent, is dependent, upon the doctrine of the Incarnation.

What is the Christian doctrine of salvation? The key to understanding what salvation's about is the Greek words that Paul uses. Paul uses the word *apolutrosis*, meaning redemption, and the key to that is three Hebrew concepts which that Greek word translates in the Greek translation of the Hebrew



Bible.

The first is *padah*, meaning God delivers us from bondage. It's a word that is used of God's deliverance in Israel from Egypt. In salvation, God is delivering us from bondage, the bondage of sin, the tyranny of sin, the disease

that we cannot overcome in and of ourselves. God does that in the Incarnation. God comes in Christ to deliver us from bondage. That's the first key metaphor.

The second: God comes to us and deals with the *costliness* of sin. There's another Hebrew word, *kipper* or *kofer*, that is also translated by a form of the word Paul uses for redemption, and that concerns the sacrificial offerings. On the Day of Atonement, the priest would take a lamb, and he would have [the names of] all the tribes of Israel along his coat...he'd lay his hands on the lamb, declare the sin of Israel—in other words, all of Israel's sin is being laid on that lamb. Then the life of the lamb would be taken and Israel would see the life of that lamb, the costliness of its sin being taken from them. Or, a scapegoat. He'd lay his hands on a goat and declare the sins of Israel, hit it on the backside, and all of Israel in the celebration of worship would watch the goat run off into the wilderness carrying away its sin. So, the second metaphor, in the Incarnation, God comes as human to deal with the costliness of sin and carry our sin away from us.

The third metaphor is *go'el*, the kinsman redeemer. This is perhaps the most important. There's a provision under the covenant where if a family lost its father, or a woman lost her husband, then a kinsman, a relative, would come and marry that woman and restore that woman to an inheritance that she would otherwise lose. Or, if a farmer falls into debt and loses his farm, the kinsman member...perhaps that man's brother... of that family would come and restore that person to the inheritance that was lost. Again, the Incarnation concerns God coming as a human to restore us the inheritance that was lost in Adam.

All three metaphors are intertwined. So in the Incarnation, we have God coming to deliver us from sin and from guilt, most importantly. People think of guilt as a good thing. Well, guilt oppresses. It can make us ashamed of being in the presence of God. Guilt eclipses God. It can become a barrier between us and God. In the Incarnation, God comes to deliver us from guilt, and he comes as our kinsman redeemer, blood of our blood, flesh of our flesh, to restore us to an inheritance that was lost. What was Adam's inheritance? Communion with God.

All this takes place in the Spirit. We have not just the doctrine of the Incarnation—the doctrine of the Incarnation unfolds properly when we understand the doctrine of the Trinity, because everything Christ does is in the Spirit, bringing humanity by the Spirit, through the Spirit, into communion with the Father, to share in that eternal communion which is constitutive of the being of God, which defines the being of God. God is

eternally Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That communion of love is shared with the world in the person of Jesus Christ. Sinful, alienated, diseased humanity is taken and re-created and given to participate in that eternal communion of love.

A lot of people think of God as an individual voyeur God, who sits in a rocking chair at some distance watching the world and condemning all that goes on. A lot of liberal theology is like that. That's why liberal theology is often full of exhortations and condemnations, bullying us into social action of some kind or another. That is a pauper's understanding of God.

The God of the heart of the Christian faith is a God whose being is eternally one of love and communion. A self-contained individual isn't capable of love. Without the doctrine of the Trinity, it wouldn't make sense to talk about the love of God. 1 John suggests God is love. That is required to be understood in Trinitarian terms because there's an eternal triune communion of loving.

I mentioned knowledge of God. The Incarnation opens out knowledge of God by getting us to share in Christ's human knowing of the Father, which at the same time is the eternal Son's knowledge of the Father. No one knows the Father save the Son and those to whom he reveals him.

It's also incredibly important for worship. I'm sure you're a more holy man than I am, but sometimes on Sunday morning I turn up in church and I don't feel in the mood to worship. I ought to, but for whatever reason, maybe I'm worried about my work or family, I've got concerns. You go into church and you're going to try to find the energy to pray, sing hymns, and worship. In charismatic churches, they often poof up the energy with lots of choruses and so on.

One of the great answers to this problem is to remember what worship is. Worship is the gift of participating in the incarnate Son's eternal communion with the Father. Before we go into the church, the worship's already going on. The Son is adoring the Father. The Priest, the sole Priest of our confession, is providing that everlasting worship in our place and on our behalf in the Spirit. When we enter into the church... (it doesn't just happen at church, it happens at home)...when we worship, we're not starting something that wasn't previously going on. We've been taken by the Spirit to share in what is going on and to participate in the prayer that the High Priest is offering for me and for my family, concerning my work-related problems, et cetera. The praise and rejoicing that goes on in the mind of Christ I've been given to participate in by the Spirit.

JMF: The fact that it is in the Spirit would seem to indicate that we don't

see it. There's not evidence to us that it's going on, except that the word of God says so. Is that where faith comes in, to believe the word of God that it's true, regardless of the fact that we may not see it or feel it?

AT: Precisely. Faith is a form of sight. It's a form of healing as well. Remember when Simon made that confession about the Christ? Jesus said, "Flesh and blood hasn't revealed that to you, but your Father who is in heaven." Faith is about being given the eyes to see and the ears to hear, to recognize what we otherwise wouldn't see. Sometimes I face struggles because sometimes we begin to doubt when we trust our own physical hearing and seeing. The Spirit gives us the conviction, the recognition of what's going on.

Two years ago my wife died of cancer, and she was ill for three and a half years until she died. It was a very difficult time. I've got four boys; it was a difficult time for the family. During that period, sometimes it was difficult to understand and see purpose in all of this. We prayed for her to be healed, and she wasn't healed. There were times when it was a challenge not to give up and find oneself disoriented.

Again, a return to the Incarnation, because this is so pertinent to faith. The heart of the Incarnation is the doctrine that Christ knows our weaknesses, takes our questions, our doubts to himself, ("My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?") and identifies with us in our suffering. By the Spirit we are united with that. We don't float free of the cares of this world. We are given to recognize the One who stands with us in the concerns of this world, who knows our weaknesses, our doubting, our blindness, who in every respect is as tempted as we are and knows our struggles. He knows even our sense of god-forsakenness at times, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

One of the most moving things that I experienced when Jane was dying in the final weeks of that awful period was the Spirit's giving one the sense that God's solidarity with one, was present with us in and through this grief, that God is Immanuel, God with us.

A lot of people ask the *why* questions. If you're Christians, why is God not healing Jane? Even if they didn't ask it verbally, you tended to feel that people were thinking that. But far more important than the *why* question is the *where* question. I don't know *why* God allowed Jane to die of cancer, but I know the answer to the *where* question. Where was God in and through that process? He was right with us in that grief, sustaining myself and my family and giving us the eyes to see and recognize his presence in and through that misery.

When we're talking about faith, we are simultaneously talking about the Spirit. It's easy for us to make faith become a work. Suddenly Alan Torrance, in a heroic way, has faith. No, faith is about the work of the Spirit, taking Alan Torrance in all his frailty, confusion, doubting, and loneliness and suffering, and giving him the eyes to see and hear the grace of God in the context of doubt and suffering. I think that's the answer one ought to give. Faith is a form of discernment. It's through the *hypostasis*, the substance, in Hebrews 11:1, of things hoped for. It's where we see and discern that which is the object of our hope.

JMF: Is our faith a participation in Christ's own faith?

AT: That's exactly what faith is. Faith is the gift of sharing by the Spirit in the incarnate Son's human communion with the Father, *his* faith. There's a big debate in New Testament circles which is incredibly important. Since Reformation times, we've always tended to emphasis in the Protestant churches justification by faith, as if Alan Torrance is justified by *his* faith. I don't think that's Paul's argument. There's a grammatical issue. Paul says we are justified, and then the question is whether he says by faith *in* Christ or by the faithfulness *of* Jesus Christ. It depends whether the genitive case there is objective or subjective. There's a strong case, when Paul says in two or three places that we are made righteous or justified through the faith of Jesus Christ, he means that we were made righteous through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ rather than through our faith in Jesus Christ. So the point you just made couldn't be more important. Our righteousness, our justification does not lie first and foremost in our faith—it lies in the faith and faithfulness of our incarnate Lord.

JMF: That would mean that when we're experiencing doubt, which is not uncommon for us to be full of doubt from time to time, we don't need to fear that God has left us because we don't have good enough faith, because our trust really is in Christ himself to have faith for us.

AT: You couldn't put it better. That is gospel. That is good news. It wouldn't be good news if God comes to me and says, "Alan, if you have faith, and if you somehow manage to sustain that faith to the point you die, then you'll go to heaven, and you'll be saved." I don't have confidence in my ability to sustain that. But the good news of the gospel is that God comes and provides that faith, and that faithfulness, for us on our behalf.

The parable of the prodigal son is one of my favorites. It's often told as a story of confession. The prodigal son comes home because he's repented, and because he's repented, the father accepts him home. That's nonsense. That's not the story. He comes home for one reason and one reason only,

and it couldn't be more plain—because of the quality of the pig food! He wants to use his father still further. The point of the story is that the father, who is a wealthy dignified nobleman, *ran*—that means he grabbed his robes up around his waist—humiliated himself in order to run and embrace his son—before he had heard any statement.

It's a great parable of the love of the father. But the gospel goes further. There's a non-parallelism between this parable of the prodigal son and the gospel. The whole time that the son was in the far county, the father was at home. In the gospel, we have the Father going (in the person of the Son) and setting up home in the far country to be with the son and to be where the son is. And, just to continue the non-parallelism, in the person of the Son, God completes all that was required of the prodigal. He offers the faith, the worship, the worth-ship... all that is required is fulfilled in him, in the place of the son. So that by the Spirit, the son might be given to recognize the meaning of grace; that, as John Calvin put it, all parts of our salvation are complete in Christ, the head of the human race. Wonderful good news. Remarkable.

JMF: Some people, upon hearing that explicated, get uncomfortable and say, if that's true, then that would give me the freedom to behave improperly. It would give me freedom to sin and not worry because I know that God has forgiven me and loves me despite my sins, so there has to be something wrong with that, because it would promote...especially among our teenagers... if they heard something like that, they would go out and sin all the more.

AT: That's invariably the response that one gets. Let's think about that for a minute. Let's think up an analogy. I was blessed with a very devoted, faithful, loving wife. There's one period in my life when I was involved in theological conversations in Holland, in the Netherlands. I was regularly going off to Amsterdam. Lots of non-theological things go on in Amsterdam, and it's sometimes known as sin city. (I used to pull Jane's leg about this.) Let's imagine that my wife had come to worry as to whether I was engaged in illegitimate activities on my travels.

Two responses she might have given. She might have said, "Alan, I want you to know that if you even contemplate involving yourself in any illicit activities while you're away in your travels, I get the kids and I get the car and you're going to pay for this the rest of your days." She could have spelled out the ramifications and implications, the costliness of any sinning I got up to.

Or she might have said this: As she waved me goodbye from the front door of my house, "Alan, I just want you to know that if ever you find

yourself in trouble, no matter what comes your way, I'll always be there for you. You'll always be welcome home. I'll always love you, I'll always be there for you." That sounds a little bit Mills and Boonish. [Mills & Boon publishes romance novels in the U.K.]

But ask yourself: which is most likely to lead me to engage in un-theological activities on my trips to Amsterdam? There is no question in my mind that I'd be much more likely to go my own way in the first situation, because the first response basically said, there's no real unconditional love between us—it's a contractual deal. If you play the game, then I'll play my part, etc. That's not love.

The second was genuine, unconditional, costly love, and that is what converts us, and that's what makes us faithful. I don't think antinomianism (the repudiation of law) is a consequence of discovering God's grace, seeing the extent of God's grace for what it is. It's the opposite. When we are brought by the Spirit, we are given the eyes to see the lengths to which God goes out of unconditional love for you as a particular person, as an individual. When you see that and are given to live in the light of that, you're liberated from sin. It doesn't encourage us to go and sin, thinking it's not going to matter. It has the opposite effect.

That's the difference between what's called legal repentance and evangelical repentance. When we're presented with a *law*, I don't think repentance is sincere. It's when we're presented with the gospel, the *euangelion*, the unconditional love and forgiveness of God, when we see that, believe it, given our eyes to recognize it and affirm it, that sets us free from sin. It liberates us from sin. It's an evangelical *metanoia*. A *metanoia* is the word for conversion. It means the transformation of our minds. When we're presented with unconditional love, it transforms our minds.

The church is often trying to prop up the gospel either by dangling people over the pit or setting up conditions: if you commit this sin, you're beyond the pale. No. We should have the courage to trust in the grace of God and the work of the Spirit getting people let in, liberating people by giving them eyes to see the meaning of the unconditional freeness of grace.

JMF: It reminds me of Paul's letter to Titus [2:12] where he says, "For it is grace that teaches you to say no to ungodliness."

AT: Precisely. I like that. Why did I take five minutes to say what you said in a sentence? Exactly.

JMF: When people ask that question, it doesn't work like that. Christians who receive the grace of God don't think like that.

AT: There's no question: good, devout Christians sin. I don't mean to claim that I'm a good Christian, but I sin all the time. *Why* do I sin? Why do

I sin when I believe so strongly in unconditional freeness? I am convinced when I look at a moment that I'm sinning, it's because for that moment, I've lost my faith. I'm not believing in the grace of God.

To believe in the grace of God is to believe that the risen, crucified Jesus, the sole Priest of our confession, is now saying, "Alan, there is nothing you can do that will separate you from my love," and when I believe that, when I'm presented with that and have the eyes to see that and hear it, I'm not tempted to sin. It's when I look away from that, that sin becomes a temptation. So the answer to sin is for the church to continue to remind people of the unconditional, costly freeness of grace in Jesus Christ. It's when we're living out of that reality that we're liberated. Not just liberated from sin but, more importantly, from the desire to sin.

JMF: The gospel is not about rules and law-keeping. The gospel is about the positive relationship that we're brought into with God and with one another. The gospel is a gospel of relationship, not behavior.

AT: Precisely. That's not just the New Testament—that's the heart of the Old Testament. Exodus 20, the Ten Commandments, the laws, where do they start? The first one, "I am the Lord thy God who has brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." When people talk of the Ten Commandments, they want to start with the "thou shalt" and the "thou shalt not." But it only makes sense in the context of that first verse, which spells out the nature of God's unconditional covenant commitment to Israel. He loves Israel and has delivered them from bondage in that love. It should read, "I am the Lord thy God which has delivered you from Egypt...therefore, as I am unconditionally faithful to you, Have no other God's before me. And as I am unconditionally faithful to all of Israel, so be faithful to each other. Don't kill, don't commit adultery, don't lie, don't steal, etc."

In other words, the Torah, the Jewish law, the commandments, are simply spelling out the structure, the logic of a relationship of love and faithfulness. The key concept in the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, is God's *hesed*, God's covenant faithfulness, or *berith*—that's the word for covenant. It's about relationship. The whole of the Pentateuch is a relational gospel. When Jesus summed up the law, in "love God and your neighbor as yourself," he wasn't introducing some new formula—he was being a good Jew. He was summarizing the heart of the Ten Commandments. I couldn't agree more with what you just said.

112. GOD'S WRATH, HELL, AND THE ROLE OF SCIENCE

J. Michael Feazell: Let's talk about a subject that is sometimes misunderstood, perhaps, or frightening to people. What is the wrath of God?

Alan Torrance: The wrath, or "wroth," as we say in this country... When we speak about the wrath of God, we are speaking about the *love* of God. We mustn't forget that. There are two kind of anger, or wrath, that we know in the human context. There's wrath which can emerge when someone's will is frustrated. Someone's football team doesn't win the game, or the referee makes a decision that wasn't the one that you wanted to see made, and people get angry. A lot of people think of God's wrath as the wrath of a largely voyeuristic individual up there, when his will is frustrated. But that is an unbiblical definition of the wrath of God. The wrath of God is the wrath of the jealous God.

What is meant by the jealous God? It does not mean jealousy of the kind that would mean a breach of the commandment, thou shall not covet. But rather God's wrath, God's jealousy, is God's love for his people. When God loves a people, he hates to see that people taken apart by sin or by disease or whatever. The wrath of God is God's anger at the costliness of sin to a people that he loves, when he sees the destruction of a people. So the best kind of human analogy is when a father adores a daughter or a son, and they are used and abused in some relationship where someone takes advantage of the one they love. Then there will be a wrath and anger that is a righteous anger grounded in love for their well-being.

God's wrath doesn't mean that he just loves the victim and hates the victimizer. God loves the victimizer as well as the victim. But God is angry with those responsible for all that destroys and destructs the *shalom*, the peace and communion and *koinonia* of his people. You can't have a proper understanding of the love of God without an equally robust doctrine of the wrath of God. It's imperative that we don't forget that to speak of the love and grace of God is to take seriously the biblical affirmations of the wrath of God.

God's love isn't any kind of mamby-pamby sentimental fuzzy love. It's a real valuing of the dignity of people. When that dignity is destroyed or betrayed by sin, God is angry — as angry as he is loving. But the important thing is...when we talk about the wrath of God, we're not talking about something that is arbitrary. The Christian life should never be based in fear. Christian life is lived from the love of God. When we see the wrath of God,

we see beyond it the love of God. The wrath reposes in the love of God. So we should rejoice in the wrath of God because, if we're going to do this right, it's the wrath of God that values persons, but loves...and not just the exploited, but the exploiter, the sinner and the sinned against.

JMF: There's a passage about how mercy triumphs over judgment. Is that applicable to the wrath of God or the love of God in this way?

AT: Absolutely. This talk of mercy is there because of the wrath of God. God forgives those with whom he's angry. He forgives me although I give him endless cause to be more than angry. We've got to say this as Christians — we rejoice in the fact that he's angry. I can rejoice in the fact that God is angry with me, because God is only angry with me because of the extent of his love for me and for those against whom I sin. So when we're talking about the wrath of God, we are talking about the good news, odd though that may seem.

JMF: We tend to think of God's anger being just like ours, and ours is usually irrational. Even if it's somewhat justified, it still is not under control so well, and it's irrational, and we usually form poor conclusions while we're in that state of mind.

AT: Precisely. Not so with God. What we must not do is project those conceptions of human anger and wrath and frustration of will onto God, because if we do that, we don't have the biblical understanding of wrath. The theological mistake we make more than any other...is when we take human concepts, interpret them in the human context, and then project them onto God.

There's a great example of Jesus dealing with that problem. After Peter's confession about the Christ, Jesus says that the Son of Man is going to suffer, and Peter becomes angry. He says, "No, there's no way we're going to allow this to happen," because Peter had a concept of messiah — and in the light of that prior concept in his mind, he was going to make sure that Jesus fitted that concept.

How did Jesus respond? The hardest comment that Jesus ever made was to Peter when he was doing that. "Get thee behind me, Satan." In other words, it is demonic to take a prior concept from human order and try to fit God into that prior human understanding. Why is it demonic? Because it's reversing revelation. It's turning revelation on its head. Revelation takes our human terms and fills them with new meaning — the meaning that is given them by the gospel and by God's involvement with us in the person of Christ. We must do that with the word "love," we must do that with "wrath." If we do the opposite, then we are not just impeding revelation, we're inverting it.

To do that is demonic.

There's another remarkable example ...in some ways that feminist theology wanted to grasp but failed to think through. Jesus is concerned about our using terms and concepts that are not reconceived in the light of the gospel. For example, he doesn't like us using status symbols, "I'm a professor." Jesus would have been skeptical about my using the term professor. We're not to call anybody Rabbi. There's only one Rabbi "Call no man teacher," there's only one teacher, namely God.

Jesus saw the way human beings used the terminology of hierarchy to oppress or control and exert power over people. What does Jesus do? We're not allowed to use the term *teacher*. I'm not allowing you to use any term that people are going to use to oppress others and to control. Then he goes on and says, "And call no man father," because there's only one father.

If we're going to use the same term for God and humanity, then as Jesus saw, there's a potential for abuse. For male fathers, a term that's appropriately used of God, and then, as it were, taking that divine authority to themselves in some sense. If we're going to use a term "Father" of God, we're to call no man father. That is a dominical injunction. How many Christians do you know stopped using the term *father* of their male parent? Christian churches ignored that for 2000 years.

Had we obeyed Jesus, there would never have been any feminist charges that it's oppressive to call God Father. The feminists are right, but there is a risk. If we call God Father and males father, then we, by association, give male parents a kind of authority, a superiority in the world order. We open the door to sexism. Jesus anticipated that. We're not to call anybody father, technically. I think what he means is this: We have got to be careful that every time we use terms of God they are radically commandeered and disentangled from any continuity with the human context, that is potentially oppressive.

So, back to the original question from *wrath*. If we use the term wrath of God, we must make sure that it is understood in the life and the totality of God's orientation to the world and to his people.

JMF: His redemptive purpose.

AT: Exactly. Every term that is used of God and God's purposes must be reconceived in the life of the gospel. The great theologian who was rigorous about this was John Calvin. Karl Barth, perhaps even more consistently than John Calvin. But Calvin set about doing that in his great work with the *Institutio*. Every term he sought to reconceive in light of biblical statements.

JMF: In that context, then let's talk about hell for a moment. What is

hell? How should a Christian view hell?

AT: Hell is a place of separation from God. It's a place of godlessness.

JMF: Do you mean separation in the sense of alienation or in the sense of actual space?

AT: No, I think alienation. People standing against God, trying to live without God. There's much that needs to be said here. First, when Jesus used the term kingdom, we often thought about the kingdom of God in terms of heaven. One day the kingdom will be fully realized. But the kingdom's not at hand.

Just as the kingdom will be fully realized on one occasion, and yet is at hand at the moment, I think we have to say the same thing about hell. There's a sense...to the extent that we seek to live without God, we stand against God, and hell is already realized in some sense. The Bible seems to suggest that one day it will be fully realized for people who seek to stand against God. But that raises the question as to what we can say about the population of hell and how populated hell is. We get into very controversial territory. Can I speak to that for one moment?

Several things have got to be said, but they can be said very quickly. First, to the extent that hell is populated, it's populated by people who are loved by God. God is love. God loves all of his creation unconditionally, and that never ends. Second, to the extent that hell is populated, it's populated by people for whom Christ died and whom Christ has *forgiven*.

People find that difficult to conceive. But just as we are to forgive 70 times 7, unconditionally, with no exception, so does Jesus. Jesus, as fellow human, wouldn't tell us to do something he wouldn't do himself. Jesus is God come as human. If God was telling us to do things that he wouldn't do himself, then there's no integrity in the gospel. Hell is populated by people who are loved and forgiven by God.

I think the most one can say is this: to the extent that hell is populated, it's populated by people whom God has allowed to opt to live against his purpose or live in isolation from him. If that happens and to the extent that that does happen, God is utterly distraught for eternity.

Finally, it is not possible to be a Christian and *want* hell to be populated. It's not possible. Why? Because we are to love our enemies. That means all our enemies. We're to love Hitler, right?

JMF: That's the first question that we hear. What about Adolf Hitler?

AT: We're somehow to love Hitler. That may be humanly impossible, but I believe that God loves Hitler, and one day, when we have that mind which was in Christ Jesus fully in us, we will be set free to love even Hitler.

JMF: In that day we would also have seen and taken part in everything that Hitler had taken away having been restored through Christ, wouldn't we?

AT: That's right. It will be a lot easier. We don't love what Hitler did. To love an evil person is not to love their evil. A final comment: I often have students come up to me and say that they had a grandparent that they loved who has just died, and they sadly weren't Christians, and they fear for their salvation. They find it puzzling — how could it be the case that God doesn't love the grandparent as much as *they* loved their grandparent? The only answer for that, is God loves the grandparent even though she or he wasn't a Christian, and infinitely more than they possibly could.

JMF: Right.

AT: When it comes to questions of the future destination of people, often the people whom we've loved and who have died, we just say this —the only God we know is a God who is all loving, all just, and all forgiving, who would never do anything that is contrary to his love, justice, and forgiveness. Therefore we can joyfully commit those people to God and trust those people with God, given that God loves them more than we do.

I think there's good news even despite the biblical warning about hell. In the dominical warnings, Jesus speaks about hell. Although it does raise a question sometimes whether Jesus in some sense speaks to that in and through the cross and resurrection, whether we need to go back to what Jesus said and interpret it in the light of what he has done, because he descended to hell for us.

JMF: Yes. That's the reason he came, because of the reality of the consequences of separation and hell. Let's switch gears for a moment and ask about science. Is science a hindrance or a help to Christian faith?

AT: Good science is a wonderful gift of God. It's helping us understand God's creation, simple as that. To the extent that scientists are being genuinely scientific, interpreting the contingent order, creation out of itself in its own light, and are doing so truthfully and faithfully, it's a wonderful gift. Science can only function because of the intelligibility of the contingent order, and that intelligibility is given by God. It stems from the intelligence of the Creator. It's an extremely strong argument from science for the existence of God, if you're wanting to engage in arguments for the existence of God.

But there are problems in the scientific community, because there's a philosophy that's sometimes *confused* for science, called Naturalism. Naturalism is as old as the hills...well, not quite as the hills... but it's as old as civilization. The view goes back to the creation. It is a view that the world

is basically a closed causal system that operates in indifference to questions of value, fairness, and so on. Certain forms of science, sometimes in the biological sciences this is more common, science wants to presuppose naturalism, the view that God does not exist.

We see that illustrated in Richard Dawkins's thought, for example. He believes that to be scientific is to repudiate the existence of God, to be an atheist. I am of the view that that is *not* scientific. Scientists should not be in the business of making theological claims – that is to go beyond the boundaries of scientific investigation.

How compatible, therefore, is the affirming of the existence of God with science? It's remarkable what's taken place in the last 30 years. We've seen in the last 30 years the most significant developments in philosophy and Christian philosophy since Thomas Aquinas. In 1974 I started a four-year philosophy degree. In those days, there was a man called G.L. Mackey who was of the view that it was logically incoherent to be a Christian theist. You could count the number of Christian philosophers on the fingers of a mutilated hand, to be frank. The vast majority of analytic philosophers repudiated theism.

In the space of only 30 years, that situation has changed profoundly. Now, at least one in four analytic philosophers in North America, which is where analytic philosophy is at its finest, is a theist; the vast majority of those are Christian theists.

In 2001, one of the world's leading atheist philosophers, Quentin Smith, wrote an article (and this is going back to the science issue) in the journal he edited, which was called *Philo...* a journal of the Humanist Philosopher's Association, with every leading atheist philosopher on its board — all the brains behind Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and so on. His article was a 10,000-word article called "The Meta-Philosophy of Naturalism" — a look at the philosophical underpinnings of naturalism — that's the atheistic philosophy of Dawkins and his book.

In that article he establishes that the Christian philosophers, this new breed of Christian philosophers (led by Alvin Plantinga, the greatest living Christian philosopher, one of the greatest philosophers), have beaten the atheists, the naturalist philosophers. At every key point, their writings are more logically rigorous, more cognizant. His article was a clarion call to atheists to get their act together if they're not going to be swamped by the quality of Christian philosophy.

One of the things that's emerged out of the Christian philosophers was the number of arguments that stem from contemporary science for the

existence of God. One of the factors that the Christian philosophers have been writing about recently is the fine-tuning of the universe. The chances of carbon emerging are infinitesimally small. Other factors, ranging to Planck time and so on.

I won't go into the details right now, but the factors, the chances of this universe occurring in the way it is, such that there can be life on this planet, is just an unthinkable small number. We're talking about factors such as 1 in 10 to the power of 60 in one of the fine tunings — in another fine tuning, 1 in 10 to the power of 43. But the difference between 1 in 10 to the power of 43 and 1 in 10 to the power of 42, we're talking about massively small chances. And 10 to the 43 is 10 with 43 zeroes after it. Similar is the chances of there being a planet in which you and I can sit here being filmed engaging in intelligent conversation are unthinkable small. Science has no explanation for that. Science can't explain the intelligibility of the contingent order. It can't explain why there's something rather than nothing.

One of the attempts to explain fine tuning on the part of atheists is called the "multi-verse theory," which suggests that there's a new infinite or infinite number of random universe occurings, one of which just happens to look like it's been designed. But then there would need to be a mechanism to produce all these random potential universe occurings. Where would that come from? That still wouldn't explain why there's something rather than nothing.

There's a vast number of fundamental questions which are beyond the bounds of science, that science will not be able to answer, which theism answers very straightforward. In other words, theism has spectacular and unparalleled explanatory power. That's something to bear in mind when we get media from everywhere bombarding us with the atheism of people like the Dennetts and the Dawkinses of this world, and Sam Harris, and so on. The quality of the arguments and the final answer don't even begin to touch the quality of the arguments that are being offered right now by the world's leading Christian philosophers.

JMF: Do you have a suggestion for a lay person who might want to read a book that would help them along those lines? What would it be?

AT: John Polkinghorne has written some very useful books, and David Wilkinson of Durham has written some successful books. The person that I would encourage everyone to engage with is Alvin Plantinga. A great many of the articles he has written on God and science are on the internet, so you don't need to fork out for a book to become familiar with the issues. Scotsmen will never fork out if we don't have to.

113. BEING IN CHRIST

J. Michael Fezell: Paul wrote to the Colossians that God was in Christ reconciling *all things* to himself. What are the implications of that for how human beings live together?

