

## Chapter 8

### *Blessed Are the Genuine*

*“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” Matthew 5:8*

Looking for a church ministry can be a very humbling and discouraging process. As many seminary graduates and inactive pastors will tell you, one’s outlook can go from excitement and hope to the cold water realities of the “church search”. Within many of the established Protestant denominations, there is more support and a regimented process by which ordinands must proceed. Largely, this is a positive process (at least in structure) as it helps churches and clergy narrow down the kind of “fit” that is being looked for by both parties.

For many non-denominational, evangelical clergy, finding a church that will legitimately consider a resume can often resemble the throwing of dice against a wall in a back alley. In the end, a free-lance clergy search is a hard road without a network, a connection, or some kind of placement support.

However, even within denominational support systems, there is no guarantee of a meaningful call from a church unless one meets the criteria that a certain parish is looking for in the “model pastor.” “For heaven’s sake”, clergy are told, “do not include anything overtly theological or philosophical in your Personal Information Forms (or questionnaires), and at no time should you reveal vulnerabilities or weaknesses. Put your best foot forward, promote yourself, and give committees what they want to hear.” So, where then does authenticity fit into this kind of search process for either the clergy or the parishioners?

Many search committees are looking for a messianic type who will bring their church to the next level. Someone who will help them move on from the past while bringing their largely aging congregation into the hope of brighter days. Of course, when clergy buy into this fantasy they unwittingly set themselves up to be either the future savior for a church or their sacrificial goat; the designation usually depends on the rate of growth and/or decline in the institution. In the end, there are few other real choices in a milieu where uninvestigated or undiscerned results are the real template of ultimate worth.

I am in no way suggesting that a vetting process is unnecessary or unimportant. Nor, am I saying that communication between search committees and clergy be filled with pious platitudes and mind-numbing theological jargon removed from wisdom, clarification and purpose.

What I *am* suggesting is that a clergy search process is one of the best indicators for seeing what truly matters to American Protestant congregants, clergy, and denominational leadership. When pressed to make a large monetary investment involving our beloved institution, we tend to reveal who we are as a parish. Because we have a vested interest in the future of *our* church (and the clergy in the future of their vocation), we want the spending of our money to be in line with our highest values.

We clergy are first responsible for teaching and living out the Word of God regarding what it means to be a child of the Kingdom in a faithful covenant community. We are to model the teachings of our King and Savior. If our spirit does not reflect an honest and appropriate authenticity, where are we hoping that our people will encounter such things? If we are not passionate, wisely vulnerable, Kingdom people, how in the world do we expect our parishioners (especially new disciples) to know what this kind of living involves?

So often, the clergy avoid the *sticky* Kingdom teachings of Jesus as fanciful ideas unrelated to everyday Christian living. The self-talk seems to go something like this:

“We have mortgages to pay and pensions to protect. Winning souls to Jesus, being there for some pastoral care, and giving some basic moral theology will have to do. All that crazy, risky ‘kingdom stuff’ will just cause tension in the church and at home.” We think, “Better to just appreciate the ‘idealized’ teachings of Jesus with professional care, and try starting yet another program or initiative. This will enable us to keep a safe distance from having to deal with real, messy, and hurting people, while avoiding potential confrontation or disapproval from church members”.

And, yet we wonder why our ministries inspire few people and seem to lack spiritual power. We don’t walk the risky, passionate, and obedient life of Christ, yet within our professions, we desire our churches to thrive.

If we clergy were taking to heart the instruction of Jesus to “*Seek first the Kingdom of God, and all these things will be added unto you*” would there be positions available to those more concerned with what our flocks need from Christ, then what they would prefer from us as their under-shepherds? The cruciform<sup>1</sup> life seems like an awfully big risk.

### *A Fly in the Wine*

I don’t do well on beaches. I enjoy the beauty of the creation and watching my family splash around in the water, but I don’t usually last long on the beach itself. I burn easily, sweat profusely, and while in the water am constantly concerned about something swimming under or around me.

In addition, the beach is a tough place to eat food; at least for me. No matter how careful I am, it seems that I invariably end up getting some amount of sand in my lunch. The worst is biting into a sandwich only to feel the crunch of the sand that has made its way into my turkey and cheese delight. It only takes a few grains to ruin the entire experience.

*“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” Matthew 5:8*

Similarly, it doesn’t take much to contaminate that which is pure. This is closely aligned to the base understanding of the word “purity” (καθαρότης). Whether referring to ceremonial purity,

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<sup>1</sup> Borrowed term from many of the better commentaries; not original to author

moral consistency or to the contents of a literal substance<sup>2</sup>, καθαρός is that which has integrity unto itself unspoiled by an outside contaminate. This means that there is no sand in purity's sandwich.

*“‘Pure in heart’ refers to the condition of the inner core of a person, that is, to thoughts and motivation, and hence anticipates the internalizing of the commandments by Jesus in the material that follows in the sermon (on the mount)”<sup>3</sup>*

-Donald Hagner

The pure in heart are those who are righteous in status, and therefore, do that which is righteous. For them, life has little to do with religious show but is indeed motivated by true holy living. The pure in heart then are the “utterly sincere”<sup>4</sup> who have an undivided commitment to the Kingdom of God<sup>5</sup>.

Psalm 24:3-4

*3 Who may ascend the hill of the LORD?  
Who may stand in his holy place?  
4 He who has clean hands and a **pure**<sup>6</sup> heart,  
who does not lift up his soul to an idol  
or swear by what is false.*

Psalm 51:10

*10 Create in me a **pure heart**<sup>7</sup>, O God,  
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.*

Psalm 73:1

*Surely God is good to Israel,  
to those who are **pure in heart**<sup>8</sup>.*

The pure in heart are *genuine*. Their “yes” means “yes”, and their “no” means “no”. They are driven to love God and their neighbor because they *want to* not just because they *must*, or are *supposed to*. They are actively engaged in *why* they do what they do, and desire to love their Lord through actions of *grateful* obedience.

The pure in heart are not wrapped up with fear, anxiety, and false guilt because they are no longer frightened by the picture of an unloving God who delights in punishing them if they don't behave. They instead believe in a gracious, loving God. He is a Father who lovingly corrects

<sup>2</sup> Whether a metal, crystal, oil, or water. (See [καθαρός] BAGD, Abridged Kittle, and Lowe and Nida lexicons)

<sup>3</sup> Word Biblical Commentary, *Matthew*, Vol 33a, Hagner, pg.94

<sup>4</sup> Expositors Commentary, *Matthew*, Carson, pg. 135

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> The Septuagint also translates the Hebrew word here as καθαρός.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> The Septuagint uses εὐθέσι in this verse, which means “straight” or a “path that is straight”/upright” (BAGD, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*).

them to help them avoid self-destruction, and therefore, they put themselves into the hand of this God who guides them with tenderness, wisdom, and love.

As a New Covenant follower of Christ if you see yourself falling short at times regarding the above characteristics, join the club. Like the Psalmist above tells us, we still need our God to “create a clean heart in us” through the Holy Spirit. As Christians, we *will* grow in our purity of life, and in our desires and ability to “produce fruit in keeping with repentance”. We might prefer to avoid the darkness we still battle, but *the truth is the truth* when it comes to our failings and blindness of heart.

Whatever our feelings are, we must live by what we *believe* God has declared is true, not what we *fear*. The more fearful we are, the more vulnerable we are to the world's ways of plugging, killing, and dealing with fear. Performance, success, approval, and wealth are just a few of the slave masters that never stop their whipping. A true faith in Christ finds a “gentle yoke” and a “light burden”. What kind of master (s) do you want?

Jesus is kind, patient, and full of forgiveness. He will walk with us, helping us with our load. But he calls us all to a complete surrender of our wills and a genuine obedience to his ways no matter how crazy or frightening they may seem at times.

Matthew 11:28;30

*Come unto me all you that are weary and heavy-laden...and you will find rest for your souls*

Matthew 10

<sup>38</sup> *and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.* <sup>39</sup> *Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*

Do we view our Christianity as “losing our lives in Christ” or do we prefer throwing Jesus on top of our already engrained beliefs and convictions? Is Jesus our all in all, or is he expected to compete with our already established loyalties to family, friends, organizations, movements, and nations? Do our individualistic journeys and subjective experiences trump his clear teaching, the establishment of Apostolic authority (his doing), and the need for historic communal confirmation (again, the church being his idea)?

Is it Jesus that we are following, or are we developing our beliefs about life and salvation in reaction to the abuse, manipulation, and thoughtlessness of those who have harmed us while using his name? Are we the determiners of our own Christianity, or is he?

No, Jesus is not the problem. He is a gentle and peace giving master. That said, his church is still the place where he desires to bless, NOT harm those that enter. We lose our lives in Christ, not in human beings, and we hold whatever church that exists (even those to whom we have the highest respect or emotional connection) to the scrutiny of *his* definitions of what is genuine and that which is counterfeit.