Alan Torrance: The word Paul uses is *apokatallasso*. That is the word for “to reconcile,” and it means, technically, “exchange.” It summarizes what you were saying earlier about redemption. You can summarize the whole of redemption and salvation in that verse... God was in Christ bringing about an exchange — taking what is ours, our alienated, sinful, fallen humanity — and healing it and transforming it. God is in Christ taking what is ours in order to give us what is his. What is his? It’s a life of communion characterized by unconditional love and unconditional forgiveness. When we are given by the Spirit to participate in Christ... The phrase “in Christ” appears in Paul 154 times. That’s the heart of Christian life, is being *en Christo* in Greek, participating in Christ.

To come to your question... what are the implications of this for how we live in society? To be a Christian is to be given the eyes to see and the ears to hear every facet of life in that light. To be a Christian is to think out of Christ in every situation. It’s never possible to bracket our Christian life out as something that happens on Sundays, or concerns our private piety. To be a Christian is to think about science, politics, every facet of our lives in the light of what it is to be *en Christo*. If we are re-created to be *en Christo*, if our being is defined by our participation in the body of Christ, then every facet of our lives has to re-thought in that light.

I had the privilege to spend two years in a North American based research group, with Miroslav Wolf, Nicholas Wolterstorff and two others, thinking about the implications, the ramifications, of reconciliation — of this reconciliation — for our political engagement. I think it means this: We shouldn’t advocate anything, not least in politics, that doesn’t reflect what it is to be in Christ. You don’t pray one thing and vote another. There’s got to be integrity and consistence in that. Christians (and this is what it means to be the salt of the earth) should work for reconciliation at the horizontal level everywhere they find themselves.

For example, if you’re a Christian in politics and you’re seeking to engage with terrorists or situations of conflict, you have to allow the truth of that verse to infuse and inform and direct your thinking in every respect. Does reconciliation mean ignoring terrorism or aggression? Emphatically not. But instead of simply enacting revenge or retribution, we should have an eye to thinking what is it that we can do, what is it we can (if we are politicians)

inspire in our voters that will lead to genuine reconciliation, because that's what God desires. What can we do that will generate healing and a restoration of good relationships?

To be a human being is to be created in the image of God, in the *imago dei*, as we often hear. We are to image, to reflect, to correspond, to who God is in all that we are. That's in the Torah, the Jewish law, the Ten Commandments: "I am the Lord thy God who has brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Therefore, as I am unconditionally faithful to you and have been, so must you be faithful to me, have no other gods before me, and be faithful to each other." That is to image God, to be in the image of God, that's what the *imago dei* is talking about. It's not talking about some innate human capacity. It's talking about the form of human existence corresponding to God's relationship to us.

Jesus summed up the law as to love God, and our neighbors as ourselves. He was talking about something that should impact every facet of our existences. To be lights in this world, to be the salt of the earth, is for Christians to have the courage, sometimes against the stream of popular opinion, to work for reconciliation, restoration, healing, and to think radically and creatively as to what is going to bring that about.

If every Christian in the West were to think out of the Christian faith, just imagine the priorities that would be manifest in our political decision making. This is controversial — we like to keep religion and politics separate. I don't see any Christian endorsement of that. If every politician in the West who was voted into their office by Christians were to seek to enact those insights, the world would be a massively happier place, and the West could be seen as committed to reconciliation, to healing, to being concerned for the poor, for prioritizing, liberating two-thirds of the world from the extreme financial hardship and the disease and so on that causes so much grief. If that was what the eyes of our critics, our enemies saw when they looked to the West, a group of nations committed to making, to creating a reconciled world characterized by mutual care and concern, we'd be far more influential, there would be much more peace in this world.

There's always going to be evil. We're still left with situations where there's always going to be, I'm afraid, terrorism, hostility, and greed, and sometimes (I'm not a pacifist, I'd love to be) we've got to take actions to try to ensure the best possible outcome for all concerned (though, as Stanley Hauerwas suggests, we've got to respect pacifists, because they have a strong doctrine of divine providence).

In everything we do and however we do it, the aim, the goal, must be *shalom*. Not just our own peace and well-being, but the peace and well-being

of our enemies. The gospel is radical. The incarnation has radical implications. It should impact every facet of the way we live, vote, think, spend our money, and behave. Nothing would be more exciting than if the church had the courage, and it does take courage, to be that radical...

JMF: Christians don't ever seem to come close in making that happen as a worldwide body. There are so many denominations, sects and splits. They don't get along with each other; they're divided against each other. How do we account for such division among Christians when we're called to such radical living together as the body of Christ?

AT: You've put your finger on the tragedy of contemporary Christian existence. It's a terrible witness that the body of Christ... We believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic church. That's an article of faith to believe, that there's one church, because there's one body, just as there's one Christ, there's one body of Christ. To the extent that we are Christians, we are one, and we must be conceived as being one. Does the world see one body of Christ? One united communion of the body of Christ? I'm afraid it doesn't. It sees a lot of Christian individuals driven by pride, very often—sometimes at war with each other. Look at the tragedy of events in Northern Ireland; look at what we've seen in South Africa. The German Christians—Hitler couldn't have come to power without the support, I'm afraid, of the *Deutsche* Christians, the German Christians.

You question why things are the way they are? Here's a one-word answer: sin, or pride (which is the other side of the same coin). Many people want to go for a kind of ecumenism, which means that we form big bodies and we form federations – where the churches talk to each other and they've got good relationships with each other. What would our Lord want to see? He'd want to see one body of Christ characterized by radical communion and a coherent collective witness which has real integrity. He'd want to see love and forgiveness and mutual understanding. The church is divided because it doesn't have the mind of Christ. Christ only has one mind (unless we're going to delve into dramatic debates). The mind of Christ which is in Christ Jesus should characterize the body of Christ, and therefore to be an evangelical, to be a Christian, is to strive for that.

Look right and left, look at the people who belong to churches with whom you disagree, and you've got to say to yourself, "that is a tragedy, and what can we do together to find ways of not just being or possessing the mind of Christ, but embodying it within the world, because the divisions in the church are a terrible witness." When I was involved in missions (Howard Marshall and I used to run missions together) I went around doors and the continual complaint was, "How can you Christians offer good news to the

world? You can't even agree amongst yourselves."

JMF: Where we see communion and union in the body of Christ is among individuals and among pastors of various denominations who come together for working together, and they bypass what amounts to the institutionalism, the entrenched structures of churches and so on. They work around that in ways that reflect the body of Christ in individual ways. This is where we see what needs to be seen.

AT: That is what it is to be true to the gospel. It also means that we have to work within our churches to bring about change — so we can find constructive ways forward together with other churches and have high aims. I think denominational division of the kind we have at the moment is a handicap. To be evangelical is to be ecumenical. The sad thing is, ecumenism and evangelicalism have often been polarized.

JMF: They originate at the heads of or in the context of institutionalism, which itself is not Christianity but institutionalism.

AT: Precisely. We've got to move, to get beyond institutionalism.

JMF: It happens with people on the ground who are living out their faith...

AT: Usually the problem is establishment religion or civil religion. For example, in Scotland...very often, to be a Scot is to belong to the Church of Scotland, as I do, and to be part of that establishment. Establishment religion is not participation in the body of Christ. I don't think there's any place for establishment religion. We're called beyond that, and we must do all we can to liberate the gospel from those forms of civil religion.

JMF: In the micro context of a family, where perhaps a husband is abusing a wife — this is not uncommon — and sometimes the church tells her that she needs to reconcile with this man who abuses her, and so ...do we sometimes confuse the forgiveness and the reconciliation of the spirit with some kind of requirement to go back under the authority of this person who is bound to abuse her again?

AT: We should never advocate in the name of reconciliation a situation of sustained abuse. That is to turn reconciliation on its head, and as I am trying to explain, reconciliation is about being given to participate in what is Christ's. Abuse within a family context is widespread; it's a massive problem, not least within the Christian church.

When there's abuse going on, the church has an absolute obligation (apodictic obligation) to stop that, to put an end to that abuse. How could we possibly give and communicate good news to a woman who is being abused by a husband by telling her to acknowledge his authority or anything of that kind? That is not the gospel. The gospel is to affirm the dignity and

humanity of that woman, and do everything in our power to liberate her from the powers that would oppress and exploit, in this case, perhaps a violent or abusive husband.

I often think that the church should be much more outspoken about the problems of abuse within family life. One of the tragedies, sometimes, is this aligning of God's fatherhood with human fatherhood and suggesting that fathers are somehow superior. Then they talk about the divine wrath! I know one Calvinist theologian who thinks he's got grounds for what I think is fairly abusive discipline of his children, because he's got to enact, as the image of the Father, "godly discipline." He takes the belt from around his trousers and belts his children. That is precisely what Jesus was opposing. Every facet of Jesus' ministry was opposing that.

Family life and marriages should be contexts of *shalom* where people should be liberated to be free to be themselves, to know what it is to be loved. A family is not being a family in truth unless it's being the body of Christ in truth. The body of Christ is a radically inclusive, affirming, liberative communion. We've got to take these issues seriously. It is not surprising that feminist thinkers have been so concerned about abuses that have gone on within (let's face it) often very patriarchal forms of Christianity. These have only emerged because we've failed to be true to the gospel, as to Jesus' clear injunctions. We've got to work continually to oppose those forms of sin.

JMF: In the time we have left, would you mind sharing some personal reflections about your father, J.B. Torrance, and your uncle, T.F. Torrance?

AT: I was incredibly privileged. I was brought up in a wonderful home. I remember my father once said to me, "In the light of Matthew 23 (that statement about calling no man father) and in the light of the gospel," he once said to me, "Alan, biologically I'm your father, but Christianly speaking, you and I are brothers." As I was growing up, there was discipline, I'd get into trouble and he'd discipline me, but never in a way that it wasn't – and didn't make his love for me unambiguously clear.

From my later teens on, my father always treated me like a brother. Because he believed, if we're going to think out of Christ, *en Christo*, in Christ, that is who we were. We had the most wonderful relationship. Even when I was 16 or 17, he'd discuss all sorts of family decisions with my sisters and myself — which is quite unusual to do in Scotland, which is a very traditional culture. If we were going to buy a house or the way we'd spend money, we'd all talk about it as a family, and my parents would involve us in major family decisions. It was a radically inclusive relationship. But for dad, what was always transparent was the fact that it was his Christian conviction that was informing every facet of his treatment of us.

There are some remarkable memories. I'll just take one that stands out, for this is a wonderful incidence. Christmas was always a very formal time in our family because we used to get together, all the aunts and uncles and so on, and we all dressed up in our Sunday best. Boxing Day, the day after Christmas, was fun, very often, because all the same food was there, but then we'd be there together as a family and relaxed, and it was a great fun day. On one particular Boxing Day, we all sat down to lunch and there was a turkey and all the trimmings, and all the remains of the Christmas provision was distributed amongst all the family.

We sat down, and dad had just said prayers, and there was a ring at the front doorbell. I thought, "Who comes to the front door at 1:00 on..." Dad and I went to the front door, he opened the door, and there was a tramp. It was freezing cold out there. He said to my father, "I'm terribly sorry to bother you at this time, but I was wondering if you could provide me with some bread...it's a difficult time to get food over Christmas." Do you know what dad did? Ushered him into the house right straight through to the dining room and put him at his place in front of his food. All the Christmas food had been distributed.

Dad went through to the kitchen and got some bean and egg together... that was dad's lunch. That tramp ate dad's feast. He made that tramp feel as if he belonged in the family. My dad lived his life, and with that mind which is in Christ Jesus, and my mother was a great partner in that. It was a privilege.

My uncle Tom, T.F. Torrance, is a wonderful, wonderful uncle. I lived with him for a year. When I was at university, my parents moved, thus I lived with uncle Tom. It was a year of enormous intellectual stimulation – we had fabulous discussions. He had a spectacular sense of humor – we laughed till tears came down. He would pray for me. On one occasion I had broken up with a girlfriend and I was very distraught, and he took me into his study and he prayed with me. So I was very privileged.

These are both men who are theologians, totally committed churchmen that had a vision of what it was to share by the Spirit in the incarnate Son's communion with the Father. They sought to see every facet of their lives in that light. Earlier, you mentioned ethics. Ethics, like worship, is a gift of participation by the Spirit in the incarnate Son's communion with the Father. It's interesting that *worship*, and worth-ship, *ethics*, are the same word. There should be no dichotomy between them. In other words, every facet of our human life is a gift by the Spirit of sharing in the incarnate Son's communion with the Father.

114. THE GRACE OF THE FINISHED WORK OF CHRIST

Michael Morrison: David, it's a pleasure to have you here.

David Torrance: Thank you. It's a privilege to be here.

MM: I'd like to begin by finding out who you are. I associate the name Torrance with Thomas and James, and you're the third brother?

DT: The third brother. Yes. The youngest.

MM: You have all studied theology and written on theology.

DT: My brothers have. I...rather more modestly, I'll put it that way.

MM: You've helped in writing some of the books, haven't you?

DT: Tom and I edited 12 volumes of John Calvin's *New Testament Commentaries* from Latin to English. That was a big effort. That's still in print. That was quite a while ago. Various other articles and so on in journals.

MM: But you didn't go into an academic teaching role like your brothers did.

DT: No. I embarked on the same course at university...went through classics, honors philosophy, Bachelor of Divinity, specialized in Dogmatics and Christology, as they did. I also went on and studied on under Karl Barth and Oscar Cullman as they did. Then I began to question what I called an academic career, to the parish ministry. I thought I was called to parish ministry, and I believe that's so. I've enjoyed it immensely.

The joy of parish ministry

MM: What's been the most enjoyable part of your work?

DT: When people are converted, they discover the reality of salvation and new life in Christ—it's a tremendous joy. It's a tremendous privilege to be allowed to be present when someone comes to Christ, or again, when people's faith is deepened and they come to a new sense of freedom in Christ. I don't think there's any job that's more satisfying than ministry. I didn't believe that at one time. It was quite a struggle for me to enter the ministry, but having entered it now, it was a marvelous calling.



MM: Many pastors, in the U.S. at least, drop out. There's a high turnover rate because of the demands of the job. You've had a different experience as a parish minister. What's the key to your role in leading a parish? Why do you see so much joy in it, whereas they might see a burden?

DT: The key to the ministry is to keep your eye on Jesus Christ—Jesus the Son of God, Jesus who became man, who lived, who died, who rose again, ascended. Here we are face to face with God the Father, God the mighty Creator and our Redeemer. If he is central in our ministry, then our ministry should grow more exciting and fresher as the years go by. Take your eyes off that, and we could try and carry though the responsibilities of ministry on our own strength, and people fail.

Put it a different way: I feel strongly that (I think this to myself) if you look at ministry today, probably 90 percent of all our preaching is telling people what to do. We lay tremendous burdens on the congregation. Our congregations get weary and tired, and many slip away. The ministers themselves get frustrated and leave. They're trying to go ahead in ministry, but under their own steam, using their own efforts, their own resources.

I believe strongly that in the ministry we are called to proclaim Christ, the person of Christ. We can't separate the person of Christ from his work and the atonement. That's what we are here to proclaim, so that predominately, our preaching should be the person of Christ and the atonement. If we keep our eye on Christ and seek to present Christ to the world...this is something exciting, something living and alive...we see people coming face-to-face with God in Jesus Christ. That is an exciting thing. I thoroughly enjoyed the ministry. I still do.

Christ has done everything for us

MM: How would you describe what Christ has done for us? Why are people so excited about it? I could have my word for it, what's yours?

DT: He's done *everything* for us. When Christ came into the world, we read in John's Gospel, he said, "I have come that you may have life, life more abundant, life to the absolute full." When we come to Christ, we are coming face-to-face with God, we're entering into the family of God, but we're discovering life itself, and that's a good thing.

MM: Does that mean I don't need to do anything?

DT: No, I wouldn't say that. God has done everything for us in Christ. Christ has come, Christ has redeemed us. When Christ on the cross said, "It is finished," that was a triumphant call, the triumphant shout of a victor. He's done everything for our salvation. All we can do is accept it.

Many years ago (I mentioned that I was involved in mission) when Billy Graham carried out an “All Scotland Crusade” in Edinburgh in 1955, some 2000 people went forward in his crusade in Edinburgh district. I was heavily involved in the follow-up. We had classes for them for 12 weeks. We took away 800 or 900 in three residential conferences.

I became involved in conversation with a man who was an office-bearing elder in the church, a fine man. He said, “I’ve done everything that Billy Graham has asked. I came forward, repented, prayed, asked Christ into my life.” He said, “I never seemed to have got there.” As I listened to him, I said, “You know what you’ve got to learn? Nothing at all.”

He was startled. I said, “You’ve got to learn to do absolutely nothing, because when Christ said on the cross, ‘It is finished,’ he’s done everything for your salvation, and there’s nothing left for you to do except to say *thank you*, and to go on and on saying *thank you*. Your thanksgiving is your acceptance.” I still see that man in my mind’s eye as it broke home to him. You could see his face relax, and he laughed. The whole burden had departed. He was set free to live, and to share the gospel with other people.

MM: He had been trying too hard.

DT: One of the disasters of the Christian church today...I love the church, I grew up in it...is that we tend to say, God has done his part in Jesus Christ. Christ has come, he’s died, he’s redeemed—now it’s over to us. We call on people to do their part. We say: come, repent, believe, pray, worship, read the Bible. But we’re throwing a tremendous responsibility back on the people.

MM: Do this, do that.

DT: ...so that their salvation, to put it crudely, we’re saying that salvation is partly what God does and partly what you do. That’s wrong. It’s entirely of God, and all we’ve got to do is to thank him, and that must be a wholehearted thanksgiving. It’s a total letting go, a total surrender.

MM: If we realize what a gift it is, then we are thankful.

DT: Absolutely. It is a total thanksgiving where we thank God with our whole being. The Psalmist said that in Psalm 103: “Bless the Lord, oh my soul, and all that is within me, bless, praise, his holy name.” It’s that thanksgiving where we’re letting go... we accept the wonder of what God has done in Christ. We’re receiving new life. In that freedom, there’s joy.

MM: If he’s done everything and he gives that to us, theologically, that’s grace. People misunderstand grace, though.

DT: Grace is a tremendous outpouring of the love of God in Jesus Christ. God, our Creator, came in incredible love to give himself to us in Jesus

Christ—to give himself in his love, in his forgiveness, in his continuing redemption. If we were to stand under a waterfall, we'd be drenched, we'd be soaked. You and I stand under the waterfall, as it were, the outpouring of God's love and grace, of his forgiveness, of his redemption. That's grace, the outpouring of the love of God, because we don't deserve anything.

We deserve nothing. But God, as love, comes and gives himself to us, forgives us, redeems us, gives us life, through the Holy Spirit brings us in, we are adopted into the family of God, able to call God Father. Know that we are in Christ, sons and daughters of God, heirs of the everlasting kingdom. That all is a free and abundant gift. That's grace.

MM: You said not just that he gives forgiveness, but he gives us *himself*.

DT: We can never separate the grace of God from the person of Christ. One of the great, dare I say, sins of the church through the ages is to separate the person of Christ and the work of Christ and separate Christ from grace. The medieval church was tempted to believe that grace is something that the church possesses, something that the church can dispense. That's nonsense. We can be possessed by Christ, but we can't possess Christ. Grace is wrapped up with the person of Christ and across the work of Christ, because we can't separate them.

The covenant of grace

MM: You talk about grace as God giving himself to us. But he also gives us forgiveness, and he gives us a promise of what he's done, of what he will be for us. That's kind of a covenant that he makes with us, this covenant of grace. In Reformed traditions, a covenant of grace is a key term. Maybe you could explain more about what it means.

DT: Covenant grace is exceedingly important. Ultimately God made a covenant of grace with all mankind, and that covenant embraced all creation. Within that covenant, God made an inner covenant with Israel when he called his people of Israel into partnership with himself for the redemption of the world.

In Jeremiah 13, we have this astonishing statement – God says, “As a man would bind a belt around his waist, I have taken my people Israel and bound them onto me around my waist.” He will never let them go for the working out of his salvation. In a wider sense, God has come and made a covenant of grace with all humankind in order that he might redeem humankind, in order that he might work out his salvation. That covenant of grace is where God, who is absolutely holy, comes in love in tremendous condescension and binds to himself a sinful people. Israel was a sinful people, a representative

people of all of us.

In a wider sense, God has bound all of us to himself—an eternal bond of grace so that we can't escape the grace of God. We can't escape the embrace of God. This is a great mystery. The fact that God in all his holiness bound a sinful people to himself meant that Israel suffered, because in their sin they rebelled, and yet God in his love would not let them go, because he's determined to strip away their sin and redeem them. In that extraordinary painful situation, Israel passed through a situation when she had shattered herself on the rock of God's love.

Ultimately, that's what we're faced with on the cross because that is gathered up in Jesus Christ. In Christ, God has bound the whole world to himself so that when Jesus is a particular man, he's a representative man linked to all creation in an everlasting bond. He's taken hold of all humankind so that when Jesus died, we all died. It's one of the things I've often pondered. In 2 Corinthians 5, when Christ died, we died. What does that mean? It means that our natural death...well, there's no such thing as a natural death. We die because Christ died. We're joined to Christ in his incredible bond of grace. The fact that Christ rose again means that all of us will rise again in the resurrection.

Here's the mystery—that sin has interposed between us and God so that, as Jesus says in John 5, whereas we are all resurrected, “some will be resurrected unto righteousness, some unto condemnation.” Grace is where God comes in love giving himself to us. Not only giving himself to us, but becoming us and remaining himself holy, and yet at the same time becoming *us* in order to redeem us, to cleanse away our sin, and to give us new life, that we might enter into the fellowship of God in Jesus Christ.

There are many aspects of creation, of grace. For us to accept us it, it must be whole-hearted...it's an all or nothing. It's a letting go in thankfulness, and then we accept all that God has done, all his love, we accept life, and joy, and salvation.

The importance of forgiveness

It equally means that our lives must be transformed, if we forgive one another. If we don't forgive one another, we're not able to receive the grace of God. That I find important, because in the ordinary practical ministry, you meet that again and again. There are divisions in the church. Church people, Christian people, find that they cannot forgive their neighbor. That lack of forgiveness means that there is a barrier between them and God. It will hinder their faith. It's the spirit of evil. Grace means that we receive the love, the forgiveness of God, but in receiving it, we must allow the grace of God to

flow through us, and we forgive one another.

An interesting case of that: Some years ago I had a meeting in the headquarters of our church in central Edinburgh. It was a morning meeting, and I agreed to meet my wife afterwards for lunch. Our meeting ended early, and I was standing just outside the church offices waiting for my wife. I was idly dreaming, my mind was far away, and I suddenly heard a voice accosting me and saying, “Are you a holy man?”

I had never been called a holy man before, and my first inclination was to laugh. But he was a man, an Indian, looking at me, very serious. Instead of laughing, I said, “Well, I try to be a holy man.” He told me a story. He had come over to study engineering. He had come from a strong Hindu background; I think he had been Brahman. He had been converted in Scotland, and he said for a while he was full of the joy of the Lord, and in a week’s time was due to be baptized. But something had happened, and all the joy had departed. He said, “What’s wrong with me?” Quite a challenge.

I said, “Only God knows. I can make a few suggestions. You alone will know whether any of these suggestions ring a bell and are true for you. Maybe you stopped praying, maybe you stopped reading the Bible, stopped going to church, perhaps you’ve been disobedient to God and done some things wrong, perhaps you can’t forgive someone who has hurt you.”

He suddenly said, “That’s it.” I said, “What do you mean?” He said, “That’s it. Forgiveness.” Someone had done something or said something or hurt him badly, and he couldn’t forgive.

I didn’t ask him what the situation was, but I said, “If that’s the case, you can forgive. That has come in between you and the Lord, and you’ve got to allow God to work through you and give you the grace to forgive. Forgiveness is not a human quality. You can’t, out of your own resources, forgive someone who’s hurt you. Forgiveness is a gift of God. All you can do is to tell the Lord the situation and ask God to give you the gift to forgive. If you do that, you’ll find peace with God.”

So I said, “Shall we pray?” We stood there and prayed together, and off he went. About three days later I got a lovely letter from him. He said he’d gone off, found this person, and been reconciled. He said all the joy of the Lord was back, and that’s very important.

MM: It reminds me of the Lord’s Prayer, where Jesus said if you do not forgive, you will not be forgiven.

DT: Absolutely.

MM: You’re saying that even though God does everything for us, our relationship with others somehow is clogging the pipeline or something or God’s gifts don’t reach us...

DT: Very much so. That is a common factor in the parish ministry. In one parish I was talking to one of the people, and she told me that she had never talked to her daughter for 12 years. I said, “You can’t say the Lord’s prayer, you know.” “Oh, but you don’t know my daughter.” (She lives in a different part of the country.) I said, “No. I don’t. But I don’t really know you, do I?”

I said, “Whatever the situation, God has forgiven us for everything, and we don’t deserve it. It’s a free gift. He loves us. He’s forgiven us. That means that he’s asking you to show that forgiveness to your daughter, whatever the situation. You’re commanded by God to go and phone your daughter and to tell her you love her and forgive her.” I said that rather frank. Two days later she called me over and told me, “I talked to my daughter the first time in 12 years, and things are put right.” Yes, it lies at the very heart of the Lord’s Prayer and is very basic... It’s a practical thing in the ministry.

The other important thing about grace, forgiveness, is that forgiveness is prior to repentance. God forgives, and we are called to receive that forgiveness, but he doesn’t forgive on condition that we repent. Conditional repentance has crept into, I suppose, all the churches. Sadly, it’s crept into my own church in Scotland.

Calvin and Knox, our Scottish reformer, followed the teaching in Scripture that God comes, and he’s forgiven us in Christ, and we are summoned to repent. We are summoned to receive. But because of sinful human nature, we have turned it around that God forgives *if* we repent—on condition. So in the church in Scotland we have what we call a *Book of Common Order*, and that is an outline of suggested services for various usages and forms of worship. We have another *Book of Common Order* for use in what we call the courts of the church. The minister is ordained, inducted to a parish, and so forth. In those services, say for an ordination of a minister or induction to a charge, there is what we call a preamble, a statement of what’s happening, and we have the words that “God offers forgiveness upon repentance.” Every time I hear that, I squirm. Forgiveness upon repentance. Forgiveness if you repent. It’s conditional. No.

In my own experience, I joined as a soldier in 1942, a long time ago. Before going abroad, I served for a period in England and used to join a small group, about 12 or 15 other soldiers, for friendship, Bible study, and prayer. Despite my Reformed upbringing, I was somewhat influenced at the time by this presentation of the gospel, which is conditional repentance. If you repent, God will forgive you.

That troubled me, so I found myself praying and trying to confess all the sins that I could remember, to receive forgiveness of God. In this process,

my prayers got longer and longer as I tried to remember and confess all the sins. I found myself probably confessing sins I hadn't really committed because if I don't repent, how do I get forgiveness? Then the question came, but what about the sins you don't remember? I tried to answer that by saying, "Lord, have mercy on me. I am a sinner." That covers a lot.

But then the question: How do you know you're repenting? I had no answer to that, and that really troubled me, because if I didn't repent, I would have no forgiveness. How can I be sure? Sometime after that I was reading Romans 6 in Greek (I studied Greek in school) and it hit me powerfully. If you take verses 2-6, the aorist tense, that's a past tense, that when Christ died, something very decisive in repentance happened: I died with him. And when he rose, I rose with him. That happened a long time ago, before I was born, 2000 years ago.

It hit me powerfully that Christ had died, he had risen, he had forgiven me before I sinned, before I was born. It was all done and completed. All I was asked to do was to receive it in thanksgiving. If I didn't receive it, I was lost. We're not compelled to receive it. Hell is real. But the fact that all I was called to do was the thanksgiving, was a tremendous relief to me. You are just full of joy, the assurance, and never again did I doubt it.

MM: You accepted that *you* had come to the point where you see in parishioners that was so exciting, whenever they come to that realization that God has done it for them, for all of us...already.

DT: Right. Last April I was preaching on the subject of grace and the fact that God has done everything for us and all we have to do is thanksgiving. I was preaching in the morning with a lay preacher, what we call a reader, taking the evening service. Shaking hands at the door after the service, this man, all he could do was laugh. He said, "I've been set free. I've been set free. I've been set free." He just kept repeating it. He said, "Set free after 30 years." He didn't explain, there wasn't time to explain, people were going out shaking hands with him.

We had a coffee after the service. I went into the church hall and again he said, "I've been set free." He said for 30 years he had had with him the lack of assurance. He said, "I came to the point that I felt I had to give up. How could I preach? How could I try to help other people when I'm not certain myself?" But he said, "I've been set free." He was full of joy. He said, "This woman, you speak to her, she's been set free as well." I find that moving. It's where we in the church have failed to present Christ and the finished work of Christ. I feel it very strongly... I found it in my own life, and I try to preach it.

115. NOT I, BUT CHRIST

The faith of Christ

MM: You've been a parish minister for many years, and you've seen God's grace being given to people in the parish, and you see how people respond to that with faith. I'd like to ask you about what faith is.

DT: Faith is very important. I hesitate to use the word, a theological term – faith is bipolar. Are we justified by Christ's faith or by my faith? We're not justified, I'm not justified by my faith. My faith can go up and down, and sometimes be almost nonexistent, sadly. I'm justified by Christ's faith, the faith of Christ. My faith is important, but my faith is really a response to the faith of Christ. The primary thing is Christ's faith.

When we look at the New Testament, Galatians 2:20, I am crucified with Christ, but the life that I now live I live by the faith *of* Jesus Christ...*of* the Son of God. I don't know of any modern translation of Scripture that uses that translation. Every modern translation of Scripture that I know of says "faith *in* Christ." That means to me that the translators have altered the Greek to make faith *in* Christ. If it's "faith in Christ," in Greek you'd have a preposition and the dative, in Christ. But the Greek is not that. It's the genitive: *of* Christ. So...the life I live, I live by the faith *of* the Son of God.

That comes out many times in the New Testament. In Romans 3, Paul has been talking about the righteousness of God apart from the law, which is by the faith *of* Jesus Christ. Modern translations say faith *in* Jesus Christ. But am I justified by *my* faith in Christ? Never. I'm justified by Christ's faith. My faith is a response to that. So if you say "the faith of Christ," that's the Authorized Version, we're laying the whole weight of our salvation upon Jesus Christ.

If you think back to the Old Testament, the great lesson of the Old Testament, which Israel found hard to learn, was that salvation is entirely an act of God. God delivered Israel out of Egypt. They couldn't deliver themselves out of Egypt. That was entirely an act of God.

Such is human sin that very shortly after that, Moses went up on Mt. Sinai, he was away for 40 days...they prevailed on Aaron to make them a golden calf. We have these words, "Here are the gods which brought you out of Egypt." That golden calf, you might say, they were paying lip service to the fact that their deliverance was an act of God, but it was an act of their own human ingenuity and strength. That's a great sin — that by their own strength they could deliver themselves. The great lesson they had to learn was no, they'd been saved entirely by an act of God.

When God gave his word that was revealed through Moses, he gave them

the laws of worship. All those laws of worship which accompanied the word were to teach Israel they could only worship God in God's way, and therefore these laws of worship are given meticulously. The tent, in every detail, the furniture of the building, every detail of worship, in the sacrifices and the great feasts were given to them. They could not worship in their own way, they had to worship only in God's way because each of these forms of worship and sacrifices are symbolic, representing God breaking through to make atonement for the people.

They are given circumcision. They were a sinful people, and yet a reminder that despite their sin, God, the Holy God, had entered into a covenant of grace binding them to himself. That circumcision, that perpetual reminder that they were sinful, a perpetual reminder that despite their sin God had bound himself to them in a bond of love, was a symbol anticipating the day when God himself would come and break through to be cut off, circumcised for his people.

The great lesson all through the Old Testament was: salvation is entirely of God, not of us. That's the great lesson that's picked up in the New Testament, fulfilled in Jesus Christ, encapsulated, if you like, in that phrase, "The life I now live, I live by the faith of the Son of God."

Take the two parables in Luke 15 — the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin. If we ask ourselves who suffers by the loss...there's no indication the sheep was the least bothered by being lost, and certainly the coin wasn't bothered because it couldn't feel a thing. It was the owner who felt the loss. It was the owner who suffered. It was the owner who took the initiative, who came in search of the lost, and who searched and went on searching until he finds, and then rejoices.

We have in those two parables a gathering up of the whole story of the gospel. It is encapsulated in those two parables. Here is God who feels the loss of this world, of humankind who are lost to God — not lost in the geographical sense, but lost in the sense that men and women are no longer living in fellowship with God. God feels that loss. He suffers. God takes initiative. God comes and searches and searches, and that search takes him to the cross and to the resurrection, and God rejoices. Those two parables set up the whole story of the gospel.

It shows that the gospel is totally different from every other religion in the world. Every other religion is concerned with man seeking to obey certain rules and regulations in order to achieve salvation. It's what man can do, how man can work out his salvation. The gospel is entirely different. It's a joyful announcement that God has come in Jesus Christ. God has searched, in the cross and resurrection. Here God finds and restores and God rejoices. That's

a glorious thing.

So that little phrase in Galatians 2:20 rounds out a number of passages in the New Testament. We are saved by Christ, by Christ's faithfulness. We've got to respond, we've got to receive, and that is a wholehearted receiving. It's a wholehearted surrender.

MM: That's our faith that comes in?

DT: That's our faith, but our faith is a response to his faith. Jesus' faith is prior.

MM: But if we are saved by his faith, don't we have to do anything, or has he done it all for us?

DT: He's done it all for us. Absolutely everything. There's nothing left for us to do but to accept in thanks. If you come and give me a present, a gift, what can I do? I can answer, "No, I don't want that" and turn away, or I could say, "Thank you" and simply accept. God comes to us and offers himself to us, he offers his forgiveness, his gift of life. All we can do is accept it or reject it. As we say thank you, that's our acceptance.

MM: Doesn't the New Testament say that we *should* have faith in Christ?

DT: Indeed. We are called to believe. But what does that mean? Faith isn't something that we produce out of ourselves out of our own resources. It's a response to his faith, and it's the gift of God.

MM: So I can't take credit for it.

DT: Paul says that "by grace are you saved through faith, and that not in yourselves, it is a gift in God so that no one can boast." As a church, and again I take this personally as a minister, we have not clearly got that across in our preaching and proclamation. Far too often we present what Christ has done. We say Christ died for you, has forgiven you, now it's over to you to accept. You pray, you repent, you read the Bible, and so on. We're laying a burden on people to do something. Salvation in that context is partly what God does and partly what we do. We cooperate — and that is totally wrong. We can do nothing at all except accept it in thanksgiving.

MM: If Jesus has done it all for us, would we say that he has prayed for us? Has he done our response for us?

DT: Everything for us. Absolutely. Many evangelicals limit Christ's salvation to the death of Christ. They say that Christ died for us and that is something apart from us and because of his death, we can be forgiven and receive salvation. As my brother James used to say, that if you're sick, a doctor can come, he can diagnose your problem, this is your illness, write out a prescription, give it to you, go away. You take that medicine, you get well. Far too often, that's the kind of gospel that we preach. Christ has died, Christ has risen, and there you are, you get on with it.

MM: Like the forgiveness is some commodity that's handed over to us.

DT: It's not like that. Christ has done everything — he's given himself, and his life for us. That's what we're asked to receive. We can't separate the work of Christ, the death of Christ on the cross, from the whole ministry or the resurrection, but sadly, many Christians do. In a great deal of preaching we often do.

The life of Christ

MM: The Gospels have a lot more information in them than just a story of the death of Christ — they've got a lot about his life as well. What are those stories there for us? What are they showing us about Jesus' life for us?

DT: We can't separate the person of Christ from his teaching and from his work. The whole thing belongs together. Calvin used to use a phrase that we're not presented with a naked Christ. He comes to us clothed in his life, death and resurrection. It's all important. He lived out his life for us, and we're asked to receive him in all his fullness.

Put it this way — that when God became man, we're faced with an incredible miracle where God broke into this world. It's a staggering fact that he came down to our level in Jesus Christ, and he took our flesh and blood. He remained God and at the same time, he became man. Not only an individual man, which he was, but a representative man, where he identified himself with each one of us — with you, with me, with all of us.

In identifying himself with us, you might say he did two things. He took our sinful life with all its faults, failings, sins and sicknesses, and he brought on the condemnation, died, and took it all away. At the same time, in becoming man, he sanctified our human life and turned our human life around, living a life of perfect obedience or righteousness. In the resurrection, he gives us himself, he gives us that new life, his life and our life. It's a total thing. We are totally letting go of our old life with a total receiving of this new life. There are no half measures. Paul says, "Be clothed with Christ in his righteousness."

MM: It's not just his life before the crucifixion and resurrection but his life afterwards as well.

DT: He rose as man, and ascended as man, and he reigns as man, and he's our high priest as man, and that's important. The whole of our life, it is not I, but Christ. In every situation, in every area of life, we've got to learn to live that out in such a way that in every situation, it's not I but Christ.

New life in Christ

MM: Once we realize that and respond to that, how does life change for

us? What difference is it going to make in our life? Can we live a rotten life until we die and just before we die say yes, I'd like to sign onto the program?

DT: Three times in the epistle to the Romans, Paul is answering questions that were put to him — can I sin that grace may abound? He says no, that's impossible. To receive Christ means that we've shared in his death — death to our own life, death to all our sins, that we might share in the resurrection. We can only enter the kingdom of God through death and resurrection, and that's a total thing. It's a death to our old way of life, it's a death to our sin. If we have received Christ, sadly, we'll go on sinning, but death is no longer the power that reigns over us. We can't go on sinning. John brings that out in his epistles, "We can't go on sinning and yet believe in Christ," in other words, if we go on sinning, we don't really, in a deeper sense, believe in Christ. We're not really followers of Christ.

MM: Is that what the Bible is talking about when it uses the word *salvation* — that it's not just a ticket into heaven but it's this entire package of taking on Christ, of dying, of rising — is all that encapsulated?

DT: Yes. It's a receiving of a totally new life in Christ. We receive Christ once and for all, and we go on and on receiving Christ as a continuous process. It is a total thing. Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters. You can only serve one or the other." If we seek to receive Christ as our Lord, he is the one we serve. There's no half measures. As long as we are here on this earth, none of us are perfect, sadly, we go on sinning. But the Lord is our Lord and king. He is dominant. So he picks us up, cleanses us, renews us — day by day we start afresh.

MM: Some days I don't feel very fresh or new. It feels like the old person is still there. How do these go side by side?

DT: That's true, but we don't go by our feelings. We go by what is real. When Christ gave himself to us, he gives himself to us. That's something very real. We've got to keep looking away from ourselves to Christ. If I look inward upon myself, it's only darkness. There's no certainty. We're full of doubt. It's when I look away to Christ and say yes, he is life, he is light, he is salvation, there is joy, there is assurance. Life is a constantly looking unto Christ. As long as we look unto Christ we are able to share in the victory of the cross and the resurrection. As we look unto Christ we are able to manifest something of the real life and power of the Holy Spirit.

MM: You talked about the resurrection of Jesus and the Holy Spirit in us. Is that the way in which we are sharing in the resurrection of Jesus now?

DT: Yes, it's through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, you might say, is Jesus' other self, although the Holy Spirit is distinct from Jesus, and yet the Holy Spirit is Jesus' other person. The Holy Spirit comes to live within us, to

reign over us. That's Christ living in us. As the Holy Spirit comes, he seals within us the finished work of Christ, the new life of Christ, so that Christ is there, and Paul says, "It's not I who live, it's Christ who lives within me." He lives within...by God, the Holy Spirit.

Forgiveness

MM: You say that the forgiveness that we give others, it is really the forgiveness of Jesus working through us.

DT: It has to be. If we're not forgiving other people, then there's a blockage. The Holy Spirit isn't able, isn't working, isn't flowing through us. He demands it, to receive that love and forgiveness, that we show Christ's forgiveness one to another and forgive one another.

I was chaplain to a fairly large hospital in my last parish, and they had one wing for people who had a nervous breakdown. Doctors and nurses used to sit with patients. I would go in and chat to them all. One day I went into the sitting room, and there was a woman, maybe about mid-30s, sitting on a couch looking at family photographs. I sat down and she showed me her photographs — son and daughter about 12 and 14.

I kept wondering why she was in the hospital, and I looked at these photographs, and I said, "You love them." She said, "Oh, very much so," absolutely she loved her son and daughter. She showed me a photograph of her husband, and I looked at him and said, "You love your husband." She said, "Oh, very much. He's a marvelous man and it's a great privilege to be married to him."

When we were finished, I looked at her and said, "Why are you here in hospital?" She said, "I don't want to live." I said, "You don't want to live? You've just shown me the family photographs, your son and daughter and husband, you tell me you love them." She said, "Yes, I do. I have a marvelous husband." "Why don't you want to live?" She said, "I have no idea, but I'm terrified to be alone. If I'm alone, I'm going to do something violent, and that's why I'm here in hospital."

I asked her the question which I often ask as a minister, "Have you had a happy childhood?" She said, "No, not at all." She told me one of these sad, dreadful stories, that her parents were both alcoholic and separated when she was 5. Her mother had married an alcoholic who physically and sexually abused her. Out came this terrible, ghastly story, so I felt pain as this woman told me this story. I said, "I'm terribly sorry."

I said, "Could you ever forgive your parents?" She said, "Never." I said, "Have you ever thought that there is a relationship between the fact that you can't forgive your parents and you don't want to live?" She said, "No, I've

never thought that. No one, no doctor has ever suggested it.” I said, “I’m suggesting there’s a real relationship. You’ve been sinned against. I’m pained by your story, you’ve suffered, you’ve been wronged, and what can I say? I’m horrified and sad. But God has forgiven us everything, and we deserve nothing. But to receive God’s forgiveness, it does mean that we have to share God’s forgiveness with other people and forgive them.”

Then I said, “You can’t forgive them. You’ve been sinned against, you’ve been hurt dreadfully. All you can do is to ask God to give you a gift which you haven’t got, and none of us have, but a gift to forgive these parents of yours.” So we talked away — she was a nominal member of the church in another parish. At the end I said, “Would you like to pray?” She said yes. So I prayed with her, committed her, and this sad story, to the Lord, and asked God to give her the gift that she might forgive her parents. The result was dramatic, and the hospital discharged her within the week. To forgive is healing. It allows the Holy Spirit to flow through us, giving us life, the life of Christ. That’s the important thing.

MM: Forgiveness doesn’t mean that the initial act was somehow okay.

DT: No — it was an evil thing, a ghastly thing for the parents – their behavior, the treatment of this daughter, for her to be sexually abused. It was totally wrong. But from her point of view, it was a real grace to be able to give in that situation. That’s what God demands.

MM: The gift wasn’t so much for her parents as it was for her.

DT: It had a profound effect on her, in healing. But she had to forgive her parents. Hopefully, that will bring a sense of healing to them where they might be able to turn to God.

116. NOT MY WILL, BUT YOURS

Missionary life in China

J. Michael Fezell: I wanted to ask you about your childhood, your story, how you came to be interested in ministry, how that came about, and what it was like to be in the Torrance household.

David Torrance: I was born into a very privileged home in the sense it was a very committed Christian home; both parents that were missionaries. My grandfather was a small-dairy farmer. But father, as it were, broke away. He went into the ministry. He went to China, and he there was a minister evangelist for 40 years. Mother went out also as a young missionary, and they met in China and married in China. So my family, six of us, were all born in China. I'm the youngest of six.

Those were turbulent days in China. West China was ruled by warlords. One might also call them brigand chiefs, because each had their own army, they fought, they plundered, they killed. Life was turbulent. But in that context of missionary serving, father served. His base was Chengdu, 1500 miles upriver from Shanghai, and from there he worked up into the mountains toward Tibet.

It was a life of faith, tremendous commitment to Christ, and we always had family worship. I never remembered a time in my life when we didn't have family worship — when the family came together, they were reading from the Bible, they prayed, and that carried us on through our childhood, through our student days, until finally we married and went our separate ways. We still continue, when we come together, but there's only two of us left in my family now. We still would meet and pray together.

Prayer was an important thing in our household. We always had it. I don't suppose our family would have survived, literally, without prayer, because, as I mentioned, these were very turbulent years when the family was in China. When the family left, there had been severe rioting. A missionary friend of my mother was beheaded in the street near the home. They rioted, wanting to break into our home. But we were wonderfully protected...there was a tremendous faith in God.

The Bible was central in our family life. When I had reached my sixth birthday, Mother showed me the calendar and said there's seven days a week, there's 52 weeks in the year. If you read three chapters of the Bible every day, five on Sunday, you'll read it through in a year short of a week, you'll read it by Christmas. She said that when you take the Bible, always pray and ask God to speak to you through it. When you hear God speaking to you through it,

you'll know that this is the word of God.

She said, form that habit, because when you grow up many people will say all sorts of terrible things about the Bible and dismiss it, but when you have heard God speaking to you through the Bible, you'll know that that is God's word. Nothing will shake it. So the Bible played an important part in our whole upbringing. I was never given any doctrine of Scripture – I was simply told it was the word of God, and if we prayed and asked God to speak, he would speak.

In addition to our family prayers, books played a big part of our family life. My youngest brother, Tom, always called my father the evangelist of the family, and he called my mother the theologian of the family. They guided us in our reading so that they introduced us to a lot of Christian works in our school days and discussed the Scripture, discussed doctrine, theology, in a simple way. It was very much part of our upbringing and family life.

JMF: What was it like for you as a child and with your siblings living in China? Under the circumstances of the dangerous conditions politically, what sort of freedom did you have to go far from the house or to be in the city alone, or what was it like?

DT: I was too young when I came home from China – I was three. The older members of the family remember it vividly because they went to school there. Apart from the turbulence, it was a marvelous country in which to grow up. There was a freedom which people didn't enjoy here. Father had a mule and a horse, and that was part of the family, so the family went to school on horseback. Father used to complain. He said that once Tom got on that mule, he would no longer walk – that mule insisted on galloping. Now, not many children go to school on the back of a mule and a horse.

JMF: Especially a galloping mule.

DT: Tom was mischievous. He was called by the Chinese a mischief. It had its dangers, but it had its freedom and its excitement.

JMF: There must have been a number of people who were glad you were there ... You mentioned that there were riots later on. Where did the animosity come from?

DT: On one hand, as people came to Christ, they were friendly and loyal. Dad, for the last 25 years of his ministry, he was agent for the American and British Bible Society. Not that he looked after printing or anything of that sort (the Chinese did that), but he was superintendent (when he retired there were many tributes to father written in Chinese...I have some at home on the wall) ...and one of the things that means a lot to me is that in his last year, he and his co-laborers distributed over a million portions of Scripture

in West China. When he retired, the church said that no one had done more to forward the gospel in West China.

On the other hand, you had these brigand chiefs, and it was their way of life. But after 1917, the Communist revolution in China, the Communists began pouring in rifles, weapons, and communistic, atheistic literature. The weapons came into the hands of these brigand armies, and also the literature. That aroused a tremendous or increased an antipathy to foreigners and the Christian faith. That's what led up to the final rise, when the family came home.

They took a difficult decision. Father was fluent in Chinese. He had quite a knowledge. After he came home, Father and I were invited by a Chinese noble, an emperor, if we would have a meal at his home. His parents had come over and fled from Communist China. The mother had no interest, and the father very little, so this noble wanted them to meet my father. He said to me he could not get over my father. He said when his back was turned you would not know that he was not Chinese. He had quite a remarkable knowledge.

He went back alone, for seven years; that was quite a sacrifice for the family. We remembered him and he kept in touch...we wrote every week. Mother insisted that each one of us write to him, and he wrote to us, so that despite the gap, it was still, you might say a remarkably close family, and once again there were great answers to prayer.

For example, just after father went back, the family settled for a short period near Glasgow in the west of Scotland and then moved to Edinburgh. Mother went to the local church, attended a local prayer meeting of about 27 led by one of the elders. She said she didn't know anyone there, but the elder said, are there any subjects for prayer tonight, any people you would like us to pray for? Mother said yes, her husband was a missionary in West China and she had a deep feeling that he needed prayer at that moment. She said it was lovely that one after another in that room prayed for my father though they didn't know him.

Mother wrote to father and told him, and he wrote back and said, could you tell me the day of that prayer meeting and the time of day? It so happened on that particular day and the very time of day, his life was spared, in the sense that a communist army... (I say communist; I don't know how much communism they really do, but they were influenced by their atheistic literature and nationalism)...came up to this mountain village to search for my father and a fellow missionary, and they searched every house in that village bar one. They walked past the door at the same time as that prayer

meeting in Glasgow. The family saw many answers to prayer like that. Prayer was very much part of the family life of all of us.

JMF: How long was he separated from the family during that period?

DT: Seven years. It was difficult... Father opened the Christian work in West China up among the tributaries of the Yangtze River, the Min was one of the main ones, and among people called the Qiang [Sichuan province, west of Chengdu]. I suppose he would be the first Western missionary ever to enter those parts. He had the language, he had the dialect, there was no one else to take over. He felt that God wanted him to continue this work and to establish it, so he went back. The church there was smaller perhaps than in other parts of China, but it nonetheless became deep-rooted.

Shortly after he came back, he received a parcel. He opened it (and I was there in the room with him), and he was a bit astonished at first. It was a Chinese Bible, but he had several Chinese Bibles. When he opened it and he looked at what we would say the back cover...but that is the beginning — they start in what we would say is the back and work forward — there was a story of that Bible. This Communist had come up to this mountain village, it was a Christian village. They would take the grain, the food, and they'd burn it — tragic things — to try to wipe them out. They would burn every Bible. The Christians had forewarning, and they took the Bibles and buried them in a cave, and when the Communists passed over, they dug it up again and sent one of the Bibles to my father. The story was inside the cover with the words that just as this Bible has been resurrected, the church in China will be resurrected, which I found moving.

I had that Bible in my possession for a number of years, but when my brother Tom went back on one of his visits to West China and up to those villages where my father worked, he took it with him because of the shortage of Bibles, and he gave it to the son of the man who sent it to my father. I was sorry to part with the Bible, but they needed the Bibles and that was the right thing to happen.

Moving into ministry

JMF: How did you then begin to or become oriented toward ministry after your father came back?

DT: I believed in the Lord all the days of my life. A living presence of Christ was real to all of us in the family. Prayer was real. I read the Bible every year (but nowadays I read it three times a year). The faith was real to all of us. The Christian life was real. The turning point for me was the army. I did a year at university, did classics for a year, and then joined the army in the

end of 1942. I felt I would say yes, I would enter the ministry, but I didn't want to be a minister.

I moved through different units in the army – in wartime you're shifted around according to where you were needed. I was part of special assault troops doing beach landings. We did a lot of rock climbing, explosives, and on and off boats. We were the British Army and they were Americans. We were due to go to the Channel Islands, because that was the only part of Britain that was occupied by Germany. We were on standby, so we knew that it tomorrow, next week, we may be sent over...

I remember saying to myself, many people were not going to come back, and I hope I don't come back, because if I come back, God will put me in the ministry. Quite mad, absolutely mad when I was young, and I felt no, I'd rather not come back than be put into the ministry. I had a deep feeling underneath that by hook, by crook, God would make sure I came back, because he was determined to put me in the ministry. That hung over me as a tremendous cloud.

JMF: Why did you not want to go into ministry?

DT: I suppose it was an anomalous situation, because the Lord meant a lot to me. I continued to read the Bible; I carried a Bible in my pocket in my army uniform and had it with me all through the army life. A passage which really troubled me was Acts 2, that here the disciples, Peter and the others, were preaching, and some in the multitude thought they were drunk and laughed and scorned at them. Somehow or other that horrified me. I didn't want to be up there on a platform and be mocked. Perhaps I was strange. I lived in this anomalous situation where I read the Bible, I prayed every day, the Lord meant a lot to me, but I was afraid to let go.

There were a number of incidents that happened that spoke powerfully to me. We were in a training scheme in the hills north of England. I was in a tent with another three lads. In that type of army exercise, you don't get into pajamas, you lay down in your uniform, your coat, you're allowed to take off your pack. When I thought they were asleep, I pulled out my Bible and started reading it, and one of the lads who wasn't asleep said, "Dave, are you reading a Bible?" I said yes. "Why not read it to us all?" I knew God was speaking to me. They weren't Christian folk, they didn't go to church; one of them was a hard swearer. They listened attentively, and I felt very humble. I felt God saying, you are called to speak the gospel.

In this assault brigade where I had said I'd rather not come back than go into ministry, there was a church three miles away. I walked down there, and came back. I had a letter to my parents, and I hunted around for a postbox.

I asked another soldier where there was a postbox. He said, "I'll show you." He took me, and we got chatting, and he asked, "You want a cup of tea?" So we had a cup of tea. He said, "What have you been doing?" I said, "I've been to church." I didn't say anything more. We were in the same assault brigade but in a different unit. He had done about two years at university and we got chatting away. We finally agreed that we both had a Saturday afternoon off, next Saturday, so we would meet and go sailing.

When we came in, he said to me, "When I saw you last week you had been to church. Are you going to church tomorrow?" I said yes. He said, "Can I come with you?" That happened for three weeks. We went out on Saturday afternoon sailing, went to church, and when we were coming back the three miles, he suddenly turned to me and said, "Dave, you're a Christian." I said yes. He said, "You've never talked to me about Christ."

That shook me. I felt God was saying I put you here, this is what you've got to do. That spoke heavily to me. He was one of those remarkable men who you shared the faith and he simply accepted...he believed. He was a university man. I had to give him a Bible. I don't think he had ever in his life been to church before. Yet you just shared the faith and he believed, and he entered the Christian faith in the mildest way. I felt very much the hand of God in me.

There was a third incident... I went to India and met on the boat a man I was very attracted to. He had been at university for four years. He was an atheist, or I should say an agnostic. We had many vigorous discussions on his humanism, which I felt was wrong. Apart from his humanism, we got on well together and we shared a tent together when we arrived in India. In the tropics it's noisy — all sorts of insects and creatures, and I was lying in my bunk in the tent and he came in. He saw me, and I knew he took a swipe at me and he said, "Oh this marvelous world we're in."

I was a bit, to use an army term, browned off. He disturbed the peace of my evening, and I said, "Shut up." I said, "You're talking dunces and you know it. Sit down." Very blunt, very rude. He sat down and was quiet. Then he suddenly said, "I'd like to become a Christian." That shook me. For weeks we had discussed and not a single suggestion that he wanted to, was open to the faith. We knelt and we prayed. He committed his life to Christ.

I felt that God's hand was on my shoulder and said this is what you're called to do, and you'll do it. It should have filled me with joy. It troubled me. There were other experiences. At the end of the war I had a marvelous leave climbing up in the Himalayas, came back, picked up smallpox, which wasn't very helpful.

JMF: In the Himalayas?

DT: On the way back. In smallpox, your temperature goes up, it dips down, and it goes up a second time. The second time is usually fatal. It's an interesting experience. I was in the jungle division, and I was put in a little hut by myself. It made me feel like a leper, all isolated, no one came. It didn't bother me in the slightest, and I wasn't downhearted in the slightest. I never thought I would die, although I knew I was pretty ill. I had the most incredible experience of the presence of Christ — sheer joy and thanksgiving. Maybe I was delirious, but I knew the closeness of Christ. I was filled with a sense of thanksgiving that I'd never had before.

I recovered, went back to my unit, because although the war was over, this was maybe October '45, the east was in a turbulent state, so the armistice, if you call it that, didn't mean a great deal to some of us. India was in uproar... To split India/Pakistan, two million people perished in those riots, never reported. Malaysia, Indonesia, the east was in turmoil.

I began to think, by the end of the year, the time is going to come when I'll leave the army. What am I going to do? I knew God was saying the ministry, and I said no. I'll be a medical missionary. Didn't want to be a doctor — anything rather than a minister. I was quite happy to go out. I'd seen enough of the poor and the destitute to spend my life with the poor and the destitute. For three days I was in total turmoil. I don't think I could talk civilly to someone. I might punch someone in the nose, which I didn't do, you'd be court-marshaled in the army if you tried that.

I had a tent to myself. I approached that tent, I can't put it into words, I knew God was there. As I entered that tent, I knew God was saying the ministry, and I said no. Hard to put into words, I felt physically that God had caught me by the scruff of the neck and said all right, you'll never again have any peace of mind, and no joy. I knelt down on the ground and said, "All right, Lord, I'll be a minister, it's your lookout." That was my words. It was the most disgruntled prayer I've ever prayed.

Something incredible happened. That whole cloud that hung over me vanished. It was like the birds were singing, and the ministry, I couldn't get over this, became very attractive. I was staggered that whereas I had hated the thought of the ministry, I now really looked forward to ministry and wanted to be a minister.

When I left the army I came back to university. I did four years of philosophy degree, then on to theology. I felt that God was with me in the ministry. I've often looked back to that because there are times in the ministry I don't think there's anything more rewarding than the life in the ministry.

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What could be more rewarding than to see people come to faith in Christ and be converted, to see people helped, comforted, filled with the joy and freedom of the Lord? It's been a marvelous life, a marvelous calling. It's a tremendous privilege, but at times difficult. Many a time I've said to the Lord, you made me a minister, and it's up to you to do something about it.

117. THE IMPORTANCE OF PRAYER IN PASTORAL WORK

JMF: When you first became a pastor and then through the course of your ministry, what are some of the experiences that stand out? What kinds of things did you find that churches need, that individuals need, and what did you have to have, and be as a pastor, to serve in that day?

DT: In the Bible, in Acts chapter 6, when a dispute arose about the expressing of some of the supplies to the poor, the needy, of the church, the apostles said, it's not right for us simply to give ourselves over to the practical affairs of distributing the poor, and they appointed seven deacons and he said (which I think is very important), "we will give ourselves to prayer and ministry of the word."

Looking back at my college days, although I had a very fine teacher, in college days we were each divided up. We each had a pastor. About 12 of us were given to Professor James S. Stewart, who is well known, a very godly man, professor of the New Testament...and we had a Bible study. He met with us individually, he met with us in a group, and he met with me individually. He was a very shy man, but he got there, he said, "What did you read from the Bible before you came to college today?" I was reading Exodus, I told him. He asked us, did we say our prayers? I don't think that's done today. I admired the man immensely.

We are called, as ministers, to be ministers of the word in a ministry of prayer. Sadly, in the ministry, we pass over that question of prayer, but it's there. The apostles said, we appoint deacons to look after the ministerial side so that we can devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word. I find that very important. I had three parish churches. I had a period of evangelism, and then three parish churches. In my second parish, although there were great rewards — I saw people converted — nonetheless there were great difficulties in that parish, and I found myself having to pray an hour every morning before breakfast for that parish. When our prayer life flags, our ministry flags, even if we do all the right things.

I came home to it very early in the ministry. I remember preaching a sermon on the atonement. People were moved and stirred. I was a probational minister at that time. I didn't have my own parish and I was called to preach in another church. There, it went entirely in the wrong way, and I preached the sermon without prayer, and it fell flat. I felt rebuked, that this is God's word, there's nothing automatic about it. It's so important that at each fresh occasion we give ourselves to the Lord and we pray for the Holy

Spirit to work.

That came home to me powerfully when I was still probationary. I was a post-graduate student and I was invited to preach in July in a glorious summer weekend over in the west of Scotland, the west highlands. They said they'd put me up in a hotel, and I'd do services. I went in the wrong way, a lesson I never forgot. I put six sermons in my bag and went off. I went early after lunch, I arrived at the hotel, and I thought I'll have a quick look at my sermon and go for a long, five, eight mile walk in the sunshine in the west highlands — it's a lovely country. So I prayed, opened my bag, pulled out six sermons, read them, and I couldn't preach them at all. I felt frustrated, so I knelt down again — my parents always knelt when they said their prayers at home — and prayed and asked what God wanted to say. It came to me clearly — the resurrection. That bothered me.

I read through my six sermons again, and they were further away than ever. So I knelt a third time and prayed, and this time it was absolutely clear — the resurrection. I thought no, I've got to have one of these sermons. I read through these six sermons, and I couldn't preach them at all. The one thing that really kept, the resurrection...so I said, all right then, it will have to be resurrection. I felt frustrated, because now I would have to sit down on a glorious sunny afternoon and write a new sermon on the resurrection.

But in my state of frustration, nothing would come. I sat there in my frustration thinking of this sunshine, the warmth, the west highlands vanishing away. Here I was, how would I prepare this sermon? At 10:00 at night, I had one sentence on the paper, and I said, "Lord, if it's the resurrection, you have to speak to these people. I have nothing to say." I went to bed, slept, got up in the morning, my mind was still a blank. I said to the Lord, "Lord, if it's the resurrection, you have to do something about it." I went to church early and met the session clerk, who greeted me and said, "Could you make the intonations?" Because last night, their beloved senior elder died, and he wanted to break the news to the congregation. In some astonishing way, that sermon just flowed. I felt very rebuked.

A few years later, I was in Oban, again this time in the west highlands. I was sitting in the car. We were going to go to an island, Lismore, but my wife was shopping. As I was waiting, the session clerk came out on the pavement, so I rolled down the window and we greeted one another. He said, "Yes, I remember you. You're the minister who came all prepared on the occasion that our senior elder died."

I said, "Would you like a coffee?" He and I went for a coffee. I said, "Could I correct... I'm afraid I went to your church entirely in the wrong

way. I did not go prepared. But by the miraculous hand of God, he took over that situation because I did not go the right way.” I’ve never forgot that lesson. The ministry is not like a normal job. We can’t just write a sermon. It may be doctrinally, theologically, correct, a good sermon. But we have to go with the Spirit of the Lord, and we have to pray. I take seriously those words that the apostles said, “We will not handle the administration. We will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

The focal point of the ministry which I’ve always tried to keep before me is preaching, proclaiming the word, teaching the word, and the pastoral work — meeting people face-to-face. I’m not very good at administration. I’ll do it, but I don’t particularly enjoy it, and often I have let it go, because people are what matters. Your preaching and your pastoral work go hand-in-hand. When you’re meeting people, I always, as a minister, had a reading and prayer. I’d visit the homes, visit people in hospital. I always felt it was right to read something of the word of God and to pray.

Again and again, I’ve found that the real pastoral work opened up after you prayed with someone. You can meet a family, you can greet them, you can ask about their welfare and about their children, their holidays, but once you’ve had a prayer, then they open up and the real pastoral work begins. We are here to share the gospel, to help people come to Jesus Christ. As we meet face-to-face, we are there to help people come and meet the Lord. That’s the key of our ministry.

The vicarious humanity of Christ

JMF: Let’s shift gears and get into pastoral ministry a bit. The same principle seems to apply to the Christian life itself. Let’s talk about what we call the vicarious humanity of Christ and how that works in a person’s life and how God deals with sin and with righteousness in the life of a believer.

DT: You used the word *vicarious*, which is a Latin word used by theologians. It means someone acting, speaking on behalf of someone else, for their benefit. This is precisely what God came to do in Jesus Christ —he came to take our place, act on our behalf, and work out a great salvation.

Many Christians, unfortunately, many evangelicals, restrict the atonement to the death of Christ, and therefore interpret it in a legal or judicial way. They’re correct to do so. There is a judicial element there, that Christ died for us and he rose again, and the virtue is that our guilt is removed, we are set free. But if we *restrict* the atonement to the death of Christ, then many problems arise. We are saying that the death of Christ is not part of the whole ministry of Christ and is separate from the resurrection. If we restrict it to

the death of Christ, we are also throwing people back on themselves, their own resources, and almost inevitably, they become legalistic.

JMF: For an average person listening to what you're saying, let me try to recap and you tell me if I'm saying it correctly. It's common for Christians to think, and many times they're taught, that the key element of Christian faith is that "Christ died for your sins, therefore believe in him and your sins will be taken away — now go your way and do the best you can to be a good person." The focus is on the death of Christ paying the penalty for your sins and therefore removing your sins, and it stops there, as though that's all there is to it, but there's far more to it than that. Is that somewhat what you're saying?

DT: Indeed. If we restrict the atonement to the death of Christ, it creates a multiplicity of problems. Often the great tendency there is to want the blessings of Christ rather than the person of Christ. That is a problem which we see in the liberal world, like Bultmann. It's equally a problem in the evangelical world — a tendency to want the blessings of Christ and not the person of Christ. A key phrase in the New Testament is the little phrase, "in Christ," the Greek, *en Christou*, in Christ. That phrase, "in Christ," in Jesus Christ, in the Lord, occurs something like 132 times in the New Testament. So if you ask me what is salvation, how are we saved? Yes, we are saved by the work of Christ, but by *union* with Christ. We can't separate union with Christ and the work of Christ any more than we can separate the work of Christ and the person of Christ.

JMF: You're saying that most of us want to receive the blessing of having our sins forgiven, but we don't want Christ to be part of our life, in fact *being* our life, we want the pain of sin taken away, but we'd rather...now that you're done, would you please just stay next door?

DT: That's common, and it runs through all the churches. It is unbiblical. If you were to ask me, "How would you sum up Paul's doctrine in his epistles?" I would have to say that we are saved by grace and union with Christ. We're not simply saved by grace, we're not simply saved by union with Christ, it's the two together — union with Christ and salvation by grace — because God came down — an incredible, staggering fact — that God came down to this earth and took flesh and blood as the man Jesus, although remaining God.

As man, he entered into our humanity. He was a particular man, and yet also a representative man at the same time. As he entered into our humanity, he took all our sins, all our weaknesses, all our sufferings, and he died bearing the connotation. But he did more than that. In taking our humanity, your

humanity, mine, he became you, he became me. He sanctified our humanity, he turned it roundabout. He perfectly obeyed God the Father on our behalf. He prayed to the Father on our behalf. In the resurrection he offers himself to us. He offers us this new life, his life for our life, your life, my life, renewed, sanctified, so that to receive salvation is to receive Christ, to receive the new life of Christ. It's a total thing.

To receive Christ is to receive the fullness of God that Paul talks about — the fullness of the Spirit. It also means on our part a total surrender, a total letting go. There's tremendous joy in that because it means that in so far as Christ has done everything for us — he is for us in every situation in life, in every event in life, in every occasion. There's no situation in life that we face but Christ is there, and it's always “not I but Christ.” Not I but Christ when I have a great decision to make, not I but Christ when I worship, because worship means that Christ alone is the one who worships the Father, he alone enters the presence of the Father. When we are united with Christ, Christ is with us, in us, we are in him. In Christ we enter the Father. So it's in Christ we can worship, in Christ we pray. We don't know how to pray. We try to pray in our own efforts, and prayer is then a frustration. We try to pray and set aside times we pray, we know how we fail. But Christ prays. If we keep our eyes on Christ and remember that all through life, every step of life it's not I but Christ, we're on the victory side.

Many years ago I had a friend who became a minister, who in turn had a close friend who was a professional footballer. His friend, a footballer, was a Christian. But he thought of the Christian life in terms of football. He said one day, it was like me trying to play football. Jesus was standing at the touch line watching, and every time I came near the goal, I missed it. It was frustrating. But something marvelous happened. Jesus and I changed places. I now stand at the touch line. I watch Jesus playing, and he scores the goal every time, and all I can do is stand and cheer. It may be a simple story of a professional footballer — that to me is the Christian life. The whole of the Christian life is centered on Christ, it's in Christ, it's a union with Christ where Christ takes over because he's accomplished everything for us — for our forgiveness, for our redemption, for our reconciliation with our Father, our entry to the Father's presence, our entry to the kingdom of heaven.

JMF: So in speaking of faith, faith is in Christ himself, not in specific things or actions per se, but in him. It isn't even a matter of our faith, we are actually entering into *his* faith.

DT: Absolutely. Faith is a way of being related to Jesus Christ. Our faith is important. Without faith we are lost. You can come and give me a gift, and

if I say no, I don't want it, I go without it. God comes to us with his gift, and we can say no, we don't want it, and we're lost.

A story that means a lot to me is of the announcement to Mary of the birth of Christ. Here was this young maiden, and the angel came and announced to her God's will for her life. He announced that she would have a child. That child would be born of God and would be the Son of God. Mary said, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord." She responded, saying, "Yes Lord, let it all happen just as you want it." Mary had the freedom to say yes, and she said yes. She had the freedom to say no, in which case God would have chosen some other young woman. The marvelous thing is that Mary said yes. But when she said yes, that's all she could do. She couldn't create that child in her womb — that was a miraculous happening from God.

When you and I first come to Christ, God comes, he confronts us, he says, "I love you, I've forgiven you, I'll give you all the fullness of God, I'll bring you into the fellowship of the Father." All you and I can do, like Mary, is say, "Yes Lord," or "No Lord," "Thank you Lord." Our thanksgiving is our response to God's glorious announcement of his love, forgiveness and salvation. It's very important. But what matters is that our faith is a response to Christ, to his faithfulness, but it's not a work.

Far too often we throw back the responsibility to men and women. That's utter frustration. We get weary. Ministers, I'm afraid, approach the same way. They throw themselves into the ministry — I speak as a minister — it could be easy to let our devotional life, our time with the Lord, slip into the background. We try to go on under our own steam and our own effort, and we utterly fail.

JMF: What often is asked is something along this line, "You're telling me that Christ has done everything necessary for my salvation and that everything I experience he is doing for me and through me, and that sounds like I don't have to do anything, and Christ does it all. I don't see how that's consistent with the Scripture. It just sounds like some kind of universalism." How do we respond to that?

DT: It depends what people mean by the use of the word universalism. On one hand it might mean, and rightly mean, that God loves the whole world and that when he came in Jesus Christ he redeemed the world — the salvation, the offer of salvation, is for the whole world. In that sense, I'm a universalist. It does not mean, however, that all people accept the salvation of Christ, that all people are saved. Sadly, no. The Bible never says that — we are free to accept or reject. God doesn't send anyone to hell. He weeps over this world. Jesus wept over Jerusalem. He loved the people of Jerusalem and

was sad that they were rejecting him. Because they're rejecting him, they would suffer, and suffer terribly. If we reject Christ, we reject his salvation, we reject life, we're lost. That's the horrors of hell. I believe in hell. If we talk about the wrath of God, the wrath of God is really the wrath of the Lamb. God doesn't want us to perish. He doesn't want any sinner to perish. He loves everyone. The glorious thing is to be able to go to anyone and say that God loves you and God has forgiven you and he wants you. But we have to respond, and if we don't, we're lost.

Responding to Christ

JMF: What is the nature of our response?

DT: Our response is, as I have said, a response of thanksgiving. It's an acknowledgement. As a pastor, I have often asked people to read certain portions of Scripture. When I've asked them to read a passage of Scripture and I've gone back to that home, they told me they read it. There are certain passages I use a great deal. Psalm 51 is a prayer of confession where David, a man of God in a remarkable way, called a friend of God, nonetheless sinned. The Bible doesn't gloss over the fact of his sin and that he committed adultery and murder in the sense that he was responsible for the death of Uriah the Hittite.

I've talked to people and we've got so far, and I've said, "Will you read Psalm 51," and I've found that they're converted on that Psalm, that God has spoken to them through it. I've generally said, when I've given them Psalm 51, to read another Psalm, one of the Psalms of thanksgiving, maybe Psalm 103 or like that. I remember being on mission and speaking to a couple of young people, aged about 21, on the street, inviting them to our meeting. I thought he was very aggressive, and if I had mentioned the name of Christ again I think he would have physically assaulted me. So I said, "Can I invite you to a cup of tea?" And she came. He was a young person that I don't suppose had ever been to church. But I tried to share the faith over the cup of tea, and I said, "Can I ask you to read Psalm 51?" She woke me up at 7:00 in the morning. I was still in my pajamas. She was on her way to work. She asked me about this Psalm, and that was her conversion. She was given words to pray. People come in different ways — some impressed by the love of Christ, a great many by an acceptance of the reality of sin.

Many years ago I met a brilliant student. He'd been done with school and was embarked on an honors course at university and said that after that, he hoped to go on to ministry and added the words, "But I'd like to go to a liberal college." That bothered me. Something didn't quite ring true. I felt compelled to pray for him. The more I prayed for him, the more I felt an

extraordinary compulsion to pray for him. I found myself praying continually for this chap. Finally it came to the point that for a fortnight I saw him every day either for a coffee, or an occasional meal.

Then I asked him to read 1 John chapter 1, and he told me he read it and as a result he could no longer pray. That bothered me. I prayed a lot about that. Then I phoned him up and said, “I asked you to read 1 John chapter 1, and you told me you did. Having read it, you told me you could no longer pray.” He said, “Yes.” I don’t find it easy to talk to a person — frankly, my knees shook. I felt I had to. I said, “The reason is because you’re a sinner, and you won’t acknowledge it. You want to gloss over it. It says if we say we have no sin, we’re a liar. The truth is not in us. It equally says that if we confess our sins, he is just and willing to forgive us our sins.” So I said, “Your problem is that you’re a sinner, and you have to confess it.”

I thought we parted company. The next three days if he saw me he’d cross the street. He wouldn’t come near me. I thought, “That’s the end of that relationship.” Then he phoned me up and said, “Who’s been talking about me?” “No one’s been talking about you.” He said, “Yes, why did you say what you did? You’ve been talking.” I said, “I haven’t mentioned you to a single mortal soul. I never mentioned you to a member of the family.” He said, “Then why did you say that?” I said, “I’d been praying for you. I felt God wanted me to say it.” He said, “Can I come round and see you?” So he came around and he told me his story. He had got into bad company and asked if I would pray for him. I said, “No, not unless you’re prepared to confess your sins.” He says, “Yes, I am.” So we prayed, I prayed, he prayed. I can still see his face — the sheer joy of the Lord. He said, “I feel all the joy of my childhood is back.”

Some people come that way. Others come in a different way — they’ve had problems, they feel the love of God has helped them, very often an illness. They’ve been comforted, they’ve been helped, or miraculously healed, and they see the hand of God. Everyone’s different. As pastors we have to learn to love people, to befriend people, and everyone’s different. There’s no uniform way of going about things.

But we have to pray... I found it helpful as a pastor when I was visiting a parish, the home of a parish, to have a brief word of prayer before knocking on each new door — that somehow God will take over and I didn’t know what to say... would God just say whatever he wanted to say. You just relax, you try to love your people, to enter into their joys and sorrows and interests and family life. And yet within that situation try to help them to an understanding of God.

118. ALREADY FORGIVEN

The Christian life

J. Michael Feazell: Reverend Torrance, it's a joy to have you back with us. I want to ask you to draw on your many years of pastoral experience to talk about a topic that has to do with how a Christian lives in light of the fact that they are union with Christ, and how a pastor should work with a congregation in light of the sin that so easily besets us and that we're surrounded with. How do those things work? We know that we're complete in Christ, we know that we're in union with Christ, we know that it's the vicarious humanity of Christ that makes us who we are. Yet, that doesn't mean that we can just not put any effort into serving God obediently. How does that work together?

David Torrance: That's a searching and important question. How do we live the Christian life? How do we, as pastors, help people live the Christian life, or indeed, to receive Christ? I think that's what you're asking. What I feel strongly about and I would say to myself as a minister (because I am part of the church in all my faults)...

Too often we say to people, "You must live the Christian life with the *help* of the Lord or with the help of the Holy Spirit." I think that's wrong. I have a car about three years old, and if it breaks down I'm not going to take it to the garage and say, "Could you lend me some tools so I can fix my car," or I'm not going to say, "Will you help me and give me a hand?" I hand him over the car. He fixes it. We can't come to Christ and say, "Lord, will you help me live a good life, will you help me, guide me, in this line of activity." He is Lord. We have to surrender and hand over everything.

That is our problem of the Christian life. How do we hand over everything? It's vital. I always find it amazing, staggering, that the almighty God came to this earth and became a man. He became a particular man, a representative man, and yet at the same time remained God. Jesus is man and he is God. As man, he has come because in the end we can do nothing. We are helpless. We've been caught in sin, we are bound by sin. If you take the parable that Jesus told about the strong man, he said, "No one can enter the house of a strong man and plunder his goods without first binding that strong man, then he can take his goods." In our natural state, we are overcome by the power of sin, which is a real power, and we are helpless. But God has lovingly come down, broken into our situation. He has, in Jesus, bound the strong man. He died on the cross and he has risen victorious.

But he has done more than that. In binding the strong man and setting us free, he has lived out on our behalf a new and a perfect life, a righteous life,

and he wants to give us that life. As we come to Christ and open our lives and we ask Christ to come, he comes as our Savior, he comes as our Lord. He comes to give us that new life so that we receive forgiveness, we receive redemption, we receive reconciliation with God. It's a marvelous thing because with Jesus ascended, we are made to ascend to the Holy Spirit. We are made to enter the presence of the Father and we are welcomed by the Father into his family.

What I always find staggering and amazing is we look at John 17...we are made to share in the fellowship of the Trinity itself, that God treats us as if we are Christ. But that's only because in Christ we become new creatures — new men and new women. Jesus has lived our life for us in a double sense, that he took away our sin, our life...but he sanctified our life, turned it around, made it holy. So day by day, month by month, you and I, as we open our eyes to Christ, keep our eyes in Christ, are appropriating Christ in every situation in life.

I think it's a disastrous thing to have people pray, "Lord, will you help me to do this?" Who's in charge? If God helps me, I'm in charge. I can't treat God as my servant or the Holy Spirit as my servant. He is the almighty God. He is Lord. I, myself, can do nothing. So every step, every day, every moment of the day has to be a looking unto Christ and surrender to Christ, but rejoicing, rejoicing that Christ is in control. Paul can say, "It's not me, but it's Christ who lives in me." That's what we've got to try to get over to our people. The sheer joy, freedom, release from the shackles of sin, the sheer release from all the worries, fears and anxieties is a letting go of God.

Personally, I had a happy marriage. We celebrated our 50 years. My wife was a doctor. She was, before we married, a missionary doctor in Africa. We came up to university together and ...my career was broken because of the army and the war. We met when she came home on furlough. She would have gone back to Africa, but she didn't go back. We married...had a happy time. But latter day she wasn't well. She had Parkinson's suddenly, and she died. People said, "What did you do?" I never thought of tomorrow. I never thought of the future. I felt we were in the hands of God. God loves her, he loves me, and we had a very happy time together.

Her illness brought us closer together. I had to do an awful lot for her. She passed away in peace. It's hard to put into words... I remember vividly the day two and a half years ago. It was a lovely sunny day, and after lunch I asked my wife what she wanted to do. She said she would like some sunshine, so I took her out in her wheelchair and we sat in the sun. We came back a little late, at 5:00, and that night our youngest daughter came in, we had a

meal... Normally she would go to bed at half past eight, but this time it's half past nine. I helped her get ready for bed. We had prayers –we always had prayers together. I kissed her, told her I loved her, helped her to bed, and a quarter of an hour later, she was gone. She was restless. I said, "Would you like to sit up?" So I helped her sit up. She was in my arms as she passed away peacefully.

It sounds strange to say, but I had a tremendous feeling of the love of Christ and the presence of Christ that she didn't suffer, she had no prolonged illness, didn't have to go to hospital. She departed — it was in the hands of God. I felt the kindness of God. People would say, what about the future? I never thought about the future. We were in the hands of God. He is our Lord and master, and we day by day looked to him, thanked him that he's our lovely, glorious Savior. He's our Lord. He looks after tomorrow. Maybe that's oversimplified, but I feel that's the way I try to live so we don't have the worries, the fears.

On one occasion, she wasn't doing well and full of anxiety. I directed her to that passage in the Sermon of the Mount, "The birds of the air, they don't care about tomorrow, the heavenly Father feeds them." She told me a long time later, it was a great help and comforter, that the Lord provides. Yes, life can be difficult, it can be hard, we can face the dark and stormy days, but we know that the Lord is there. Not only is he there, but he is our mighty Redeemer and Lord who has total control over the whole situation.

In the ministry I tried always to direct people to Christ. The most disastrous thing to do would be for the church to draw attention to itself, and what the church is doing. Sadly, the church is good at doing that. But our task is to turn people away from us to Jesus Christ, and as far as possible to turn them away from their problems and throw them to Christ.

Dealing with sin in our lives

JMF: If I have a sin or a destructive habit that I'm struggling with or that's bringing me down, or that is not the kind of behavior that reflects one who is in union with Christ, what is my role? How do I deal with that, and what is the pastor's role? How does the pastor deal with that sort of thing in the congregation?

DT: We all have these problems, sadly, we're all sinners, and as a pastor, I'm a sinner. How do I go about it? If there are bad habits, what do you do about those bad habits? Sadly, there's a lot of illness in the world, and what do we do about that? We have to look to Jesus Christ. When Christ came and gave himself for us on our behalf and died for us and rose again... We have that great shout of triumph, the shout of the victor, "It is finished." He had

accomplished everything for our salvation, everything to solving all our problems and anxieties of life, perplexities... He has done everything for our complete physical healing. There's nothing left to do. So we look to him and thank him for what he has done in the finished work of Christ, that he is the answer.

I attended a conference on prayer and healing on the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd of July. I responded warmly to that conference, and I've never witnessed so much physical healing ever before. I responded because when someone comes who is sick, he doesn't pray, "Lord, here's this person, he's sick, he's got cancer, please, take away the cancer." He said when that person comes – this is what he does in practice – you try to help that person look away from their problem, away from their sickness, or if it's a bad habit like drugs or whatever, look away from that problem and look to Jesus Christ and look to the cross and the fact that Christ has died and has risen, and say, "Complete victory belongs to me in the light of what Jesus has done. Complete deliverance belongs to me from this evil habit because of what Christ has done. Complete healing belongs to me because of what Christ has done, thank you Lord," and go on and on saying thank you. As you thank the Lord, the miracle happens.

It might sound simple...it is very simple. But the gospel is very simple. It's you and I who make it complicated with our sinful ways. Or the church makes it complicated. In that conference of prayer and healing, he had sessions on Thursday night and Friday night. Friday morning was ministers and leaders, Saturday morning, Saturday afternoon, then we had a prayer. There were some marvelous healings. That's all we did. Those who were asked to join in that prayer, and I shared in it, to help people to look at Christ, the finished work of Christ. He would say: "Now you say, 'Because of what Christ has done, complete healing belongs to me, complete healing, because of what Christ has done, thank you.'" There were some remarkable healings. When we approach our people and they share the problems, we try to do that.

Take a common situation in a parish ministry — broken marriages. I've tried all my ministry to visit people whose marriages had a problem. I find that to be the most difficult side of the ministry because of hardened hearts. I've equally found some incredibly lovely stories of people who have been reconciled and whose marriage was healed. That has always upheld me and comforted me. I've had many failures at that and some lovely answers to prayer.

I've always said, when two people have a marriage problem, and I could see very vividly in one parish...a couple, they were in their 60s, married over

40 years, and he happily went off with another woman. I went back and forth between husband and wife for over three months, and I thought I was almost battering my head against a wall, because these are not easy situations. I tried to tell them that both had to first and foremost kneel at the foot of the cross and receive God's forgiveness for themselves. They had to think of their partner, as a wife not to think of a husband who had gone off with another woman, but to kneel at the foot of the cross and receive God's forgiveness for her life and receive the whole fullness of Christ, the life of Christ.

I told him he had to abandon the other woman. I said, "You've got to kneel before the foot of the cross and receive Christ. Only as you both die to yourselves, you'll be raised up as one new person. And after 40 years, it means you start again from the beginning. But as you both kneel before that cross and in the light of all that God has done for you, forgiveness, he will raise you up with new life." I went off on holiday. When I came back, they were side-by-side in church. They were there every Sunday. They were the last people to say goodbye when I left that parish.

It's trying to help your people... We're all sinful...I can't look down at that, I'm in the same boat as a fellow sinner sharing as a fellow sinner with my people. But helping them to look away from ourselves, from our sins, from our problems, or from our physical illnesses to Christ, to the finished work of Christ, what Christ has done in his life, in his death, his resurrection, ascension, absolutely everything... that finished work of Christ. When we think of the atonement, it is the entire ministry of Christ...his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost. We are reliant on Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

JMF: Is there a time for the pastor to admonish the congregation about some prevailing sin?

DT: Yes. But we have to be very conscious that *we* are sinners. We are not standing on a pedestal. We are fellow sinner. We're seeking to come together and to ask God's forgiveness.

When I entered my first parish, the ministry had gone wrong. It's sad when the ministry goes wrong. Everything is turned around about. Office-bearers wouldn't speak to one another, they were at loggerheads. In my first board meeting, I walked in, and they were there before me, standing in a circle... The two leading office-bearers were in the center, about to have a physical assault to one another. I had to stride into the middle and push the two apart. I wondered as a young man, what do I do now? I've never been taught about boxing in Christianity.

They were a bit appalled that here is a minister having seized two men,

pushed them apart. I said, “Now we begin our board meeting.” This is my first board meeting in the church. It was the fastest meeting I had ever had, because no one would speak — it was over in half an hour. I was asked for a quick session meeting with the superior body, so I said to one of the elders, my session clerk, my leading elder, “What’s the problem?”

He got up, and I would say blew off. For about 20 minutes he told us all the problems, the animosities, the back-biting, and all sorts of dreadful things. I had to silence him after 20 minutes and thank him, and ask the other elder to say what was on his mind. He marvelously stood up and apologized. I looked at that, thanked him, and read the passage from the Bible, “Little children, love one another.” I didn’t know what to do. That’s all I could think about.

I said, “We have sinned against God. Here we are, office-bearers of the church, striving. It’s God’s church, and we’re quarrelling. The Lord is grieved with us! We are absolutely sinners.” I included myself. I said, “We have to pray and ask God to forgive us.” So we prayed and asked God to forgive us. Every one of us, “bring us together.” Then I shook hands, and they went away. I went home that night with a headache wondering what sort of church I had come to. For the next 18 months I preached through the Sermon on the Mount, preached on requests for forgiveness...we receive forgiveness as we give it. I said to them I would never appoint to office anyone in the church who was not at peace with God, without peace with everyone in the church, with everyone in the parish. In the end they came wonderfully together, and those two elders who fought became good friends. Another two, who hitherto wouldn’t speak, asked to share the car together in visiting their district.

You stand with them as a fellow sinner. You together ask God’s forgiveness, and you try to speak about the marvelous love of God and the fact that God is sad that we quarrel. He loves us, he’s forgiven us, he wants us to come enjoy that love and love one another. We can’t beat around the bush, but it’s not easy.

JMF: You mentioned thanksgiving as part of the repentance process. In asking for forgiveness, we already know we have forgiveness, so in one sense we are giving thanks, aren’t we, for knowing that we’re forgiven, but we’re giving thanks for the forgiveness even as we ask.

DT: In the small Bible class, one of the teenage girls, a lovely person, said, “How often must I ask for forgiveness before I receive it?” I said, our Lord says in the Lord’s Prayer, “Forgive us our debts, our sins.” We ask, but we don’t go on asking. That would insult God — that we don’t believe that God loves us, that he’s forgiven us. Christ *has* forgiven us. So we come and ask,

“Lord, forgive us our sins,” but as we look to Christ we thank him that he *has* forgiven us, forgiven us before we sinned, and before we were born. I find that a staggering thought. I always tried to say to my people, You must ask for forgiveness every day, but having asked for forgiveness, always say “thank you” that you *are* forgiven.

JMF: So the asking is like a participation in the fact of forgiveness.

DT: Absolutely. It’s a sharing in Christ’s finished work. Paul says, “In all things, in all times, in all circumstances give thanks to God.” We’re not good at that. But it’s important that we pray at all times with thanksgiving. If we don’t pray with thanksgiving, we have no faith. We’re not believing, we’re not accepting the marvelous love of God.

JMF: Paul gives admonition in Scripture, but he always does it from the context of “this is who you already are in Christ, this is who Christ has made you be, and therefore act like it.” He never turns it around and says, “You’re behaving badly, and if you don’t stop it then you’re lost.”

DT: Absolutely. Perhaps the severest forms of judgment we see in the gospel are out of the lips of Jesus. He was frank. When we look at the cross, we might belittle our sins. We might think it doesn’t matter. I say to people, “You look at the cross, you look at the fact that sin was so serious it took everything that God himself had got, to remove our sin and deliver us.” I think of that great cry, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” There you see the depths and the horror of sin. Sin is real, but thank God that we’re delivered from it. Our church needs to be cleansed, I pray every day that our church will be cleansed, purified. We must — but we thank God that there is complete cleansing, complete deliverance.

119. CHRIST HAS FAITH FOR US

JMF: You're editor of two very important books by Thomas F. Torrance, *Atonement* and *Incarnation*. They're having a great impact, and we'd like to talk to you about the project, how it came to be, how it developed, and you're the person to talk to.

RW: I got a phone call from a classmate that I shared a room with at New College when we heard these lectures, and he asked me if I would be willing to edit the lectures. He had persuaded Thomas Torrance to get them published, and Thomas Torrance had given him the manuscript, or his son had, with a note saying that these needed an awful lot of work before they could be published. And Jock thought I was the best person to do it, so I said yes. But I had no idea how much work was involved in doing it.

JMF: You started in what year?

RW: 2003 or something. Thomas Torrance, my uncle, was almost 90 by that stage, and his short-term memory was failing a bit... he also had a stroke and so he couldn't have done the job.

JMF: So it involved collecting the notes from the class...

RW: No, because by the end of his career, he read all of his lectures from a typescript. He'd often stop and speak off the cuff, and those were often the best parts. But the lectures or such were all typed out and duplicated for us. Later they were photocopied. Somebody put them onto computer disk, so I got hard copies and the computer disks to work with.

JMF: It wasn't long before you realized that you'd need two volumes.

RW: That's right. When I looked at all the material, and what wasn't there that I knew he'd given us handouts on, and there was a missing lecture that I remember hearing, a whole chapter, I realized pretty soon we needed to have two volumes.

JMF: How many people were involved in helping you with the project?

RW: Mostly myself. Jock Stein, the editor of Handsel Press, who had initiated the project, was a great help. On any points of difficulty, just to check that I'd interpreted it right, I checked with Tom's brother, David. So it was mostly myself.

JMF: As you went through and put together this material in a form that would be a book, you began to see that the lectures as they were prepared and presented are a little more accessible, easier to read for the average person, than Thomas Torrance's earlier academic work, his published work.

RW: Yes. They're lectures, so they're the spoken word, and they come across better, they're more alive. When he writes, it becomes a little more polished. He writes extremely well, but it comes across differently. These lectures are easily the most accessible way into his thought.

JMF: They're also very thorough. As I recall, you mentioned that they're

covering pretty much the entire range of his theological thought.

RW: They cover the doctrine of Christ, the incarnation of God becoming human, the Old Testament background, the whole life of Christ, the atonement, justification, reconciliation, redemption, resurrection, ascension, coming again, doctrine of the church. Yeah, they're pretty full.

JMF: You also put together a synopsis at the beginning that goes through everything that you're going to see as a reader as you go through the book. You can get an overview from the beginning.

RW: Right. The synopsis is all the headings lifted out of the book and put together at the beginning. That gives a good guide to the contents in addition to the index.

JMF: I found it easy to find a topic that I wanted to read about. It's easy using that synopsis or the index or together. It's easy to locate a particular area of interest. You also included a glossary of terms. It's user-friendly, both of them. What kind of feedback have you received from those who have been reading it?

RW: Everyone says that they're very readable, and they've been surprised because Thomas Torrance has a reputation of being difficult at times. I heard these lectures. They were unbelievably thrilling and stretching —most exciting thing I've ever heard in my life, and ever will, because we heard the lectures every day but Wednesday, when there were no lectures. The content was deeply moving, inspiring, and thrilling. I was keen to make them as reader-friendly as I could in breaking up some of the longer sentences, adding lots of headings, explaining the meaning of terms that the students of the day didn't have to have explained, but the early reader does, and making it reader-friendly.

JMF: In talking about how exciting and thrilling the lectures were, what is it about Torrance's theology and his approach to these fundamental issues of the gospel and of Christian theology that make it so thrilling and exciting, so fresh, so worth reading?

RW: It's deeply biblical. He was brought up to read the Bible three chapters a day and five on Sundays. He continued to do that all the way through his life. He read it two or three times each year. He is steeped in the Bible. That, plus he has this Christo-centric view. He interprets it in the light of his goal in Christ, and Christ as the atonement of sin and the heart of the Trinity. With that focus, he's able to connect Christian doctrine to biblical passages. So you suddenly see some connections and new meanings in the Bible, and then it brings alive the Christian faith.

I felt, why aren't we taught this in the churches? That's the reaction I get when I teach it to a student. They say, "Why didn't we get this in church? Because we should." This is what they got at the Reformation, under Luther

or Calvin. I find it hugely stimulating, enriching, and exciting.

JMF: What are some of the areas that we don't get typically in church? A person would say Christ is the center of the Bible and he ties everything together, but what are they missing, that this theology is bringing out of the Scriptures?

RW: I could answer that for several hours, but for example, the way in which the importance of the person of Christ, who he is, that he is God, fully God, and yet fully man. We don't make enough of his being fully man, and not just that, but that he is the union of God and man in his own person. He's one reality. There's not a God Jesus and a man Jesus. There's one Jesus. In his person, he is the union of God and man.

Because that union that was forged and made at Bethlehem is unbreakable, humanity and God will never be separated — they're one in Christ. That's the heart of the Christian faith and our salvation. We are joined to Christ because he shares our humanity. Christ is God, he's joined to God. Because of that union, that's the heart of our salvation. That's the ultimate meaning of all the great "I am's" of John's Gospel. That's one aspect of a deeper biblical emphasis that we don't get.

JMF: Most Christians seem to think Jesus came, was a human being, and died for our sins. Then, when he was raised, he goes back to being God. We don't typically think of him as still being a human, fully God, fully man. We think of him as fully God again, but what is the significance of him being fully human? Why does that matter to me and my Christian faith and my walk with Christ?

RW: It matters hugely, and it's common to think that he's no longer a man. But if he's only God, then we're here on earth, he's up in heaven, and there's a distance. Whereas if he's still man, if he's still bearing our humanity, then he's the one who prays for us and knows what we feel like. He takes our prayers, our human prayers, and presents them to the Father. Because he shares our humanity, that's an unbroken link with him.

JMF: You said he takes our prayers and presents them to the Father. So would that mean that we don't need to worry about whether our prayers are good enough?

RW: Right. We pray, and we're called to pray, but our prayers are never what they ought to be. He is the one who has taken our fallen humanity and perfected it. He takes our prayers and makes them his, and presents them to the Father. That's the emphasis of the letter to the Hebrews, that he is our High Priest. Paul also says that if we've been saved by his death, how much more will we be saved by his life? That is very significant. You're saying if we've been saved by his death, how much more will we be saved by his risen life in heaven. Christian life is sharing in Christ's risen life. If Christ is not

risen as man, then we don't have that risen life to share in.

JMF: What does it mean to share in his life? Usually we think of that as “We need to follow his example. We need to obey as well as he did, and that's sharing in his life.” That doesn't sound like what you're talking about.

RW: It's a lot more than that; that he has become man in our place for us, to act as man for us. In his human life, he's fulfilled everything that we ought to be doing. It's not a matter of trying to copy it, it's the fact that he has already done it for us and it's ours, so that his human life, his response to God, is our response.

That comes out strongly in Galatians 2:20, “I've been crucified with Christ. I live, yet not I but Christ who lives in me. And the life I live in the flesh I live by *the faith of the Son of God* who loved me and gave himself for me.” Properly understood, this faith is not our faith in Christ, and it's not our faith that saves us. It's *Christ's* faith that saved us; it's his humanity. We put faith in his faith or in his human life, in his human righteousness. That's the content of our salvation. We don't rely on what we do — we live out of his fullness, his prayer, his life. We live in union with him.

JMF: So the passages that speak of “We're already seated with him in heavenly places, we're already seated at the right hand of the Father with him, we already have passed into eternal life,” we can take them seriously.

RW: Absolutely.

JMF: So our acts of obedience, although they don't merit salvation for us, are our participation in the righteous... Like the prayer you mentioned (he takes our prayer and makes it his own, so that it is effective), he takes everything we are and do in the same way, then.

RW: Yes. We are called to live out the life that he has lived for us. The only reason we can live it out is because he has already done it for us.

JMF: We're living out something that's already so.

RW: Yes. We're living out the salvation that he has won for us.

JMF: It's not a matter of going around worrying all the time whether we'll make it, let's say, into heaven or that we'll measure up in some way.

RW: No. The gospel is the incredible realization that Jesus is not only God coming to rescue us, but he's also God coming to be man for us, even to make our response for us. When we make a response, I'm not making an extra response to God in addition to what Christ has made for us — I'm letting Christ's response to his Father be mine. I'm resting on his faith. We need to have faith, but it's not faith in *our* faith — it's resting on Christ and his human righteousness and his faith.

JMF: So we trust in him, not in ideas... Like you said, we don't have faith in our faith. Often, our faith is weak, but we don't have to worry when our faith is weak — we can trust that he has perfect faith for us.

RW: That's right.

JMF: So we're trusting in him completely. Someone might argue, yes, but if you believe that, then there's nothing to keep you from behaving badly, from being disobedient, since you would say, "I'm already taken care of in Christ, so therefore I can live in whatever destructive way I want and I'm still safe in Christ." How do we respond to that?

RW: That's a key question. Paul answered it at the beginning of Romans 6. In chapter 5, Paul said we are saved. It's been done. At the start of chapter 6 he says, "Does that mean we can sin? We've been saved." He says *no*, because for one thing, if we sin, we're bringing ourselves back again under the slavery of sin. But secondly, if we have been saved, we have been made *new*. If we sin, we're saying we haven't been made new, but we're acting a lie against what Christ has done for us and we're falling back into sin.

The fact that we've been saved doesn't mean we don't do anything; it's the opposite. It liberates us to live out the life that's given to us in Christ. We often think (this is the way Tom Torrance used to put it), some of God, some of man. He does his part, we now have to do our part. He always emphasized it's not like that. The way it works is: all of God means all of man. The fact that God has done it all, his part and our part, that liberates us to become ourselves in him and to live to the full out of him, because we're not worried about our having to do it. We're living out of Christ.

JMF: How do we deal with the fact that we still sin? Even though we are in Christ, we fall short. How do we cope with that?

RW: We'll continue to sin until the day we die. But it's not what *we* do that counts, it's what we are in Christ. We are in the process of being cleansed, slowly. We never reach perfection. In fact, often the more we know Christ, the more we know our sin.

JMF: It does seem like that.

RW: At the same time, we trust more in him. It's not a matter of living out of ourselves and the concern with how good we are or how good Christians we are, it's a matter of living out of Christ, with Christ and out of him.

JMF: That brings to mind the passage in Hebrews 4, "Since we have such a great high priest, therefore we go to the throne of grace to find help in time of need." It seems to be saying, like you said, because he's already done everything for us and made us who we are in him, that when we fall short, that grace drives us to the throne of grace to find the help we need. That takes away all the fear, anxiety and worry about salvation, doesn't it?

RW: Yes, it liberates us.

JMF: It almost sounds too easy. It sounds too simple. It sounds like good news, but it's so good that it can't possibly be so.

RW: (laughing). That's right. When somebody hears the gospel for the

first time... I love Martin Luther's phrase. He said it's like a cow staring at a new gate. This can't be true — is it? That is the impact of the gospel when we first see it. We're liberated. You are freed from thinking, "I've got to do this." Christ has done it for us. When we understand that, that is the beginning of faith.

JMF: That would drive you toward sin?

RW: No.

JMF: That would drive you toward joy, and toward the faith that you have to live it out.

RW: Yes. Torrance used to use the analogy that when his daughter was young, he would walk with his daughter. She held him tightly, but his hand was around hers. She'd often stumble. What mattered was not her feeble grasp of him, but his grasp of her. That's the same as Christ. It's not our grasp of Christ that counts, it's his grasp of us.

JMF: Yes. That raises the question of confession. We're told to confess our sins, and yet we're already forgiven and our sins are taken care of. What role does confession play in the process?

RW: On the cross Christ took all our sins and nailed them to the cross. There are numerous verses that speak about, "If when we were enemies we were reconciled by the death of his Son, much more, having been reconciled, we are saved by his life." The passages indicate it's been done. We've been saved.

We do need to confess our sins. That's partly for our sake, that in the process of confessing, we don't bottle them up. We bring them to the surface in the light of what Christ has done for us. Our confessing them is part of the means by which what has been done already for us in Christ is actualized in our lives. We come to know the power of sins forgiven, if we can put it like that. He has already put away our sins, and yet we still live as though we have them. But by confessing them we bring them to the cross so that their having been put away on the cross is verified to us.

JMF: So we're taking part in the thing that's already so. We're participating in the reality of the forgiveness we already have. That changes the way we approach confession. In my life, early on, I had the idea that God might not forgive me, so I would have to ask more than once and I would keep doing it with more and more fervency and intensity until I could feel that maybe I was convincing myself of the reality of it... It was as though I was asking, or let me say begging, a boss for a raise or something. It was like begging that God would forgive me until I felt like he had. Even then, I wasn't sure that he did. Why would he forgive me anyway, because this is probably the 100th time I've asked about the same thing.

RW: Yep.

JMF: So that changes the whole... we can confess our sins knowing we're forgiven. It's almost a joyful thing.

RW: It should be joyful repentance. We don't repent *in order to* be forgiven. It's forgiveness that leads us to repentance and to joyful repentance. That's a proper way to understand it.

120. WHY THE INCARNATION IS GOOD NEWS

J. Michael Feazell: What is a Christian missing out on if they don't have an incarnational understanding of the gospel?

Robert Walker: The first thing they're missing out on is that they do not know that God has come all the way to us where we are, because incarnation says that God has become man. In other words, he's no longer distant. He's come in person, into space and time, to do our salvation, to meet us face to face in Jesus. If we don't have a proper understanding of the incarnation, that God became man, then we don't know that God is really with us. But also, we don't know that he's become man *to save us*. The fact that he's become man means that he has come all the way to what we are and achieved our salvation for us as man. So on two counts, we're not aware of how much God has united himself to us.

JMF: A lot of Christians think of Jesus as a role model — he came to show the way. We have popular songs, “He Came to Earth to Show the Way,” for example. What's wrong with just seeing him as a role model?

RW: If we think he's come to show us the way, that implies that “the way” is different from what *he* is. In that view, he would say, “that's the way, walk in it,” and he shows us. But he's much more than that — he *IS* the way. In John's Gospel he says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” What he's done *is* the way. He is the way and so there's much more than just *showing* us the way. He has done everything for us, and we come to the Father through him. So he is the way who has done it for us.

JMF: That would still fit with the role model, if we think of it in terms of following him — if he's the way, then do we follow him and just try to do what he did?

RW: In a way. But it's more than that, because he has done it for us. We can't comprehend it in the sense of trying to do what he did, because of our sin. The Christian life is living in unity with him, and so, living out of what he has done for us. Rather than trying to copy what he has done so that it's *our* doing it, he's become man to do it *for* us, so we make what he's done ours, and we live out of it. We do the same thing but not in our strength trying to do it all over again. Through union with him, because of the Spirit living in us, we find ourselves beginning to live the way he lived.

JMF: We talk of the Spirit and doing it in the Spirit, but we can't see the Spirit. So how do we know that the Spirit is at work in us?

RW: We're familiar with light. When you go into a room and it's dark,

and you flip a switch and the light comes on. We actually can't see light, but we can see what light lights up. And it's the Spirit that gives us the eyes to see Christ and makes Christ real for us, so that if we know Christ, then we know it's through the Spirit. The Spirit is the One who opens us up to live out of Christ.

JMF: You say that he's already done it for us. If that's so, then what are we trying to do? If he's already done everything necessary for our salvation, what is left for us to do for ourselves?

RW: In one sense, nothing, but in another sense, everything. It's to joyfully live out the life that he has re-made for us. If we think of it in the sense that he has come and taken our fallen, dying humanity that wastes away and gets older and dies and then disintegrates in the grave...he's taken our life, he's remade it in his own life. That's what the resurrection is about — that's the remaking of our life. He gives us our new humanity. We're living out our new humanity that he gives us. We're not trying to copy him. We couldn't — we couldn't rise from the dead.

JMF: That's the trouble, isn't it? We try to do what Jesus says, but we fall short, and we may be successful to some degree, but we fall short and then we feel guilty, anxious and fearful about how can we be part of the kingdom of God? How can we be saved, because we fall short and because we're not following Christ as we should? We're fearful. But incarnational theology, seeing the gospel in the way you're describing, doesn't push us back on how well we perform, it sounds like you're saying.

RW: It points us to Christ, and so that we see his humanity, the life that he lived as our life. We don't see that he's done something and we have to copy it — we see what he's done; that is our life. He was born for us, his birth at Bethlehem is our new birth. When he died, that was our death. When he rose, that was our resurrection. When he ascended into heaven, he took us with him.

This is what Paul says — and that's the meaning of faith — that we understand that he so came into our place to live for us, that everything that he did is ours. We live out of that. That takes away all the strain and burden and gives a new dimension to Christian living. We live in his strength, not in ours. We are released to live to the full, and yet we're not living in our strength, we're living in Christ's strength. That liberates us to live fully.

JMF: Then the gospel is not about calling people to good behavior — it's about letting people know and calling them to a new identity — who they are in Christ — to a relationship with God in Christ, and it's a whole different point of the gospel, isn't it? (Don't we usually think of the gospel as being a call to straighten out your life?) In other words, you're a sinner, and did you

know it? Now that you know you're a sinner, you need to be forgiven of those sins, and so we're forgiven, we're told to behave better, and the Holy Spirit will help you and Jesus shows the way — and the whole goal is a better me through good behavior.

RW: Yes.

JMF: But the gospel is not about that.

RW: No, it's much more than that. It's not just that God has come to show us what we ought to do — he's come to do himself for us what we ought to do. He's taken our human life and he's remade it. What he gives us in Christ (this comes over especially at the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist), is our new humanity. Our task is to live out our new humanity. We don't start by trying to remake ourselves. We have been remade in Christ. We live out the new identity, as you put it, in union with Christ through the Spirit.

JMF: So the gospel's declaration is that you've been made new, therefore live like it. Not "live good, so that God will give you the kingdom." That's the opposite of what we typically hear. It's putting the cart before the horse instead of the other way.

RW: That's right. The word *gospel* means "good news." It's not the good news that we have to make ourselves better. The good news is that we *have* been made better, already been renewed.

JMF: It's almost like...the gospel is good news if you can achieve it. But sorry, you never will. You can try very hard, though, and that will make you happier. That's not good news.

RW: Usually it *won't* make us happier, because we know we can't do it.

JMF: It couldn't be more frustrating... we give up or whatever we do.

RW: Yeah. The exciting thing about the incarnation is that God himself came to do it. He did it as man, and that immediately takes us into the doctrine of the Trinity, the Father, Son, and Spirit. That opens up a richer dimension to Christian thought and living.

JMF: How does it do that?

RW: For one thing, this is what God is — the real God is Father, Son, and Spirit. We're used to thinking of God as a single being out there far off. But when we know God in Jesus Christ, we discover that God is Father, Son, and Spirit, and we come to know the real God for the first time. Calvin says if we don't conceive God as Father, Son, and Spirit, then we don't really know God. It's partly coming to know the real God.

The real God is a communion of love. The Father loves the Son, the Son loves the Father — they live in the communion of love with the Spirit. That is the nature of God — the three persons of God. That doesn't mean there are three Gods. There's one God, and yet he is Father, Son, and Spirit, and

they exist in relation.

When we begin to think in that way, then we begin to think of ourselves not just as individuals — an individual here and a separate individual there. We begin to think of ourselves in the human race as interconnected persons in relation. So it has an implication for a much richer and deeper sense of community. A lot of people are a bit scared of the doctrine of the Trinity, but I don't think they need to be.

JMF: It's into that, that Christ brings us — if we're one with him, if he comes and takes humanity, us, into himself, and he's in that eternal communion of love, then we're in that eternal communion of love with him. That's the way things are. It's been done, he already did it.

RW: That's the miracle of the Ascension. When Jesus ascended still wearing our humanity, he took our humanity into the heart of God. So there's now a man in the heart of God. He's still human. That's our destiny — to live in fellowship with God.

When we think of people, we automatically think of people as complete individuals, and you are a different individual from what I am. If somebody knows you, they don't have a clue what I'm like. But with the Trinity, it's different, because the persons are so interrelated. They're different and they remain different. They're each totally God — the Father is completely God, the Son is completely God, the Spirit's completely God — and yet they live in such a close relation that when we look at the Son and see his face, then we know what the Father is like. The Son is the image of the Father.

You are different — if someone looks at you, they don't know what I'm like. But it's the opposite when we look at Christ. He's the image of the Father. He is the Son of the Father. To know the Son is to know the Father, and Jesus says that. Phillip says, "Show us the Father, and we'll be satisfied." Jesus says, "If you've seen me, you've seen the Father." Especially through John's Gospel, when we listen to words of Jesus and we're drawn into his relationship with the Father and we begin to cotton on somehow, slowly, through the Spirit we begin to think in this deeper interpersonal way. We begin to understand something as a relation to the Father, and that's the heart of the gospel — the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit that he has come to share with us.

JMF: When we talk about Trinitarian theology, are we talking about something complicated, or something simple?

RW: It's both at once. The simplest things are often the profoundest things...or put it the other way, the profoundest things are often the simplest things. There's a profound simplicity here. The person with the simplest faith

can understand the Son, and the Son being the image of the Father and the Spirit. But this is something that stretches our mind. That doesn't mean that we have to be intellectual or brilliant academically, because it's not that kind of understanding. It's more a different way of thinking. There's a deep simplicity, and yet at the same time, it's profound.

“Complicated” is the wrong word. People often worry that theology is not for them, or the Trinity is not for them, because they haven't got the mind to understand it. But the thing with God is that God makes himself known to us. It's back to the thing about faith. We shouldn't think of our faith — have we got enough faith? We shouldn't think of enough reason — have we got enough reason, enough intelligence, to understand? It's more of who the God is we're trying to understand. If we focus on him, he gives us understanding — he makes himself known.

Often, when we learn something new, if it's really new, we don't know it. How do we learn something we don't know? It might seem impossible. But we all do. We all make breakthroughs. Slowly, gradually, the pieces fall into place. If we have confidence in what we're trying to understand and in the person who is making himself known, we hang in there and listen and wait, and God gives us understanding. We're led deeper into this way of thinking — especially, I think, through reading John's Gospel.

JMF: With some of the most simple things, such as if you go outside in the evening and look at the sunset and the stars, you can appreciate the profound beauty, and you're drawn into that. You have that sense of inspiration and beauty whether or not you ever study sunsets and stars and how they work (and many people do study them — everything from sensory appreciation, how we process things we see, to how stars are made). There are many things you could learn more about from a sunset and a starry evening, but you don't have to, to stand there and appreciate it and be taken up by it. It's the same whether you know more about it or not. It's still itself. I wonder if the gospel is somewhat like that. There's a simplicity in Christ in simply trusting Christ to be our all in all, and if so, he is everything he is for us and with us, in us, whether we study more about it or not. It's something we can explore forever, joyfully, and never come to the end of.

RW: That's right. The more we know Christ, the more we are drawn into understanding his riches. Paul says that we should be mature in our thinking and have a reason for the hope that's in us. The lecture to the Hebrews says similar things. It's part of our calling, too, in knowing Christ, and being drawn into this profound adoration and love and worship, to do that with the whole of ourselves, and that includes our minds, so that we come to understand

deeper.

It's not academic; it's a different way of understanding that we all have because we're all made to know and we're all made in the image of God — to know and understand and think more deeply than we think we're able to — that's given to us. My grandmother was Tom Torrance's mother. She was an evangelical with a profound simple faith. But for Tom, she was the theologian in the family, simply because of her spiritual influence — not through any academic thing learned.

JMF: If we want to understand the gospel in a truly gospel way, for what it is and for what the truth of the gospel is, or even if we want to help somebody else understand it, what is the bottom line? What is the simple thing we need to and can know, whether we ever pick up a theology book?

RW: That God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself and that through what he's done as God and man for us, our lives have been renewed in him, and he gives us a new humanity.

JMF: So our faith, the thing that we're asked to believe, is something that is true for us whether we believe it or not, even before we believe it.

RW: That's profoundly true. Paul said, "While we were enemies, we were reconciled." Even while we hated God, before we heard the gospel, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son. The gospel is the message of what has happened for us in Jesus. When we hear it, it's good news. It's like the story of the Japanese soldier, in I think it was the Second World War, who was marooned on an island. No one knew he was there. He didn't know the war had ended. He was discovered 20 years later or something. They told him, "The war's ended." The good news. The gospel is hearing the good news that God has done it.

JMF: Some people don't want to commit themselves to the gospel because of the way it's presented. They're given something that really isn't the gospel. They're given this idea that you're going to enter into something where you will need to achieve salvation by doing certain things. You've got to repent of your sins, and then you can't be sure if you've repented of all of them exactly. There are so many barriers, it seems, that keep you from being able to experience joy or rest. What we often hear is not a gospel of rest — it's a gospel of anxiety — you're in big trouble and you better do something to get out of that trouble, or God is going to send you to hell. We're looking for a way to avoid hell, but we have to do something that we're not even sure we can do, in order to avoid hell. It's confused... We're saying this good news — God loves you, so receive him, but he's going to send you to hell if you don't, because that's how he *really* feels about you.

RW: To put it that way is not the gospel. But what you said is what many people believe. The gospel is that God has come to make himself known...by making himself known, that inevitably exposes us for what we are. There is a judgment on us, that we are not what we ought to be. But God has taken his own judgment on himself, and has undone our sin and put it all in the past, and risen into a new life in the resurrection. That is ours now through the gospel. We are called to live out the new life that Jesus achieved, that he lived out in his life and achieved in a permanent sense in the resurrection.

JMF: That's good news. It doesn't require fear — we can rest.

RW: Yes, that's right.

JMF: I want to ask one last thing in the minute or two we have remaining. If there's one thing that you would want people to know about God, what would that be?

RW: That he loves us and that he is love in himself — that's his very nature. He loves us so much that he has even entered into our hell for us on the cross. He's taken our godforsakenness and undone it, and cleared away all the barriers between us and him, and united us to himself. He has taken our flesh, our dust, and made it his. He is now a man in Christ. He's done all that for us. He's now with us, one with us.

JMF: That's a good reason to receive the gospel.

RW: Indeed.

121. THE IMPLICATIONS OF JESUS' RESURRECTION

J. Michael Feazell: As you were working on the project of editing *Incarnation* and *Atonement*, what were some of the memorable moments during the process?

Robert Walker: It's hard to answer that, because I'm not sure there's any one particular moment. But working on the whole thing, it was deeply moving, and I felt this is precious, this is wonderful stuff. I heard all the lectures, but coming back to it, it just swept over me again. All sorts of things I appreciated struck me with much greater force. It's been a wonderful experience and very rewarding.

JMF: Do you remember a couple of those that stand out?

RW: For example, this emphasis on the resurrection and the meaning of the resurrection. Normally we think the gospel is the cross, and then the resurrection is kind of an extra. But in many ways, it's the resurrection... you can't separate the two. There's a verse of Paul, "Jesus was put to death for our sins and raised for our justification." Raised for our justification. It's the resurrection that makes us righteous. The cross puts away our sins, but it's the resurrection that makes us righteous.

The resurrection is an almighty event. It's not just the raising of a body from death, it's the beginning of a new creation — the beginning of the renewal of all of space and time. For Torrance, it brings out the fact that the resurrection is forgiveness. It's not just the proof of forgiveness, it *is* forgiveness, because in the Bible, sin and death are linked. So for God to undo sin, means to undo death. That means the resurrection is God's undoing sin. It's raising somebody up who has taken our sin out of the grave, so that is our resurrection.

That's why Paul says, "If Christ is not raised, we are still in our sins." Something like that, which we often bypass, it just hit me with renewed force... There are all sorts of nuggets like that in the book.

JMF: It turns everything on its head, doesn't it? Instead of hoping our sins are forgiven if we repent well enough, it gives us full assurance of salvation because Christ has already done everything. What a joy, what rest, what peace.

RW: Yes. The resurrection of Jesus is our forgiveness in action. They're identical — God forgiving and God raising Christ, they're the same thing.

JMF: You mentioned the resurrection as the new creation, as the starting place for everything — there are implications for the universe, for the whole

creation. Could you elaborate on that?

RW: The incarnation means that God has taken part of the stuff of the old creation — our body — and in it has died and undone sin, so that when he rose, that was the beginning of the new creation. The early church fathers had an analogy — they said that when a baby is born, the head comes out first, and that’s the hard part. But once the head’s come out, the rest of the body will follow. They used that of Christ — he’s the firstborn, the first fruits, and he’s the head that’s come out first, so the rest of creation will follow in what’s happened to Christ.

That means the renewal of all space and time. The physical creation will be renewed in Christ, reconstituted under him as the new head. That’s the unbelievably cosmic dimension of the New Testament, and that comes out extremely well in Torrance’s writings. The resurrection is not just somebody being raised from the dead, it’s the beginning of the reconstitution of everything — the beginning of heaven on earth.

JMF: That would imply that we don’t know what space and time will be like in the resurrection, once we are immortal. What will that look like — as something not like what we experience now, perhaps?

RW: We can’t say. But we can say that it will be this creation, these bodies of ours. We’ll recognize each other, so there will be continuity. Yet what it will be like when the creation is freed from sin, death, corruption and injustice, we can’t say. It will be far more wonderful and glorious — we can only look forward to it. The Bible says that it does not yet appear — we cannot yet see what we shall be like, but we know that when Christ comes again, we’ll be like him [1 John 3:2]. It speaks of Jesus now having a new and more glorious body, a body which no longer dies.

JMF: After his resurrection he appeared to the disciples several times, including on the seashore, cooking a meal and eating it with them. Yet this was a resurrected body that he was appearing in and he was able to enjoy food and fellowship.

RW: Yes. I like those stories, because dead men don’t rise from the dead, so it’s striking that the first reaction of the disciples is...they don’t believe it. The risen Jesus meets some of the women, and the women tell the disciples he’s risen, and they don’t believe it, and they’re afraid because ...is this a ghost? No, it’s real.

The fact that Jesus is raised, he’s the beginning of a new creation. In the 40 days that he was on earth, the new creation was overlapping with the old creation. When he ascended, we can no longer see the new creation that is there in Christ. We know it by faith, we know it because we meet and know

Christ through the Spirit. We know the reality of it, and that's what gives the New Testament its tremendous sense of victory, triumph and looking forward to what we will be. It's not "pie in the sky" – it's the renewal of this wonderful creation.

JMF: We're saved by grace through faith, and the Scriptures tell us even that is not our own. Luther goes to great lengths to explain that we must not look at faith as another work, because we're not saved by our works, so faith cannot be a work. How do the eyes of faith work? What is faith, and how are we to see this new creation and believe and trust Christ that we're in it? Where does this faith come from, and how is it not a work?

RW: It's God's work, but it's something that really happens in us. We come to see and understand and believe, but the nature of that is that we know that it's through God's work that we came to understand, because this is not something that we could do for ourselves so that we really believe and understand.

Torrance uses the analogy of the virgin birth. Mary did nothing to conceive Jesus. Joseph was set aside. There was no human input, Christ was born, a man. Something happened in Mary and she gave birth. All she did — she was told it would happen, and she said, "Amen." Faith is a bit like that — that God has become man for us — to believe, to do everything for us — and we say amen to it. Our amen is the way it happens in us. We've understood that it's for us, and we say amen. We live out of what Christ has done for us. Something real happens in us. It's a real understanding, in that it's God's work.

JMF: So our job is to believe what is so. He is, therefore we don't have to be afraid.

RW: Yes. To believe the gospel, to rejoice in what Christ has done for us — not just as God but as man.

JMF: Your degrees are in philosophy and theology. How does Trinitarian theology bear on philosophy?

RW: I did a degree in philosophy and found that very useful. It gives a conceptual understanding, which isn't necessary, but it helps to understand theology. I enjoyed my study in philosophy hugely. When I did theology, it was going somewhere. There was a purpose, there was a truth, there was a reality, and the heart of the reality in the Christian faith is the Trinity, God in Christ. That gives us a grasp of reality as it is, so that having that grasp at once deepens and enriches our understanding of the rest of the world — of science, of philosophy, et cetera. The philosophy helps to understand it.

At the same time, the theology enriches philosophy. Trinitarian theology

gives a deeper dimension. Theology helps us think in a profound way because in the gospel we know God. In theology we are knowing God not just with our feelings, our hearts, but with our minds. Our minds are inevitably deepened and stretched. So for me, there's a link between that and the fact that, I think it's true to say, most of the good philosophers today are Christians, which is a remarkable fact.

JMF: Academic work and working on a major project like this is not all you do – you're involved in outdoor sports. Can you tell us about that?

RW: I am very fortunate. Edinburgh University has an outdoor center on Loch Tay, that's a lake in the Highlands — a fabulously beautiful setting. I've worked there almost every weekend of the year except for July and August, and four or five months a year to mid-weeks as well. I teach kayaking, canoeing, mountain biking, cross-country skiing, hill walking, sometimes sailing and windsurfing. I love that. It's out in the open air, it's exercise, it's doing what I love and sharing with people. It's an ideal balance to the academic work, to theology.

JMF: We have just a little bit of time remaining, and in that time I wonder if you would mind sharing some of your personal observations, reflections on your uncle, Thomas F. Torrance.

RW: I got to know him much better at the end of his life, having been asked to edit these lectures of his after his stroke. He was unfortunately in the hospital and in a nursing home for the last few years of his life, and I visited him once or twice a week, so I got to know him very well. Things that come across — he is very personable. He took an intense interest in people. When he died, a number of fellow students wrote or phoned his brother and said that what they remembered about Tom was not his academic learning, although the amount he knew was incredible...what they remembered was his pastoral concern for them as students.

He was a minister. On the pastoral side he was always very strong, so he was a unique combination — a minister, a pastor. He prayed for his students, he prayed for all the family each day, he read the Bible each day. That's the pastoral side, you've got the academic side. His knowledge of field after field of history, of theology, was just amazing. He knew science. He had incredible energy, he worked at great speed, and he held all these things together. He was a unique synthesis of theology and life. His experiences in the war... that would be an adventure book in itself.

I used to try to get him going on some of his war memories, because even though I'd heard them, it was good to hear them again. One time he was out on patrol with the soldiers. He insisted on being with the soldiers whenever

he could, and they gave him skis. This was in Italy, in winter. And skiing down, one of his skis came off. It was badly fitting, and it clattered down the hillside. It made a noise and alerted the Germans and they began firing at him. So he had to ski down on one ski to avoid enemy fire.

There are numerous occasions when his life appeared to have been saved by a miracle. They'd be sheltering down in a trench and the person on the left and the right would be killed. Or he'd sleep in his Land Rover at night and then one night he, for some reason, didn't sleep there, and the next day there was a bullet hole right where he would have been sleeping.

He was a man of tremendous energy. He came back from the war and said, "Mother, I'm not cut out to be an academic. I'm a man of action." He had this tremendous energy.

JMF: Tell us about your mother. She's his sister, and I'm curious about how it was to live with someone who came from such a family.

RW: It was an immense privilege. There were six children — three sons and three daughters. They were all given to the Lord before they were born, or dedicated, and the way that worked out was that the three sons all became ministers and the three daughters all married ministers. It was a tremendous privilege to have that theological understanding in the family.

My father was a medic. Going out as a missionary to Africa, he trained as a minister. He was a great sportsman. He played hockey for Scotland and he was good with his hands...and I combine both. I love sport. I like doing do-it-yourself. But in many ways the heart of me is theology — it's knowing God, understanding the Christian faith, helping communicate it to others.

We were made to use our minds and know God with the whole of ourselves, and most Christians, we tend not to use our minds about God, so we miss out on a lot. But human life is, in all its richness, is about being part of the world, about doing things, so sport for me happens to be my work, but I think it's important for people to be active in some way, to use their bodies, whether it's in sport or painting or woodwork, because we're made to be physical beings, and so to me, it's good to combine the two.

JMF: If we know who we are in Christ, there's no separation between secular and spiritual, as it were ...

RW: No, there shouldn't be. That's part of the meaning of the incarnation — that God has become man. In the Bible, in the Old Testament, the human being is body and soul as a unity. The Old Testament has no concept of a soul apart from the body, so when the body dies, that's it, we're dead. In the Old Testament the soul is thought of as a living body, a body with breath in it. That's why the resurrection in the New Testament is so fundamental,

because if we're not raised, then that's it.

God loves this physical world – he made it as physical, and he's come to save it as physical, so he became a physical being, he became man, and he rose in the body. Jesus is forever bodily. We will forever be human. In some religions, we stop being human, we become god, we lose our individuality. But part of the glory of the Christian-Hebrew tradition is that God loves us as we are, men and women, children of flesh and blood, and we will forever be human.

JMF: Did Tom Torrance ever talk about pets? I receive questions frequently, and I know C.S. Lewis had made some statements about it. Did he ever comment on...?

RW: He was a keen horse rider when he grew up in China. He taught the mule to jump. The mule had never done that before. And he skied. He and his family always had several dogs, so they loved their pets and used to take their dogs for a daily walk. When you'd go to the house there's this furious barking, all the dogs were barking and waiting to welcome you.

JMF: Did he have any feeling on whether there is a reunion with pets in the resurrection?

RW: I never heard him on that, but to me everything that we enjoy in this creation will be somehow renewed over there for us, perhaps in a different form. There's a lot in the Bible about the renewal of the earth, and the meek will inherit the earth, the new city comes down from above. To me it's wrong to think of heaven as a separate place "up there." Heaven is the future state of the earth, which will be so much more wonderful than it is now, because it will be freed from all sin and crying and tears, and just wasting away or death.

JMF: Final question... If God has redeemed or is reconciling everything through himself, "whether things in heaven or things on earth," as Colossians says, through Christ, or in Christ... I don't know why people are concerned about the devil and demons, but did Tom Torrance discuss the resolution of the devil and demons in terms of the new creation?

RW: He had a strong and vivid sense, as the New Testament did, of the reality of evil powers, and Christ's whole life was a battle with evil. He used to say that evil is essentially parasitic. It cannot exist in its own right. It can only exist as an attack on what is good, so that God has made this creation to be wonderful and good. Somehow the mystery of evil is that there's this force which attacks and tries to destroy it. But Christ has overcome it.

Torrance used to use the analogy of two grindstones rubbing against each other. One is going one way and the other is going the other, and they're

rubbing sparks off each other. One is saying, “I love you” and the other is saying, “No, you don’t,” and that for him was his picture of hell — that God remains love, God has redeemed the whole of creation, and the whole of creation is being renewed. The mystery is that some people, as far as we can, according to the Bible (and the Bible is our only authority and guide), have the freedom to say no, and they will say no. They refuse to enter this reality, and so they’re on the outside, the fringe. He has a good understanding of the nature of evil and the powers of evil.

JMF: The wheels give a great analogy because that’s what happens, is sparks, and it erodes you as you continue to say no to who you are, to your actual identity of who God has made you to be in Christ. Yet it is kind of scary to receive something that you’re unfamiliar with.

RW: That’s right, because it means we’re no longer self-centered, we’re no longer in control, we’re no longer turned in on ourselves. We need to learn to look out, to live for others and with others, and that’s the new life that God holds up for us in Christ. Some people resist – I don’t know why, it’s illogical, it’s daft. Why would we want to persist in death when we can have life?

122. HOW GOD BECAME KING

Gary Deddo: Professor Wright, thank you for taking some time out here at Saint Andrews [Scotland] this morning and joining us for the *You're Included* interview series of Grace Communion International.

NTW: Good to be with you.

GD: I like to spend some time considering themes that you address in your recent publication, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospel*. At the outset of your book, you tell the reader that you think there's a serious problem at the heart of the Christian faith and practice as you've experienced it. You say your increasing impression is that most of the Western Christian tradition has forgotten what the four Gospels are really all about. That's provocative. Could you elaborate on that statement and tell us what we have forgotten?

NTW: I've often wondered since writing that whether I was overstating it, but looking around and listening and attending church and talking with friends, I want to stick to it. At the heart of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John is this enormous claim that something actually happened there at the beginning of the first century through the work and death and resurrection of Jesus, something happened which has transformed the world.

We have tended to slide that downhill into being Jesus simply providing a system of salvation which enables us later to leave the world or to escape the world in some way, either by our spirituality in the present or by a salvation which will take us entirely away from the world in the future. Whereas the four Gospel writers, living as they did within the world of second-temple Judaism, believed that through Jesus, the one God of Israel, the creator of the world, had acted to reclaim the world, to redeem the world,



to rescue the world, not to enable people to leave it behind.

This idea is scary for most people in the Western world, because for the last 200 years, Western thought in general and Christianity along with that has tended to think in terms of splitting apart things that are “worldly” (whether we call them political or social or whatever) and then “religious” (or spiritual things) over there. So we have read the Gospels through a grid of interpretation which is systematically and at every point denying one of the main things that the Gospels are trying to affirm. I don’t know how to say that except by doing it rather sharply: I think we’ve all been getting it wrong.

GD: Could you recall for us some passages in the New Testament that point out the emphasis or the importance of Jesus and the kingdom and his kingship?

NTW: A passage which many Western Christians know well (because they may hear it read in church at Christmas time and so on) is the beginning of John’s Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”

What John is doing in that passage — hooking up with what he does in his story of Jesus’ resurrection — is to tell the story of Jesus as the story of a new Genesis, a new beginning. Genesis is all about the creation and about God’s beautiful world, and the story John tells in his Gospel from beginning to end is not about Jesus telling people to leave the world behind and go somewhere else, but a story about how in and through Jesus, the one God of creation is rescuing creation and enabling his people to live as new-creation people. That’s a way of telling the story which I never heard when I was growing up in church and when I was being taught as a student. We need to recapture it.

This comes to a climax in John’s Gospel in that extraordinary scene in chapters 18 and 19 — when Jesus confronts Pontius Pilate — here we have the kingdom of God squaring off against the kingdom of Caesar. But it isn’t Jesus saying, “Well, all this kingdom stuff is a waste of time.” It’s Jesus and Pilate arguing about different visions of kingdom, truth and power.

We see that also in the beginning of Luke’s Gospel, in chapter 2, where Luke spends some time setting up the chronology in terms of the Roman emperor of that time, Augustus Caesar, who was emperor when Jesus was born. Luke describes that in detail, that Jesus was born in Bethlehem because Augustus Caesar wanted to have a census so he could get more tax and do all that stuff which was standard practice at that time.

Anyone living at that time and a Jew living at that time would know this story — of somebody being born in the royal house of David in Bethlehem precisely the moment when the Roman empire is flexing its muscles — is bound to lead to a sense of, “Which kingdom are we going to go with, then?”

The story ends for Luke, not at the end of Luke's Gospel but the end of Acts, with Paul announcing God as King and Jesus as Lord in Rome openly and unhindered, and Luke says to us, "You do the math, you figure out what's going on here."

One third example: In Mark 10, when James and John say they want to sit one at Jesus' right and one at his left, Jesus explains, not only do they not have a clue what they're talking about, but that there are two different ways of doing power. The rulers of the nations, he says, boss people about and bully them and so on. He says, "We're not going to do it like that – we're going to do it the other way – by the power of servanthood. The Son of Man didn't come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."

In other words, the gospel isn't about an other-worldly dream, it's about a different way of doing stuff in and for *this* world – because it's God's world and God loves it and has come to rescue it. One of the most famous verses in Scripture, John 3:16, doesn't say: God so *hated* the world that he sent his Son. God so *loved* the world, and that's the whole purpose – God is reclaiming his rights as Creator over the whole world.

GD: What about Jesus' parables of the kingdom? Do some of those point in the same direction?

NTW: The parables of the kingdom are fascinating because at one level, they are illustrations, just like you or I might toss into a sermon or a talk, an illustration happens to occur to us while we're on the way to church or whatever. But they're much more than that.

Those parables of seed and growth play back in the minds of Jesus' hearers (and we have to remember that most of them, the main texts they had in their minds were the Old Testament Scriptures). They play back particularly through the prophetic images about God sowing his people, about God sowing Israel, making it a fruitful place, etc. But they play all the way back to Genesis 1 again, where you get the lavish account of God creating plants with seed in them bearing fruit and so on.

The idea of plants coming up and bearing fruit is a new-creation idea, a new-Israel idea. If you track it through Isaiah and Jeremiah, it's a return from exile idea – these all nest together and fit together, so that though what Jesus is saying is a direct challenge to these people who are listening to him now, that challenge resonates with a sense that this kingdom vision is about God doing the new thing which is going with the grain of the original creation but now making it much more fruitful.

You see this in the miracle stories when Jesus multiplies loaves and fishes. It isn't that he says, "Forget eating loaves and fishes entirely, I got something totally different." These are signs that the God of creation is doing new

things, he's on the move in a new way.

GD: I think what you are bringing out here is that we can't fully appreciate what the New Testament means until we read about its connections to the Old Testament. Could you say a little more about that need to be familiar with Old Testament and its background?

NTW: If one doesn't know the Old Testament, one doesn't have a chance of understanding the New, because again and again, and you see this in the Gospels, the way they told a story is not just with the odd glance over their shoulder – that something interesting happened back there and this is an odd reference. Like I might drop a reference to a Shakespeare play into a speech or a book I was writing or something that is just for decoration. Some people think the Old Testament is just a back decoration. It's much, much more than that.

The Old Testament – whether we read it in the English translations from Genesis to Malachi or as you do in the Hebrew from Genesis to Chronicles (they ordered the books differently) – whichever way you do it, it's telling a story, and the story is going somewhere, and it stops short. The end of Chronicles, the end of Malachi, it's pointing ahead, it's as though we've got a 12-chapter novel and we've got nine or ten of those chapters, or maybe nine and a half. Or as I've sometimes said, take a Shakespeare play, it's as though we've got three acts of the play, and we're waiting to see what's going to happen in the 4th act, when it all really works out.

The Gospels are written very cleverly – quite different, all four, each one in its own way is taking that Old Testament narrative and saying, the story that I am telling you, the story about Jesus, is where that story was going. It doesn't look like what you were expecting, but this is where it all had to go.

It is, in modern terms, this-worldly – the Jewish story is about God promising Abraham a family and a land, and then all the bad things that happen when they get it wrong, messed it up and all the rest. In the New Testament the family gets expanded so that it includes people of all ethnic backgrounds, not just the Jewish people. The land gets expanded, as you see in the Acts of the Apostles, so it's now the whole world.

That sense of a narrative which suddenly does this new thing is powerful in the Gospels. I suspect that 90 percent of Christians in today's world haven't thought that, let alone tried to read the text in that way.

GD: So Jesus is fulfilling the expectations and hopes of Israel in many ways. Sometimes it seems we've too narrowly construed the kind of fulfillment that Jesus is bringing about. It has kingdom dimensions and time and space, and "on earth" dimensions.

NTW: Yes, and of all the Scriptures that the people of Israel in Jesus' day would know, what would they know most? Possibly the Psalms. Think for

instance of the Psalms in the 90s – “The Lord is King and has put on his glorious apparel and he is taking his power and reigning” and “the Lord is King let the earth be glad thereof.” You get those wonderful psalms like 96 and 98, which say that the mountains and hills and the sheep in the field are all going to sing for joy because Yahweh is coming to be king.

Perhaps most decisive of all, in Isaiah 52, “How lovely in the mountains are the ones who say to Zion, your God reigns” – that is, your God is becoming King. How does that come about? We go from the end of Isaiah 52 into Isaiah 53, which is an extraordinary picture of the suffering servant, who is the obedient representative of Israel taking the weight of sin and sorrow upon himself. Then in Isaiah 54, there is new covenant; in Isaiah 55 there is new creation. It’s an extraordinary sequence, and I think that Jesus and the Gospel writers have that prophetic sequence in mind: The kingdom of God through the work of the servant, resulting in the total renewal of covenant in creation.

GD: How would their understanding of Jesus as Son of David or Messiah fill out and inform what we hear Jesus saying in the Gospels?

NTW: The word Messiah (or Christ, which is just a re-translation) is often misunderstood, not least by Christians who have short-circuited the argument over the last two or three hundred years, particularly the question that Western cultures ask is, Is Jesus divine? People have taken the word “Christ” and assumed that it meant *divine*. Then it comes as a shock to people when they’re told, “It means Messiah, and as far as we know, first-century Jews didn’t imagine that the Messiah would be in any sense divine.”

We see in the New Testament a swirling mass of different Jewish ideas. There was no one identikit picture of what the Messiah would look like. Jesus takes the variegated expectations of the time and remolds them around himself. We can see other figures doing the same thing in the same period. Jesus draws those Messianic expectations (which are fuzzy and ill-formed) onto himself, and through his own work, he does this stuff in a new way, so he doesn’t appear like the “warrior messiah” that some were imagining. He doesn’t appear to be wanting to rebuild the temple, as some people thought the Messiah ought to do. (That’s why the Herod family were trying to legitimate themselves as kings of the Jews, by doing stuff with the temple.) Jesus, on the contrary, seems to be *attacking* the temple and warning that it is under threat of immanent destruction and so on.

But his followers see that he is obedient to a deeper Messianic vision rooted in Israel’s Scriptures, one which is producing an extraordinarily different sort of messianic victory. Instead of beating the pagans in an old-fashioned military battle, he is beating the darkest enemy of all, death, which is caused by human rebellion and sin. Jesus is redefining the messianic agenda

around a deeper vision, his understanding of what the real problem is – which has to be dealt with by the King when he comes.

Many Jews looked at Jesus (in his lifetime and when Paul was preaching about him) and said, “That’s not the sort of messiah we were expecting, thank you very much.” But the early Christians nevertheless said, “The resurrection of Jesus is the declaration by the living God that he really is the Messiah, and hence this is the redemption you were expecting, even if it doesn’t look like you thought it would at that time.”

GD: Another important element needed to follow the Gospel writers’ story regards the nature of this kingdom and Jesus’ redefinition of it. Jesus’ kingship relates to the idea of righteousness – the righteous kingdom (and God’s righteousness is a theme in both the Old Testament and the New Testament). How would you define biblical righteousness (because we can think of that in purely spiritual or moralistic ways)? How does that notion of righteousness relate to Jesus being King in the kingdom of God?

NTW: Part of our difficulty with the word *righteousness* and its cognates – righteous and justify, etc., which is the same root in the Greek or Hebrew – is that we don’t have one English word or set of words which map directly onto the Hebrew words or the Greek words that we find in the Old or the New Testament. This is a common problem with many words, but this is one of the big ones.

The Hebrew word *tsedaqah*, the word we normally translate as righteousness, is like a large ocean-going freight vessel which carries a lot of freight from different bits of Israel’s Scriptures and Israel’s history. In contemporary English, we don’t have any vessel big enough to carry all that freight. So when we say “righteousness,” we have to educate ourselves to think back into what that word would carry.

It’s complicated, because many of the Jews of Jesus’ day would read the Septuagint, the Greek translation, but the Greek word *dikiosyne* carries *some* of the content that *tsedaqah* would, but for a Greek speaker, it would also carry quite a lot of Plato, who had written about *dikiosyne* as justice. It is hugely complicated in the New Testament, and the word moves this way and that, from writer to writer. The center of it is something to do with God’s righteousness, something to do with God’s faithfulness to his people, to the relationship he’s established with his people, which we call the covenant relationship. But because God’s intention for his people is that they would be the genuine humans, the real deal, then the word has (inescapably) what we call an ethical content as well. They wouldn’t have dissociated covenant from ethics – those two go together. God says, “if you are my people, then this is what it’s going to look like.”

So we separate these things out and ask, is this a status, is it behavior, is it

spirituality? The answer: it's all of those but more. When you learn to think in the way that the Psalms do, talking about Yahweh's righteousness, or again, Isaiah 40-55, the passage is full of talk about the fact that Yahweh is righteous, so you may be in exile now, but you can trust him, because he is righteous, he will restore you, he will rescue you, he will bring you back. But then you have to be a people who not only embody but reflect that righteous quality.

The New Testament is drawing cheerfully on all of that as part of this overall picture that if God is becoming King, then that is both a revelation of his faithfulness to creation and covenant, and a summons to all those whom he is calling to live as part of that, to be God's righteous people — both as the status they are given by God's grace and then, as Paul says in Romans 6, in the way they behave.

Part of our problem in the last two, three centuries in the Western world is that we have separated status and behavior in a way that the New Testament writers wouldn't have, so that we want to emphasize the one or the other, but it's difficult to do both at the same time. The New Testament doesn't seem to suffer from our inhibitions at that point.

GD: Sometimes the notion of righteousness is related to the notion of justice (in our Western parlance anyway). Righteousness is often understood as rewarding the good and punishing the evil. God's righteousness would be fulfilled, even if that's all God accomplished, that he rewarded the good and punished the evil. It seems to me you're talking about something more than that.

NTW: Yes. When I think about the way the Bible treats the righteousness of God, I think of a passage like Daniel 9 – the great prayer of Daniel in exile, where he says, “We've been here a long time, and we know why this happened, it's because you [God] are righteous.” How does that work? It's because we were in covenant, we broke the covenant, so because you are righteous, you were obliged to punish us. Go to Deuteronomy 27, 28 — God was obliged to punish his rebellious people by sending them into exile.

Then Daniel says, “However, because you are righteous, now is the time for you to rescue us and bring us back.” In other words, the covenant was not simply a quid pro quo: “you behave like this, this happens; you behave like that, that happens.” The covenant was God setting up the family of Abraham as the family through whom he was going to rescue the whole world. (That's how Paul expounds the Abrahamic story in Romans 4 or Galatians 3, for instance.) God knew from the beginning when he chose Abraham, that this family was going to mess up. These people were themselves part of the problem as well as part of the solution.

So the story gets complicated, morally, theologically – but when it all

comes into land in the New Testament, we find that the notion of God being like a just judge who punishes the evil and rewards the good is not totally removed, but we go beyond that into the extraordinary idea that God's righteousness is about his grace and mercy — and his over-flowing faithfulness to a purpose, which is to say, "The whole world has messed up, but I love you so much that I'm going to take that on to myself, and deal with it, so that there can be new creation, forgiveness, and new life for anyone who is hearing this message and is able to respond."

GD: So the idea of new creation and restoration is intrinsically related to righteousness. [NTW: Absolutely.] If God merely stopped short of that and didn't provide us renewal, then that would be a different notion. But because he's righteous, he renews, he restores, recreates...

NTW: One of the fascinating things which the New Testament holds together (which we often manage not to) is the dealing with evil on the cross, making the way therefore for new life to happen. Because it's evil which is stopping the new life happening (as we all know in ourselves, that when we mess up, when we sin, when we rebel, that stuff which ought to be flourishing in our lives then doesn't). That happens cosmically, and God takes the weight of that evil upon himself in the person of Jesus, and that's what the cross is all about.

But if it just stops there.... (Some Western piety has done that — think of the great work of Johann Sebastian Bach, *The Matthew Passion*, *The John Passion* — we almost have a theory of salvation stopping with the cross. Bach didn't have a very big theology of the resurrection — interesting, in his Lutheran world.) Sometimes, we've allowed ourselves to think you can tell the story with the resurrection as kind of a nice happy ending, as an afterthought. But the point is, now that sin has been dealt with, new creation can begin. That's where the kingdom of God comes in.

GD: In another of your books, you talked about God's commitment to "putting things to rights."

NTW: Yes. I think is a British-ism, that we talk about putting things to rights. If my bicycle has been messed up because of an accident, I take it to the shop and they will put it to rights — they will fix it. Or if my radio is on the blink, then somebody will fiddle inside, and we say, he'll put it to rights. I think in America you often say, will put it right, we'll make it right.

I like the phrase "put it to rights" because that has a little echo of "rights" as in the sense of justice, and the way I've often put it is (this relates to the doctrine of justification in Paul) that God's eventual aim is to put the whole world to rights. It's to sort the whole world out. That's in the Psalms, Isaiah, Genesis, Deuteronomy, etc.

Part of the means whereby God does that in and through Jesus Christ is

to put *people* right. Justification serves the larger cause of justice. It is not just about me needing to be right with God. (I do, and that's important, and that's central – when I look in the mirror, I need to know that that's there. But God doesn't stop there.) He says, "I'm putting you right so that you can be part of the team which is working on the putting-the-world-right stuff," because that's what, by the Holy Spirit, God is intending to be doing in and through us.

GD: It's clear in your book that you think an emphasis on going to heaven doesn't do complete justice to the message of the gospel in the New Testament. What's the problem with setting out the gospel in that way — going to heaven — and is there a way to correct for that?

NTW: This is a big and deep one, and I struggled with this when I was in my late teens and early twenties, because I've grown up going to church where the emphasis, the assumption was, if you are a Christian, you get to heaven, and if you're not a Christian, then watch out, because you probably won't get to heaven. Much of Western Christianity has been stuck on that. This is a medieval thing.

An anecdote may help. I was once in a worship service in the Sistine Chapel in Rome, with that great picture by Michelangelo at the far end. I was sitting next to a Greek Orthodox archimandrite. (It was an ecumenical row we were on.) He pointed at that painting and said, "That's not how we do it in the Greek East. We don't tell the story like that, with some going to heaven and some going to hell." Because for them it's all about resurrection and new creation. They're not necessarily universalists, but the emphasis is not on "some this way, some that way." It's on the newness and the new creation and the life, rather than the either/or.

What we then find is a problem: If you grow up with going to heaven as the ideal, people envisage heaven as outside space and time and matter. But, excuse me, we have Jesus being raised from the dead, and we are promised that we will be raised bodily from the dead. Most devout Christians believe that without ever stopping and thinking, how does that work together?

The answer is, as any first-century Jew would know, that *resurrection* means a two-stage, post-mortem reality, that you don't go straight from death to resurrection. Jesus himself didn't go straight from death to resurrection. Jesus was in the tomb, and then was raised on the third day. He talks to the brigand beside him on the cross when he says, "Today, you will be with me in paradise." Because in that world, *paradise* is not the ultimate place you go to be. Paradise is the temporary resting place.

Just under two years ago, my father died. I had the privilege of taking his funeral, and it was a wonderful sense — he was a devout Christian man — of giving him over to God, to be rested and refreshed and restored, a big sigh

of relief, against the day when one day, he will be raised from the dead, when we all will be, when God makes the new heavens and new earth.

When we talk about going to heaven, okay, but the New Testament doesn't usually do that. Hardly any passages in the New Testament use that language. In Revelation it talks about the souls being under the altar and saying to God "how long?" They're on a holding pattern, in a waiting mode, and the eventual thing is the new heavens and the new earth, which will be like this world, only more so.

God made space, time and matter – and he loves that stuff. He said in Genesis it was very good. He wants to do it even more, so the new world which God will make will be like the present one, only more so. Where the dead are now... If they belong to Christ, Paul says, they are with Christ, which is far better. But that is not the end of the story. There's resurrection still to come. Getting that two-stage story into people's heads when they have a whole lifetime of thinking of "one step straight into heaven and that's it," that's difficult. Fortunately, if you read the New Testament, it becomes clearer and clearer.

GD: Thank you so much. We're out of time, but I know our viewers will be prompted with this interview to look at your book *How God Became King*.

123. HOW GOD BECAME KING (PART 2)

GD: Professor Wright, thank you for joining us again here in St. Andrews. I'd like to follow up with a few more questions that are derived mostly from your book *How God Became King*. I'm particularly interested in the connection and relationship between heaven and earth. Often we think of them as separate, and we're going to heaven and leaving earth, but you want to bring out the relationship and the connection. Can you say something more about that?

NTW: A few years ago, in 2005, I was working on another book called *Simply Christian*. I found myself having to explain certain things in a way I hadn't before, and I did it in terms of the temple in Jerusalem. When they built the temple in Jerusalem (and when they had the wilderness tabernacle before that), the idea of the temple was *this* was the place where heaven and earth would overlap and interlock.

That seems counterintuitive to most people in the modern West. The reason for that is: ever since the Renaissance, Western culture has become more and more Epicurean, in terms of ancient philosophy. Epicurus and his follower Lucretius split apart heaven and earth and said that the gods are somewhere far away, are not bothered about us, are not interested in us, and we just do our own thing, and the world rambles along under eternity. That's Epicureanism. Much of the modern Western world has been Epicurean. Thomas Jefferson said, "I am an Epicurean."

The Enlightenment of the 18th century is built on the principle that God and the world don't basically mix. The Bible is built on the principle that they're designed to, but, because the world is in rebellion, that's a complex and contested idea. Nevertheless, the point of the temple in Jerusalem, and the reason why the main thing you do there is sacrifice, is because God wants to get together with his people.

Then the extraordinary thing happens in the New Testament: Jesus behaves and talks as if he is somehow almost the temple in person, a living, breathing temple. Paul says (even more extraordinarily) to the Christians in Corinth, of all places, that because God's Spirit now dwells in you, you are the temple of the living God [1 Corinthians 3:16] and therefore, you have to figure out how to handle that, what comes as a result. That is hugely challenging intellectually, personally and ethically, but that's how it's meant to be, that God and the world are meant for each other. Heaven and earth are meant for each other, not meant to be pulled apart. In Jesus and the Spirit,

that's what we're supposed to see happening.

GD: They touched, came together.

NTW: They touched, they merged. In 1 Corinthians 15:28, Paul says, God will eventually be all in all.

GD: The problem for some people is when we read that Jesus said his kingdom was not of this world. That's often interpreted in a certain way and you're trying to bring out a different, a particular way of viewing that. Could you say something about it: what did he mean when he said, "my kingdom is not of this world"?

NTW: Part of the difficulty here is in the translation. The phrase "not of this world" has been used to mean it's an otherworld sort of thing, in the sense of nothing to do with space, time and matter. Nothing to do with politics and mess of this world.

The phrase in Greek is "my kingdom is not *ek tou kosmou toutou*. *Eke* means "out of" or "from." Jesus is saying, "my kingdom isn't the sort that grows in this world of itself." It's not the sort of kingdom that grows in this world, like the ancient Roman kingdom, like many modern empires.

This is the next line that Jesus goes on to: by violence. He says, "If my kingdom was the sort that grows in this world, then my followers will be fighting to stop me from being handed over. My kingdom is not from here." The point is his kingdom is from God, from heaven, but it is for this world. It isn't *from* this world, but it's *for* this world.

That's why, when Pilate sends Jesus to the cross with ironically the words "King of the Jews" above his head... (Any first-century Jew would know that that has to do with this kingdom vision from Psalm 2 and so on, which is "the king of the Jews" whose dominion will be from one sea to the other and from the river to the ends of the earth. This is not about another worldly kingdom.) Pilate (like the centurion at the foot of the cross in Mark's Gospel) is saying more than he knew: Jesus is the true king of the world, and that's what begins properly with the resurrection.

GD: So "not of this world" means "it's not of that sort or of that kind." It doesn't mean it's of another world and place.

NTW: Exactly. It comes from God's world, but God's world, heaven, was always meant to intersect with our world. If a kingdom merely grows in this world, it will do its business by violence and death, and it will die. God's kingdom is a new thing coming in, but it is for this world, to make it a world that God wants it to be.

GD: How would you see that working out in the life of the church and the people of God? How do we go about living in Christ's reign here and

now on this earth?

NTW: The most important thing is worship. Most Christians worship, because they go to church on Sunday, or they say their prayers or whatever, but very few reflect on what actually happens when you worship. When you worship, you're saying to God with your innermost being, "You are in charge. You are the King. You are the Lord, and we are available for your use, as it were."

This is a scary, risky and dangerous thing to do, but that's basically what one is doing. When you're worshipping, you are adoring the God in whose image you are made. In the New Testament, Paul and others say things to do with that. It means you get remade in the image of God, so you become somebody who can reflect God into the world, perhaps in ways that one is not aware of oneself. That's what worship ought to result in.

Therefore, as Christians are worshipers, they ought to be kingdom bearers. They ought to be stewards in God's world. Jesus said, "You are the light of the world"; that's how we are supposed to be. Without worship, that won't happen. With worship, it begins to happen, but it takes more than that — it takes teaching and thinking through how the practice is going to work out.

GD: Could you give us some examples of where you think the church (or a branch of the church or individual Christians, or organizations) has done a good job of making this apparent?

NTW: There are positives and negatives. As with Jesus in his work and then his confrontation with Pontius Pilate, some of the kingdom work is positive, planting new things, planting seeds which are going to grow. Some of it is negative, confronting the past of the world with the fact that they're getting it wrong.

My successor Bishop of Durham, Justin Welby [now Archbishop of Canterbury], was recently in the news because he was in the business world before he became a priest and then a bishop. He is now one of the church's representatives to speak into the world of banking and commerce. He made a speech recently (which got the headlines) pointing out that the way the banking industry has run was purely for the benefit of the banking industry. It was called the service industry, but it wasn't actually serving anyone. That is a classic example of a wise Christian who understands what he's talking about, not just shooting his mouth off to somebody he doesn't like (which is always a danger), but actually naming an issue in our society which has been a major sore point, putting his finger on it in the name of God—not in order to say you silly people, whatever, but in order to produce the serious prophetic critique which we need, the positive as well.

From my time in Durham I saw a lot of this. It was one of the poorest areas of the U.K., and there were churches that didn't have a great deal in terms of big theological education telling them how to do it. They were worshipping people who look around at their local communities. In one case a church in one of the poorest parts of the northeastern England saw that there were a lot broken homes. There were single mothers with young kids, but the mothers were out at work; the kids were running wild on the street. The church with minimal resources started an amazing child daycare center which became a flagship project that other people from around the country looked at. They said, We never thought of doing it like that, but how did this work, and how did you solve that problem, et cetera.

That's how it often works: two or three people (maybe even one person) out of the life of worship, prayer and Scripture study see that there is something which needs to be done. They say, "This seems impossible, we will pray about it, we will work it, we'll go and talk to the local council." When they do it, it cascades. Other people say, "we could do that" as well.

My favorite example (not recent, because I was involved in it) is the Hospice Movement. Fifty or 60 years ago there wasn't a hospice movement as we now know it. It was because Cicely Saunders, a Christian with a bit of steely eye who wasn't going to take no for an answer, knew that the care that people were getting in hospital when they were dying was not good, that the doctors would just give them up. So she started St. Christopher's Hospice in London. The government didn't want to help, the medical profession weren't interested. She raised the money herself. There are now hospices all over the Western world which really flowed from that and have given hope and comfort and solace to millions of people. That's within my lifetime that's happened, and that's a sign of God being king even here even now—paradoxically, even in the midst of death bringing signs of life.

GD: They're not necessarily grandiose. You might think the kingdom of God is going to be heroic and grandiose and these aren't.

NTW: Exactly.

GD: It can take simple forms.

NTW: It's precisely not grandiose. That's why the parables are often about a tiny seed which then will grow into something. The book of Zechariah says, Don't despise that they're small things. Again and again I have seen kingdom projects, you might call them, which started amazingly small—with one poor person in a poor rundown church who gets this idea that when she or he is praying, God seems to be saying, "I want you to go and do this." "That's crazy, how could I make a difference?" It is extraordinary: one or two

or three people saying prayers, worshipping, attentive to the needs around them. It's extraordinary what God can do.

GD: Another theme that you bring up in your book is the theme of suffering as a part of demonstrating the kingdom and participating in Christ's reign. Can you say something about that?

NTW: We're not good at suffering in the Western world. The whole Enlightenment project was about, "We have grown up now, we have more meds and we have modern technology, therefore we shouldn't have to suffer, so we'll vanish suffering." The trouble is that there's lots of suffering in the rest of the world, and some of it, sadly, we have inflicted on the rest of the world; there's all sorts of issues around that.

There is the danger as well, which is there in the second century already, of Christians embracing martyrdom a bit too eagerly, and wanting to throw themselves on to the fire, or have themselves taken off to be fed to the lions. The church has navigated that, but it goes back to the sense of the way the world is at the moment. If the world is run by kingdoms from this world, which do what they do by bullying and by violence, and the church is called to make its way in a totally different way, there is bound to be again and again a point of conflict.

We saw this in the churches in Eastern Europe under communism, but we see it in plenty parts of the world today, where the people who are bearing faithful witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ are stamped upon, denied access to jobs, or whatever it may be, and that sadly goes on. There is a question as to whether in the Western world the church ought to be suffering a bit more than it is, because the church ought to be bearing witness to the kingdom of God against the way the Western powers work. People in the Middle East look at the Western powers and think, "They're Christian nations." We who live in the West know that that's not the case. Our nations are not run on gospel principles, and so it's a challenge to the church.

However, anyone in the Western world who seeks to follow Jesus and be loyal and works for his kingdom and his gospel is going to face suffering sooner or later. It's going to happen through sickness, family problems, financial difficulties, or whatever. Suffering comes in all shapes and sorts and sizes, and it's usually messy, and usually it doesn't mean that we can say, "I am suffering this because I am a Christian, so I can feel good about this." Sadly, it's not like that.

Second Corinthians 4 is the passage I go back to again and again where Paul basically says we are cast down but not destroyed [verse 9]. We are at a loss, and yet not completely lost. At the time, it probably did feel that we

were completely lost, that we were killed, that we were overthrown. It's only with hindsight that we look back and say, "That's strange—we went through a dark patch there, and somehow we've lived to tell the tale." Again and again, it's in those dark patches that often God is most powerfully at work. It doesn't feel like it at that time, but having lived 63 years now and trying to follow this out, I can say again and again in my life, and that of many people who might have the privilege of ministering, that's how it's been.

GD: Thank you again for joining us, and I encourage our listeners to get your book *How God Became King*, because we haven't touched on everything but ...

NTW: It's enough to get you going.

GD: Some very important themes. Thank you again.

NTW: Very good to be talking with you. Thank you.

124. HOW *THE SHACK* WAS WRITTEN

J. Michael Feazell: 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 come 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.

125. 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.

126. 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 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 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 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?

127. 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.

128. NEW RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

J. Michael Fezell: 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.

129. *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.

130. 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.

131. TRINITARIAN GRACE AND PARTICIPATION

Gary Deddo: It's great to have you here. Tell us a little about yourself. You went to Scotland and studied theology, and you've been involved in pastoral ministry since then. What led you to study theology?



Geordie Ziegler: I fell in love with the Bible. I got exposed to it in college. I didn't go to a Christian college but I attended a Bible school for one semester and fell in love with it. That sent me to seminary and so I was at Regent College for a seminary, and that ended up sparking some things that I couldn't let go of, and eventually led to Scotland.

GD: That led to a big project that lasted quite a few years. Eventually a book came out of it, which I was happy to read. I love the title you came up with — it indicates the core of your interest: *Trinitarian Grace and Participation*. There's a million theological topics that you could have chosen and pursued. For what? Three, four years or longer [**GZ:** Six years.] That's a lot of time and a lot of effort. So tell us about this Trinitarian grace — it seems that it captured a lot of what you were interested in and wanted to explore.

GZ: Maybe I need to go back to your first question to prepare for that, because when I was in seminary, I went to Regent College, which was fantastic. Some wonderful teachers there. My theology classes were from people like J.I. Packer and Stanley Grenz, but at the end of my second year, Alan Torrance came to Regent College and taught a class on Christology, on Jesus, and I ended up being his teaching assistant for it. Not because I was helping teach, but because somebody had to make copies and pick him up from the airport.

I sat in on his class and I read the book that he recommended, which was *The Mediation of Christ*, by Thomas Torrance. I felt like I was hearing the gospel for the first time. Not that I was not a Christian before or anything like that. I got excited about what I was hearing in a way that I have never felt before. If I had to identify what was new, I think the big things were [first] that the incarnation – when God becomes human – is not just an experiment that God did to get a job done for 33 years, but it was an eternal decision.

[And second,] That the Incarnation continues in the Ascension. God retains his humanity. He doesn't leave it behind. That stunned me. I know it's in our Creed and we say that, but the penny never dropped for me, that that was the way it is. For me, that showed that God's love was on a scale that I never understood before, which then forced me to think about what was the basis for God and his relationship to me?

My understanding, my assumption (even though I was Trinitarian and would never doubt that) for God for me, primarily was ruler. He was Lord, he's sovereign, he's Almighty. He's God. That's the way that we tend to talk in church. God was Trinity – Father, Son and Spirit – but we don't do a lot with that in church. If the primary thing that defines God is that he is ruler, then first of all, it means that he needed a creation to rule. He needed people to be the rule followers. Then my job is to follow his rules, to be a dutiful servant, to live in gratitude, and that's the set-up, the framework.

But if the core of who God is, is that he is Father, Son, and Spirit, then that changes the relationship, that changes the basis. Athanasius said that before God is creator, he was Father. That means that before there was a creation, Father, Son, and Spirit were together in love and they chose to make this creation out of the freedom of their love, and that [understanding] changed the playing field. It was a game changer for me in terms of my understanding of how God related to us as human beings.

That got me excited and I couldn't let it go. That kind of buzzed in me for nine years as I was a pastor in California and eventually led to us selling everything and moving our family to Scotland, which was a great experience for all of us, mostly. That was what drove us and the theme, the topic that I was passionate about, was understanding what is God's grace. *Trinitarian Grace and Participation* is the title of the book. Its subtitle is “an entry into the theology of Thomas Torrance.” That's how it got there. I think you're asking about why the title.

GD: Yeah. A lot of people would just say it was grace. We all know what grace is. It's simple. It's easy. But is it really that simple and easy, especially just common ordinary answers to what grace is? I'm sure your exploration

revealed some things about it.

GZ: Most people, when they think of grace (and this is also within church history; there are ways that grace has been understood over time), probably one of the most common is that it's kind of a thing. It's a commodity. It's something you can bank and possess. And if you have more grace then you are more able to be a spiritual person or do good things. One version of it is to kind of commodify grace. I call it the pharmaceuticalization of grace. It's like this pill, and if we get it or we can store them, then we have more of it.

Other people talk about grace like it's more of an impersonal legal transaction. That's more of the Allah court [?] image for grace. At this single moment that's all that it's about. It's not personal, it's just something that happens, has to happen. It's focused on the cross. And then another way people think of grace is, it's like a tool and it helps you. It's a little divine boost – powerbar you can take. But all those versions of grace are impersonal. They miss the essence of grace – which is God giving himself to us, in Christ through the Spirit.

The title of the book is a bit redundant. People don't know it's redundant but it is, because grace is not uni-directional. It's like a boomerang. God gives himself in Christ through the Spirit so that we would participate in his life. The purpose is relationship. We like to tell people that grace is a free gift with no strings attached. It's not. The purpose of the gift is for relationship. A gift with no strings attached is like you don't care. You leave it on the doorstep and walk away and nobody knows; it doesn't make a closer relationship. It blesses a person who got it – a very individualistic version of maybe what grace would be. But God's purpose in grace is to give himself to us so that we would share in his life.

GD: That's a good illustration. Another version I've been aware of is that it's an exception to a rule. So, back to that you're talking about God being the ruler. In that framework (and I think it's the one that affected me for a lot of my life), God is gracious and what that means is he makes exceptions to rules. I knew there was something else to it. But I didn't know how it connected.

GZ: Yeah. Or we say what grace is getting what you don't deserve, which we agree with, but if that's the core definition, it's the same thing. You don't deserve this. It's not something you're supposed to have. It never was God's intent but he's going to break the rule and give it to you anyway.

GD: That's impersonal too, in a way. It's not what you are talking about in terms of the gift of a relationship by him giving himself to us. That's a different thing.

In your book, you were talking about the connection between God's love

and God's grace and I thought that was an important differentiation you were making. Tell us about that – the love of God and the grace of God. How are they distinct? How are they connected? They're both from God.

GZ: God's love is who he is in himself. He is love — Father, Son and Spirit share this love in their life. They always have; they don't need us; they're not lonely. But God, in the freedom of his love, chooses to share that. So he makes a world, makes a universe. He didn't have to. There didn't have to be anything, but there is. I remember the first time one of my supervisors in Aberdeen said that. None of this had to be. I was like, oh, I guess that's true. God didn't have to have kids. He didn't have to have a universe, but he did. So, grace is his love extended beyond himself. When he gives us himself, his love is poured out. As Paul says: his love is being poured out into our hearts [Roman 5:5]. That is his grace, and the purpose of that is that we would share in his life and become like him because of that.

GD: Yeah. I find that helpful. Would grace be grace if God *had* to be gracious? No, it wouldn't. It's important. I'm sure you run into this in your ministry: we say that God is love. That's true. We can find that in 1 John; there's not a problem with that. But often people don't know to fill that out, or they fill in the notion of love in any old way. It seems to me, they've not recognized that the form of love is what we call grace.

GZ: Grace has a shape, a form. Love has a shape and a form. And the form that it takes that's revealed to us is: God comes and it's self-giving love. Sacrificial love. We see that lived out in Jesus. People often say, “I like Jesus, but I'm not so sure about the Father. Should we even call him Father? It's kind of scary. ‘Spirit’ is confusing. But I like Jesus.” I don't think those people have read everything Jesus said. Because he is challenging — he calls us to a way of life that's like his, which is love poured out.

GD: So it's a self-giving nature and it has a form. A lot of the notion of love today, generally in the culture, is just being kind or nice. A person may be helpful or something like that. You used the word "sacrificial." Say more about that. What's the sacrificial side of grace?

GZ: It's because this world that God made has resisted him and turned away because of our sin. The way Scripture describes sin, it's reliance on ourselves, rather than dependence upon God, faith and trust. Those words become blurry to people. Trust is reliance on God, dependence on God, rather than reliance on ourselves.

Because of our sin, the world that God comes into is a world that needs redemption. It's a world that is broken and needs healing, so he deals with it. He enters it fully. He doesn't just wave a magic wand to fix things from a

distance. Could God have done that? If he could have, it would have been a very impersonal way to deal with the issue. I think you could say, given the nature of who God is, he wouldn't. He deals with everything personally. There's nothing that God does that is not personal.

Within our culture, within our ways of understanding God, and ourselves, and the church, we do a lot of things that are impersonal. We functionalize people. We functionalize systems. We treat people as problems rather than as human beings – and that's not the way that Jesus relates to us. That's not the way God relates to us. Love calls for that kind of personalness, of entering into the difficulties of life with people. Not from a distance, not making just big policies, but life on life, which is hard and slow and takes a lot of patience, but God is patient.

GD: Yes. We just don't throw in our own definitions of what love is. But actually it's demonstrated in a particular way in Jesus himself.

GZ: The ultimate is, of course, on the cross. That's his love, it's the obedience of his love to the cross that he shows it to the fullest extent. It's not only a love for humanity that God shows in the cross — it's Jesus' love of the Father that he shows, in his trust in the Father. To have his will aligned with the Father's will in the Garden [Luke 22:42], to be committed to trust the Father to that extent. And that's how reconciliation took place.

GD: So, Jesus' love for us has its root in his love for the Father, and it has the same shape expressed toward us. That goes back to the Trinitarian nature. Jesus' relationship with the Father is one of love, and that same love is extended towards us. That's grace, because it needs to address the problem – our alienation, our distrust and the brokenness of it.

A lot of people pit love or even grace against God's wrath or God's judgment. I know it's a huge topic, but can you say just a word about that? Because a lot of people think they're opposite, but we see both in the New Testament and in Jesus' ministry.

GZ: It is a terrible idea to put God's love on one side and his justice or his wrath on the other, as if he loves us but he's got to satisfy this, so there's some sort of negotiation deal, and here's the deal that's been worked out among the lawyers. That's a terrible way of talking about who God is and his attributes.

Somebody recently sent me something from a Bible study that they were a part of. It's just a list of God's attributes, about 30 or 40 of them. And when you make a list, none is more important than the other. Or maybe here's the most important, then here's number two and number three, but it becomes just this list.

The reality is that everything God does flows from his love. So, his wrath is an expression of his love – his commitment to justice and righteousness is the expression of his love. His wrath is him saying no when we resist him. We say no, and he says no to our no, and that's because of love. If my kid is going to run out on the street, I'm going to grab him and pull him back. That may hurt their arm when I do that. They may cry and be upset at me. But it's because of love that I'm seeking to protect them and care for them. It's not because I'm angry. They may experience it as anger. But it's not necessarily anger. It's actually because of love.

GD: They might think you're against them, rather than know you're actually expressing love, you are being for them, to watch out for them or to prevent harm and damage. That's a very important point. Thanks for sharing all that. These are interesting, important things. I'm sure it's key to your ministry to try to help people grasp this more deeply.

GZ: It is. What I want people to recognize is that God's grace isn't just some generic commodity. It's the invitation to participate in the Son's relationship with the Father. And that to me is what the Christian life is all about.

132. A TRINITARIAN APPROACH TO SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Gary Deddo: You've been involved in pastoral ministry quite a few years, and for a good number of years, there's been a rising interest in what's often being called spiritual formation. I know you've run into this, because you wrote an article on it, that I found very helpful. The title was: "Is It Time for a Reformation of Spiritual Formation?" You've done a lot of thinking on that and I know it's tied in with the rest of your study and theological reflection. What led you to that topic and why did you want to address it?

Geordie Ziegler: It's kind of the pinnacle of what my research has been about. I was a pastor in a church for nine years and was passionate about spiritual formation. I went to conference after conference and read all the kind of books you would expect somebody to be reading and found them helpful, but there were some theological gaps that I think were significant. I found in my experience with the congregation that many forms of spiritual formation throw people back on themselves and get them to pay more attention to themselves rather than to the God that we are seeking to become like, and that becomes problematic. Spiritual formation can begin to feel like a workout program and then it's just "train yourself and try harder and you'll be able to become the kind of person that can do these things. I couldn't run a marathon tomorrow, but if I trained for it I could." That's all true, but is that how we want to base and understand the framework that we live in in spiritual formation?

In my research, I came to believe that the goal of the Christian life is that the Father-Son relation would become embedded in us, that we would share in that and live in that. That forced a re-thinking of spiritual formation as a whole. In the article, I describe what I call a normal version of spiritual formation as subjective moral formation. "Subjective" because it begins with us. It's "moral" because the focus is on becoming a certain kind of person having certain virtues that are socially recognized within our culture to be the right things, and it's "formation" because if you do certain things you will become like that. I think that fairly accurately describes a lot of the books that are out there.

But I think a better way, a more Christian orthodox Trinitarian way, would be called objective Trinitarian participation. "Objective" meaning that it's rooted in who God is and it begins with God and then what God has done. It's "Trinitarian" because it's about participating in the Son's relationship with the Father through the Spirit. That's the center of it. And

it's "participation" because it's sharing in that, and as we share in his life and share in that relationship and we begin to take on the mind of Christ in that way, then we do become a new kind of person. But it's not through our own training and trying on our own but it's in relationship and in koinonia with Christ.

GD: It sounds like this would be (back from the '60s) a kind of self-realization, self-actualization and things like that, and the techniques and methods for doing that. What you're talking about sounds like it's going down a different route than that. Say more about that difference.

GZ: Foundationally, it's where we start. Are we starting with a center in ourselves, or are we starting with a center in God and who he is and what he's doing? I think much of formation begins with ourselves and trying to make ourselves into certain kinds of people – we work really hard, we do our Bible studies and we do our works and our activities and it becomes just work.

GD: And often people say, I'm trying to be like Christ.

GZ: Yeah, that sounds difficult. Christ-likeness is a great goal, but the real goal of spiritual formation (if we want to use the phrase spiritual formation) is not Christ-likeness – it's Christ. It's not to become a person who lives for Christ, but to be a person who lives in Christ and with Christ.

I don't think Christ-likeness is a bad goal, but what do we mean by Christ-likeness? Do we describe that or define that by moral-likeness like Christ? Or are we talking about relational-likeness? Of course, Jesus was moral – although socially he wasn't always moral – he often did things that the morality of that culture thought was immoral, but what made Jesus who he was, was his relationship with his Father. It's this orientation that he has toward the Father and everything through the Spirit and that made him a person who lived the kind of life he lived.

So if we are to be Christ-like, then it is to share the mindset that he had, of orientation to the Father. What does it look like for us to be doing that constantly? So we might do the same things – we might open our Bible, we should open our Bibles and read it and spend time in it. But when we do that, where do we begin? Are we beginning with ourselves, and thinking, "I got to figure this out and I got to read three chapters and keep up with my project that I decided that I should do – or somebody told me I should do – we make that a self-making project?

Or do we open the Scriptures and say, "Lord, how do you want to spend time with me today? How do you want to speak to me through this word? I'm here, I'm open and listening." That is not our project, but we begin with

him and we keep orienting it back to him. Because that's Christ-like, because that's what Jesus did. Everything he did, he says, he did because the Father told him to. He only did the works that the Father was doing [John 5:19]. His whole life was oriented around the Father. I think we miss that so much in our teaching, in the church, we lose sight (as Torrance says so well) that the center of the New Testament is the Father-Son relationship. And if that's true, we should pay attention to that more.

GD: Yeah, my own study is looking into that, for the New Testament has a lot more about that than I had realized. When I started looking for it, I found it was right there in front of my nose. It was there, there's a lot more to discover. I particularly like John 17, which talks a lot about it. As the Son is praying to the Father, you realize the nature of their relationship. There have been conversations down through the ages about the imitation of Christ, and in that framework a lot of people come away with the idea – I'm trying to follow Jesus' example, do what Jesus would do – that what-would-Jesus-do type of thing. But it sounds to me like you're talking about something maybe related but still different from that.

GZ: Yeah, one of the tests I ask myself (and we talk about this in our church staff quite often every Sunday): “Did we throw people back on themselves? Whether it's in the sermon or any part of worship, in a prayer and the offering and our confession and assurance, did we throw people back on themselves?” Because there are many ways that people can be involved in Christian things and it's just a weight on themselves.

It reminds me of what Jesus says in Matthew 11: “Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.” Just before he says that, he's praying to the Father, talking about this special relation between him and the Father that they only share, but also that he can pass on and share with his followers. That invitation to relationship that he has for us is different than just watching him from a distance and thinking, “I'm going to try and I'll become like that and I'll try harder.”

That's probably one of the biggest problems in Christianity: that people see what they should be – here's what I ought to be, but here's where I'm at. Here's reality, and I've got to get from here to over there and I've got to somehow cross that chasm. So we try to follow his example, we work hard at applying Scripture to our lives, but all the time we are doing it in a way that is focused on self or is self-reliant. The invitation of Matthew 11 is that we would come to him and do it with him. That's what participation is really about, that's the invitation. It's to share in Jesus' relationship with the Father.

You mentioned John 17 earlier. At the end of John, there's a scene where Mary is in the garden looking for the body and suddenly Jesus appears to her. She's so excited, she wants to hug him and he's like, wait. Then he says: "Go and tell the disciples this message: I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." So she goes and tells them. But I think it's significant that this is the first message that the risen Christ gives to the first person who finds him – to tell the brothers and sisters this truth. I think that's what they were so excited about – that Jesus now is with the Father and we're included in that. What's happening to him somehow includes us, and we can be excited about that, and we can live in that reality of his presence with the Father, but also his presence with us, because he is with us through his Spirit.

One of the challenges related to this is a question of ontology, of how we talk about the Christian life and what grounds spiritual formation, what grounds the church.... I worry about a lot of forms of spiritual formation that are not grounded ontologically. I get that phrase "ontology of the church" from Eugene Peterson – he uses it in his book *Practice Resurrection*, and it talks about the ontology of the church, which Torrance also does. That ontology is Jesus Christ and the risen Christ at the right hand of the Father – the one who lived among us – on our turf, lived that human life, that incarnate life, and also he's the one who's with us through the Spirit. That ontology includes the past, the present now, and the one who's taking us into the future. That needs to root us and ground us our entire life.

Torrance had this phrase "we live within an all-embracing framework of grace." If that's true, then everything in our existence is meant to be a life of participation in that relationship. There's no realm of our existence where we are meant to just go off and... "you can take care of this on your own. You've worked, you've trained hard enough, you're good enough now..." We never get better at the Christian life. We never get holier, or godlier, in the sense that godliness doesn't mean that we need God less. "You're so godly, you can take a week off." The more godly we become, we actually realize our deeper need for God. Godliness and holiness should be defined by an awareness of our greater need. Because all of us are saints and sinners. All of us are one step away from falling into an abyss if we are not careful. We all are dependent people – creatures.

GD: So that relationship is very important. How does obedience fit in here? Because there's a lot of trouble with that. There's either, we just do it by an act will, or "well, we live by grace, so we don't need to obey." So how does obedience fit into spiritual formation?

GZ: If spiritual formation has an ontology, as our life in Christ does, and

the ontology is Jesus, we look to Jesus for that answer. And when I look at Jesus and his obedience, probably we can see that his entire life was a life of obedience, but it begins at his baptism. In his baptism we hear that the Father speaks to him and says, “You are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” The way that Scripture tells that story, it doesn’t seem like it’s just for everybody else’s benefit to hear, “this is Jesus, the Son of God.” It’s spoken to Jesus from the Father. I think that’s a very personal experience for him and an important one.

From that moment, in the next scene he goes out into the wilderness. He’s driven by the Spirit into the wilderness, faces temptations and in each temptation, in each trial, he’s obedient. In two of the temptations, two of the three trials, the specific wording of the devil, of the accuser, to him is: “If you are the Son of God...” He is attacking him at the place that the Father had just affirmed. Satan attacks that identity – that sonship – because he knows if he can challenge that and create some doubt there, then it’s game over.

Jesus is faithful in each of those places and that demonstrates what happens throughout his entire ministry: He is the one who knows that he is the Son of the Father. He knows who he is and is always looking to the Father. His obedience flows out of that identity, and it’s the same with us. We are those who are in Christ; we are sharing his relationship with the Father, so by adoption, we get to have the voice of the Father say that to us, too: “You are my beloved daughter, you are my beloved Son, in whom I’m well pleased.” And then our invitation is to live in obedience and faithfulness out of that identity.

Where we go wrong is when we begin with obedience without having come from identity. When we start there, we start with a sense of performance – “I’ve got to perform, I’ve got to do good, I’ve got to impress people, I’ve got to make God happy, make me happy.” When we begin with a center in ourselves, that can either be a way of trying to get God’s approval or a way of making a name for ourselves and creating our own identity.

Obedience might look the same on the surface but be coming from very different places. Is it an obedience that begins in needing to prove itself to be enough? Or is it an obedience that comes out of a secure identity – a platform, a base, a spacious salvation place that God has given us to live in? Obedience, if we begin with the kind of the direction that we see in Jesus, if we begin from that place, then obedience is really being who we are. It is being who the Father has said we are in Christ. That is our truest identity, to be brothers and sisters of Christ; that’s who he’s made us to be. It’s living with the grain of that calling. Disobedience is when we try to make a name

for ourselves and do it on our own.

GD: And when we forget who we are and act as if we're someone else.

GZ: The challenge is, as Martin Luther says, that our default is religion. If we think of religion in the sense of working your way up, our default is to start with ourselves as performers. It helps me to think about that: If that's my natural starting point, then everyday, I have to say something like (this is a prayer that a friend shared with me) "You are God and I am NOT. What shall we do today?" Everyday we have to remember that my starting point can't be with me. It has to be with my God and who he calls me and makes me to be. So, am I going to be overwhelmed by all the tasks, or am I going to say "Lord, where do we start? It's your day. It's not all up to me."

GD: The doing will be doing together, instead of on our own. When we say "You're God and I'm not," that's a kind of repentance, isn't it? Dying to self, and remembering who we really are.

GZ: I think we have problems with the language of repentance because we make it about such big things. If somebody has to repent, we think, they must have done something terribly wrong. Well, we have to repent many times a day. Because it's really about changing your thinking, your mindset – from beginning with yourself to beginning with the reality of who you are in Christ and who the Father says you are and starting with him. It's really about that with-ness: am I going to do my day with him? Or am I going to do maybe 15 minutes with God and then we'll check back in at the end of the day? Rather than just living that as I'm driving, as I'm interacting with different people, as I'm reading Scripture, as I'm dealing with challenges – letting that be something that's with God. And you can't always have your mind in two places, but knowing that we are accompanied and making that a practice to bring that together.

GD: That reminds me when Jesus says, No longer I call you servants or slaves but friends [John 15:15]. I think he's trying to help them see a new kind of relationship so that they live out that relationship. Not as a servant, as a slave, but as a son and a daughter.

GZ: People can do, on the surface, many of the same things. But we can either do it as a son, as a daughter, or we can do it as a slave. As a son or daughter, there's a sense that, I am loved (even though it doesn't mean I'm perfect). It's just "I'm loved," and that's the beginning point. I am, because God is. As a slave, the message is: I'm not. I'm not enough and I'll never be enough unless I figure it out, work hard, and that's just an endless cycle.

Everyday we have that choice. But it's not a choice that we make in our own power and struggle. We say, "Lord, I'm weak, and I want to do this day

with you. Help me. And Spirit, remind me throughout the day.” It’s not even my job to remind myself all the time. I can do things to try to help to make that easier or better, more consistent, but it’s the Spirit who ultimately is responsible for it. Just letting that be part of the prayer – that the prayer should not be that I would be strong so I can do this on my own.

If I could start a revolution or a reformation of spiritual formation, it would be that we would really believe that the heart of the Christian life is sharing with the Son’s relationship with the Father through the Spirit. As Torrance says: Christian discipleship is thinking and acting in Christ – the disciplined habit of thinking and acting in Christ – and living in that place.

GD: Thanks. I appreciate you sharing with us.

Special thanks to Johnny Logroño for many of the transcriptions.

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*
- *Everything That Makes Me Happy I Learned When I Grew Up*
- *Exploration Into God: Sermonic Meditations on the Book of Ecclesiastes*
- *God So Loved ... : A Theology for Ministry Formation*
- *The Gospel According to Judas: Is There a Limit to God's Forgiveness?*
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- *Judas And Jesus: Amazing Grace for the Wounded Soul*
- *Like Living Stones*
- *Living the Spiritually Balanced Life: Acquiring the Virtues You Admire in Others*
- *Minding God's Business*
- *Ministry on the Fireline: A Practical Theology for an Empowered Church*
- *The New Age of Soul: Spiritual Wisdom for a New Millennium*
- *On Being Family: A Social Theology of the Family*
- *On Being Happy: Everything That Makes Me Unhappy I Learned as a Child*
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- *Self-Care: A Theology of Personal Empowerment and Spiritual Healing*
- *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry With Theological Praxis*
- *Something Old, Something New: Marriage and Family Ministry in a Postmodern Culture*
- *The Soul of God: A Theological Memoir*
- *The Soul of Ministry: Forming Leaders for God's People*

- *Soulsprints: Personal Reflections on Faith, Hope and Love*
- *Spiritual Caregiving as Secular Sacrament: A Practical Theology for Professional Caregivers*
- *Theological Anthropology and the Revelation of God*
- *Theological Foundations for Ministry: Selected Readings for a Theology of the Church in Ministry*
- *A Theological Perspective on Human Personhood*
- *Theology, Death, and Dying*
- *Unspoken Wisdom: Truths My Father Taught Me*

Jeremy Begbie, Professor of Theology at Duke Divinity School, received a PhD in 1987 from the University of Aberdeen. His books include:

- *A Peculiar Orthodoxy: Reflections on Theology and the Arts*
- *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation through the Arts (ed.)*
- *Music in God's Purposes*
- *Music, Modernity and God: Essays in Listening*
- *Redeeming Transcendence in the Arts: Bearing Witness to the Triune God*
- *Resonant Witness: Conversations between Music and Theology (co-editor)*
- *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music*
- *Theology, Music and Time*
- *Voicing Creation's Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts*

Douglas A. Campbell, Professor of New Testament at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina, received his PhD in 1989 from the University of Toronto. He is the author of:

- *Four Views on the Apostle Paul (contributor)*
- *Framing Paul: An Epistolary Biography*
- *Paul: An Apostle's Journey*
- *Pauline Dogmatics: The Triumph of God's Love (2020)*
- *The Call to Serve: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Ministry in Honour of Bishop Penny Jamieson*
- *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul*
- *The Quest for Paul's Gospel*
- *The Rhetoric of Righteousness in Romans 3:21-26*

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 (ed.)*
- *Evangelical Theology in Transition: Theologians in Dialogue with Donald Bloesch (ed.)*
- *How to Read T.F. Torrance: Understanding His Trinitarian and Scientific Theology*
- *The Nature of Doctrine in T. F. Torrance's Theology*
- *The Trinitarian Dimension of John Wesley'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*

Cathy Deddo received a master's degree from Fuller Theological Seminary. She has co-authored two books with Gary Deddo:

- *George MacDonald: A Devotional Guide to His Writings*
- *God, the Bible, and the Shack* (co-authored with Gary W. Deddo)
- *The Letter of James*

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*
- *George McDonald: A Devotional Guide to His Writing* (with Cathy Deddo)
- *God, the Bible, and the Shack* (with Cathy Deddo)

Gordon D. Fee is professor emeritus of New Testament at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia. He received his PhD in 1966 from the University of Southern California. He has written numerous books:

- *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus (Understanding the Bible Commentary)*
- *First Epistle to the Corinthians (New International Commentary)*
- *Galatians: Pentecostal Commentary*
- *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*
- *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics*
- *How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth (with Mark Strauss)*
- *How to Read the Bible Book by Book (with Douglas Stuart)*
- *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth (with Douglas Stuart)*
- *Jesus the Lord according to Paul the Apostle: A Concise Introduction*
- *Listening to the Spirit in the Text*
- *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*
- *New Testament Textual Criticism: Its Significance for Exegesis (with Eldon J. Epp)*
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- *The Disease of the Health and Wealth Gospels*
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- *The Text of the Fourth Gospel in the Writings of Origen (co-authored with Bart Ehrman and Michael Holmes)*
- *To What End Exegesis? Essays Textual, Exegetical, and Theological*

David A. S. Fergusson is Professor of Divinity and Principal at New College in the University of Edinburgh. He is the author of

- *Christ, Church and Society*
- *Church, State, and Civil Society*
- *Community, Liberalism and Christian Ethics*
- *Cosmos and the Creator - An Introduction to the Theology of Creation*
- *Creation*
- *Faith and Its Critics: A Conversation*
- *Future as God's Gift: Explorations in Christian Eschatology*

- *John and Donald Baillie (co-edited with James Torrance)*
- *John Macmurray: Critical Perspectives*
- *Rudolf Bultmann: Outstanding Christian Thinkers series*
- *Scottish Philosophical Theology*
- *The Blackwell Companion to Nineteenth-Century Theology (editor)*
- *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology (co-editor)*

Jeannine Graham is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at George Fox University in Newburg, OR. She earned her PhD at the University of Aberdeen under the direction of J.B. Torrance. She has written:

- *Representation and Substitution in the Atonement Theologies of Dorothee Sölle, John Macquarrie and Karl Barth*
- “The ‘One for the Many’ Theme in James Torrance’s Theology” in *Participatio*, the Journal of the Thomas F. Torrance Theological Fellowship, 2014

Myk Habets is head of Carey Graduate School in New Zealand. He received his PhD from the University of Otago in 2006. His books include:

- *Doing Integrative Theology: Word, World, and Work in Conversation (co-editor)*
- *Ecumenical Perspectives on the Filioque for the 21st Century*
- *Evangelical Calvinism: Essays Resourcing the Continuing Reformation of the Church (2 volumes; edited with Bobby Grow)*
- *Gospel, Truth, and Interpretation: Evangelical Identity in Aotearoa New Zealand*
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- *T&T Clark Handbook of Thomas F. Torrance (co-editor)*
- *The Anointed Son: A Trinitarian Spirit Christology*
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- *The Progressive Mystery: Tracing the Elusive Spirit in Scripture and Tradition*
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- *Third Article Theology: A Pneumatological Dogmatics*

- *Trinitarian Theology after Barth* (edited with Philip Tolladay)

Trevor Hart is Professor of Divinity at the University of St. Andrews in Edinburgh, Scotland. He received his PhD from the University of Aberdeen in 1989. Among his books are:

- *Art, Imagination and Christian Hope: Patterns of Promise* (with Gavin Hopps and Jeremy Begbie)
- *At the Cross: Meditations on People Who Were There* (with Richard Bauckham)
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- *The Dictionary of Historical Theology* (editor)
- *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology* (co-editor)
- *The Waiting Father: Thomas Erskine of Linlathen*

George Hunsinger, professor of systematic theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, received his PhD in 1988 from Yale University. His published works include:

- *Christology, Ancient and Modern: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics* (co-editor)
- *Conversational Theology: Essays on Ecumenical, Postliberal, and Political Themes*
- *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*
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- *Types of Christian Theology (with Hans Frei and William Placher)*
- *Wiley Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth (Wiley Blackwell Companions to Religion)*

Michael Jinkins is president of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. He received his PhD from the University of Aberdeen in 1990. His publications include:

- *A Comparative Study in the Theology of Atonement in Jonathan Edwards and John McLeod Campbell: Atonement and the Character of God*
- *Called to Be Human: Letters to My Children on Living a Christian Life*
- *Christianity, Tolerance and Pluralism: A Theological Engagement with Isaiah Berlin's Social Theory*
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- *The Church Faces Death: Ecclesiology in a Post-Modern Context*
- *The Church Transforming: What's Next for the Reformed Project? (with Susan Garrett)*
- *Transformational Ministry: Church Leadership and the Way of the Cross*

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:

- *Incarnational Ministry: The Presence of Christ in Church, Society, and Family: Essays in Honor of Ray S. Anderson (with Todd Speidell)*
- *Reading Ray Anderson: Theology as Ministry, Ministry as Theology*
- *The Breadth and Depth of the Atonement: The Vicarious Humanity of Christ in the Church, the World, and the Self: Essays, 1990–2015*
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- *The God Who Rejoices: Joy, Despair, and the Vicarious Humanity of Christ*
- *The Vicarious Humanity of Christ and the Reality of Salvation*

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*

Alister McGrath, Professor of Science and Religion at Oxford University, earned a doctorate in molecular biophysics in 1977, a doctorate in divinity in 2001 and was awarded a third doctorate in 2013. His publications include:

- *"I Believe": Exploring the Apostles' Creed*
- *A Brief History of Heaven*
- *A Fine-Tuned Universe? Anthropic Phenomena and Natural Theology*
- *A Handbook of Anglican Theologians*
- *A Scientific Theology: Volume 1 – Nature, Volume 2 – Reality, Volume 3 – Theory*
- *A Theory of Everything (That Matters): A Brief Guide to Einstein, Relativity, and His Surprising Thoughts on God*
- *Apostles' Creed*
- *Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Modern Christian Thought (editor)*
- *C. S. Lewis - A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet*
- *Chosen Ones (The Aedyn Chronicles)*
- *Christian Belief (editor)*

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- *Christian Belief for Everyone: Faith and Creeds*
- *Christian Belief for Everyone: The Living God*
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- *Christianity: An Introduction*
- *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution from the Sixteenth to the Twenty-First Century*
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- *Darwinism and the Divine: Evolutionary Thought and Natural Theology*
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- *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible*
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- *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Christ in Luther's Sermons on John*
- *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough*
- *Mere Apologetics: How to Help Seekers and Skeptics Find Faith*
- *Mere Discipleship: Growing in Wisdom and Hope*
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- *Narrative Apologetics: Sharing the Relevance, Joy, and Wonder of the Christian Faith*
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- *Re-Imagining Nature: The Promise of a Christian Natural Theology*
- *Resurrection*
- *Richard Dawkins, C. S. Lewis and the Meaning of Life*

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- *The Augsburg Handbook of Christian Belief*
- *The Big Question: Why We Can't Stop Talking About Science, Faith and God*
- *The Blackwell Companion to Protestantism (co-editor)*
- *The Christian Life and Hope: A Guide for Study and Devotion*
- *The Christian Theology Reader*
- *The Christian Vision of God*
- *The Complete Topical Guide to the Bible (co-editor)*
- *The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine. (With Joanna Collicutt McGrath)*
- *The Foundations of Dialogue in Science and Religion*
- *The Future of Christianity*
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- *The Landscape of Faith: An Explorer's Guide to the Christian Creeds*
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- *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World*
- *The Unknown God: Searching for Spiritual Fulfilment*
- *Theology: The Basic Readings*
- *Theology: The Basics*
- *Thomas F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography*
- *What Was God Doing on the Cross?*
- *Why Are We Here?: A Little Book of Guidance*
- *Why God Won't Go Away: Is the New Atheism Running on Empty?*

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 at the University of St. Andrews. He is the author of

- *Movements of Grace: The Dynamic Christo-Realism of Barth, Bonhoeffer, and the Torrances*

Steve McVey (D.Min., Luther Rice Seminary), is founder of GraceWalk Ministries and author of numerous popular books:

- *52 Lies Heard in Church Every Sunday*
- *A Divine Invitation*
- *Anchored: Five Keys to a Secure Faith*
- *Beyond an Angry God*
- *Getting Past the Hurt: When Others Have Wronged Us*
- *Grace Amazing*
- *Grace Land (with Gary Smalley)*
- *Grace Rules*
- *Grace Walk*
- *Helping Others Overcome Addiction (with Mike Quarles)*
- *Journey Into Intimacy*
- *The Divine Reversal: Recovering the Vision of Jesus Christ as the Last Adam*
- *The God That Grace Kills: Exchanging Religion's God for the Real One*
- *The Godward Gaze*
- *The Grace Walk Devotional*
- *The Grace Walk Experience*
- *The Secret of Grace: Stop Following the Rules and Start Living*
- *Unlock Your Bible: The Key to Understanding and Applying the Scriptures in Your Life*

- *Walking in The Will of God*
- *When Wives Walk in Grace: Resting in Christ While God Works in Your Marriage*

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 King's 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*

Paul Molnar is professor of systematic theology at St. John's University in New York. He received his PhD from Fordham University in 1980. He is author of:

- *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity*
- *Faith, Freedom, and the Spirit: The Economic Trinity in Barth, Torrance, and Contemporary Theology*
- *Incarnation and Resurrection: Toward a Contemporary Understanding*
- *Karl Barth and the Theology of the Lord's Supper*
- *T&T Clark Handbook of Thomas F. Torrance (co-author)*
- *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity*
- *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity (contributor)*

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*
- *The Feeling Intellect: Reading the Bible With C. S. Lewis.*

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

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

Robin Parry is an editor for Wipf and Stock Publishers. He received a PhD in 2001 from the Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education in England. He is the author of:

- *A Larger Hope?, Volume 2: Universal Salvation from the Reformation to the Nineteenth Century* (co-author)
- *Canon and Biblical Interpretation* (contributor)
- *Deep Church Rising: The Third Schism and the Recovery of Christian Orthodoxy* (with Andrew Walker)
- *Exorcism and Deliverance: Multi-Disciplinary Studies* (edited with William Kay)
- *Four Views on Hell, 3rd ed.* (contributor)
- *Great Is Thy Faithfulness? Reading Lamentations as Sacred Scripture*
- *Lamentations* (in the *Two Horizons Commentary* series)
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- *The Futures of Evangelicalism: Issues and Prospects* (contributor)
- *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate* (with Christopher Partridge)
- *Worshipping Trinity: Coming Back to the Heart of Worship*

Andrew Purves, Professor of Reformed Theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, received his PhD in 1978 from the University of Edinburgh, in Scotland. He is author of:

- *A Passion for the Gospel: Confessing Jesus Christ for the 21st Century* (with Mark Achtemeier)
- *Encountering God: Christian Faith in Turbulent Times* (with Charles Partee)

- *Exploring Christology and Atonement: Conversations With John McLeod Campbell, H.R. Macintosh, and T.F. Torrance*
- *Pastoral Theology in the Classical Tradition*
- *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology: A Christological Foundation*
- *The Crucifixion of Ministry: Surrendering Our Ambitions to the Service of Christ*
- *The Resurrection of Ministry: Serving in the Hope of the Risen Lord*
- *The Search for Compassion: Spirituality and Ministry*
- *Union in Christ: A Declaration for the Church (with P. Mark Achtemeier)*

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*
- *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross*
- *Exploding Stars, Dead Dinosaurs, and Zombies: Youth Ministry in the Age of Science The Promise of Despair: The Way of the Cross as the Way of the Church*
- *Relationships Unfiltered: Help for Youth Workers, Volunteers, and Parents on Creating Authentic Relationships*
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- *The End of Youth Ministry? Why Parents Don't Really Care about Youth Groups and What Youth Workers Should Do about It*
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- *The Relational Pastor: Sharing in Christ by Sharing Ourselves*
- *The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry*
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- *Unpacking Scripture in Youth Ministry*

Fred Sanders is professor of theology in the Torrey Honors Institute at Biola University, La Mirada, CA. He received a PhD from the Graduate Theological Union (Berkeley, CA) in 2001. He is the author of:

- *Dr. Doctrine's Christian Comix on the Trinity, ...on the Word of God*

...on the Christian Life ...on Biblical Images

- *Five Views on the Extent of the Atonement (contributor)*
- *How God Used R. A. Torrey*
- *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective (editor, with Klaus Issler)*
- *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything (published in the U.K. as Embracing the Trinity)*
- *The Image of the Immanent Trinity: Rahner's Rule and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture*
- *The Triune God (New Studies in Dogmatics)*
- *Theology and California (editor, with Jason S. Sexton)*
- *Wesley on the Christian Life*

He is the editor, with Oliver Crisp, of the Proceedings of the Los Angeles Theology Conference:

- *Advancing Trinitarian Theology*
- *Christology Ancient and Modern*
- *Locating Atonement*
- *The Task of Dogmatics: Explorations in Theological Method*
- *The Voice of God and the Text of Scripture*

Stephen Seamands is professor of Christian doctrine at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. He received his PhD from Drew University in 1983. He is the author of:

- *A Conversation With Jesus*
- *Give Them Christ: Preaching His Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension and Return*
- *Holiness of Heart and Life*
- *Ministry in the Image of God: The Trinitarian Shape of Christian Service*
- *The Evangelical's Guide to Spiritual Warfare: Scriptural Insights and Practical Instruction on Facing the Enemy (with Charles Kraft)*
- *The Unseen Real: Life in the Light of the Ascension of Jesus*
- *Wounds That Heal: Bringing Our Hurts to the Cross*

Daniel Thimell is Associate Professor of Theological-Historical Studies at Oral Roberts University. Dr. Thimell earned his Ph.D. from the University of Aberdeen in 1993. His books include:

- *Charismatic Faith and Ministry*
- *Christ in Our Place: Essays Presented to Professor James Torrance (edited by Trevor Hart)*
- *God, Grace, and the Gospel: A Study in St. Thomas, Calvin, and McLeod Campbell*

Alan Torrance earned his doctorate in theology at the University of Erlangen-Nurnberg in Germany. He is professor of systematic theology at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. His work includes:

- *Christ and Context: The Confrontation between Gospel and Culture* (co-editor)
- *The Doctrine of God and Theological Ethics* (with Michael Banner)
- *Persons in Communion: Trinitarian Description and Human Participation*
- *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible: How the New Testament Shapes Christian Dogmatics* (with Markus Bockmuehl)

David Torrance studied in Basel, Switzerland, under Karl Barth and Oscar Cullmann. He served in the Church of Scotland from 1955 until his retirement. His books include:

- *A Passion for Christ: The Vision that Ignites Ministry* (with James and Thomas Torrance)
- *Anti-Semitism and Christian Responsibility*
- *Calvin's Commentaries* (12 volumes, edited with Thomas Torrance)
- *Embracing Truth: Homosexuality and the Word of God*
- *God, Family and Sexuality*
- *Israel God's Servant: God's Key to the Redemption of the World*
- *The Mission of Christians and Jews*
- *The Witness of the Jews to God* (editor)

Robert T. Walker is a nephew of the late Thomas F. Torrance. He edited Torrance's lecture notes into two books describing Torrance's teachings about the person and work of Jesus Christ:

- *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*
- *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*

N.T. Wright is Chair of New Testament and Early Christianity at the School of Divinity at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland. He received a PhD from Oxford in 1980. He is a prolific author; for a regularly updated list, see <http://www.amazon.com/N.-T.-Wright/e/B001H6NEG8>. For sermons, articles and other publications, see www.ntwrightpage.com/.

- "Romans." *In The New Interpreter's Bible, volume 10*
- *Acts for Everyone*
- *Advent for Everyone, Matthew: A Daily Devotional*
- *Advent for Everyone: A Journey with the Apostles*
- *Advent for Everyone: Luke: A Daily Devotional*
- *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters*

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- *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians*
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- *Simply Good News: Why the Gospel Is News and What Makes It Good*
- *Simply Jesus: A New Vision of Who He Was, What He Did, and Why He Matters*
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- *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*
- *Surprised by Scripture: Engaging Contemporary Issues*
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- *The Challenge of Easter*
- *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is*
- *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology*
- *The Crown and the Fire: Meditations on the Cross and the Life of the Spirit*
- *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus's Crucifixion*
- *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*
- *The Kingdom New Testament: A Contemporary Translation*
- *The Lord and His Prayer*
- *The Meal Jesus Gave Us: Understanding Holy Communion*
- *The Messiah and the People of God: A Study in Pauline Theology With Particular Reference to The Argument of the Epistle to the Romans (doctoral thesis)*
- *The Millennium Myth*
- *The New Testament and the People of God*
- *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians (co-author)*
- *The New Testament in Its World Workbook: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians (co-author)*
- *The New Testament You Never Knew Study Guide with DVD: Exploring the Context, Purpose, and Meaning of the Story of God (co-author)*
- *The Original Jesus: The Life and Vision of a Revolutionary (co-author)*
- *The Paul Debate: Critical Questions for Understanding the Apostle*
- *The Resurrection of the Son of God*
- *The Scriptures, the Cross and the Power of God: Reflections for Holy Week*
- *The Way of the Lord: Christian Pilgrimage Today*
- *Twelve Months of Sundays: Reflections on Bible Readings, Year A*
- *Twelve Months of Sundays: Reflections on Bible Readings, Year B*
- *Twelve Months of Sundays: Reflections on Bible Readings, Year C*
- *Virtue Reborn*

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- *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?*
- *Who Was Jesus?*
- *Why Read the Bible?: A Little Book of Guidance*

William Paul Young is author of

- *Cross Roads*
- *Eve: A Novel*
- *The Shack*

Geordie Ziegler is a pastor at the Columbia Presbyterian Church in Vancouver, Washington. He received a PhD in theology from the University of Aberdeen. He has written:

- *Trinitarian Grace and Participation: An Entry into the Theology of T.F. Torrance*

In most cases, the interviewer was **J. Michael Fezell** (D.Min., Azusa Pacific University, 2000), who was then vice president of Grace Communion International. Some interviews were conducted by **Gary W. Deddo** (PhD, University of Aberdeen, 1991), who is now the president of Grace Communion Seminary. Some interviews were conducted by **Michael D. Morrison** (PhD, Fuller Theological Seminary, 2006), Dean of Faculty at Grace Communion Seminary and editor of this volume.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWS

Most of the interviews were done in a studio in Glendora, California. Some were done in the home city of the interviewee, or at a meeting we attended. When there are three to five interviews, they were usually conducted on the same day. In a few cases the interviewee returned on a later occasion.

Here are the years in which the interviews were done:

Anderson: 2007	McSwain: 2008, 2009
Begbie: 2017	McVey: 2010, 2011
Campbell: 2010	Metzger: 2009
Colyer: 2009, 2011	Molnar: 2010
Dawson: 2009	Newell: 2008
Deddo, C.: 2011	Nordling: 2009
Deddo, G.: 2008, 2009	Parry: 2010
Fee: 2009	Purves: 2010
Fergusson: 2012	Root: 2009
Graham: 2017	Sanders: 2016
Habets: 2012	Seamands: 2012
Hart: 2010	Thimell: 2009
Hunsinger: 2010	Torrance, A.: 2010
Jinkins: 2015	Torrance, D.: 2010
Kettler: 2009	Walker: 2010
Kruger: 2006, 2009, 2011	Wright: 2012
McGrath: 2017	Young: 2008, 2011
McKenna: 2007	Ziegler: 2018

ABOUT THE PUBLISHER...

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We also offer personal counsel. If you have questions about the Bible, salvation or Christian living, we are happy to talk. If you want to discuss faith, baptism or other matters, a pastor near you can discuss these on the phone or set up an appointment for a longer discussion. We are convinced that Jesus offers what people need most, and we are happy to share the good news of what he has done for all humanity. We like to help people find new life in Christ, and to grow in that life. Come and see why we believe it's the best news there could be!

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