## *No Place for Fear*

The more we believe that our triune God can be trusted, the more we find healing and a growing authenticity which cannot be hidden by a “bushel basket” if we tried. Authenticity doesn’t stand out because it is moral and pushy; it stands out because it is so rare that people are a bit surprised when they encounter it.

Unfortunately, in the historic life of the English word “purity”, the idea of integrity or authenticity has often been lost. Instead, the word tends to denote a measurement of visible good works and/or the avoidance of sexual deviance, while at its worst it is associated with hypocrisy and self-righteous behavior.

But these narrow interpretations will not do. Authenticity is something that cannot be faked, and in time, reveals a person’s true character through patterns of behavior. These patterns can be story-tellers to us, and need not frighten us. In Christ, we can view the clarity regarding our need as an opportunity to change.

But for those still hanging on to moralistic denial and fear, their “occasional mistakes” must be handled quickly, succinctly, and covered up like teenage acne. These kinds of people get “frustrated” but never angry. They are “concerned” not fearful. They don’t have “blind spots”, they are just misunderstood by those who may suggest a critique.

Those in denial know theologically that they are still sinners, but they have no desire to engage with sins practical outworking in their everyday life and relationships. Hell will freeze over before any other person will hurt them or cause them pain, thus, one had better not try to challenge or criticize their behavior. “Iron sharpening iron” and the “confessing of sins one to another” has little place in the heart of a moralist. The scriptures dealing with these concepts are taken as suggestions for others who may be concerned about such verses.

Some who can no longer keep their pain at bay may start looking for shortcuts: just the right superstitious experience, just the right event, just the right book, or some other road that will take them around the dark forest ahead. They figure that the magic answer is out there somewhere, but a constant overhaul involving a change in their thinking, believing, and living is asking for far too much.

In the end, it is the way we live our life over time that reveals the multiple masters that we truly serve. If we accept the depth of our need while embracing love, forgiveness, and grace our self-evaluation can be a blessing. In humility, our need of repentance and growth can spur us to remember the reality of God’s mercy and the hope of our continuing (and needed) salvation. If we are inauthentic, frightened, and hiding from God (and others), just the *idea* that these patterns exist will terrify us...and continue to enslave us.

II Timothy 1:

<sup>7</sup> *for God did not give us a **spirit of cowardice**, but rather a spirit of **power** and of **love** and of a **sound mind**.*

I John 4:

<sup>18</sup> *There is no **fear** in love, but **perfect love casts out fear**; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.*

Romans 8:

*There is therefore now **no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus**.<sup>2</sup> For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.*

<sup>5</sup> *For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.*

<sup>15</sup> *For you did not receive a spirit of slavery **to fall back into fear**, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!”<sup>16</sup> it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God,<sup>17</sup> and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.*

A person that continually holds an emotional shield for their own protection (gripping it tightly with both hands) can never open their arms to understand the growing and developing embrace of love and intimacy with God...or anyone else.

*“To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.”<sup>9</sup>*

— C.S. Lewis

Ironically, the one holding the shield encourages an environment where existing wounds can never be dressed or tended to because those that could help are shut out. Many who might aid their healing will never be welcomed to inspect or treat their illness long enough to truly make a difference. It is only during strategic and personal times of need that the shield must be dropped for any lasting healing to occur. The Lord himself must be welcomed into the darkness of our fears.

Safety and self-protection that never comes out of the dark promotes the stinking, festering decay of our anger and fear. It is only in the light of the truth that we can then look at our lives and honestly assess what is there. When the Spirit illumines us, we can see the truth about our lives as God already sees it. We can turn from our ways, our own attempts at self-medication, and our own self-idolatry to follow him. This is called confession. This is called discipleship.

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<sup>9</sup> Lewis, *The Four Loves*, pg. 121

But the Triune God must first be trusted unconditionally. When we ask him to heal and lead us, he *can* be taken at his word. But to stay vigilant with this kind of courageous faith we will need to embrace the power of the Holy Spirit.

*James 1:*

*2 My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; 4 and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.*

*5 If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. 6 **But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; 7, 8 for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.***

When we avoid the dark forest, we avoid the Triune God. Troubles, trials, and pain provide a way to spiritual life, growth and the healing of the wounds we have sustained from others. When we decide to trust ourselves and continue that which is convenient and comfortable (in our ways of engaging life and relationships) we choose a continual idolatry and slavery. Whether stated or not, our choices reveal if we trust and believe God, or if we prefer to stay with the destructive lords of our own existence.

As we learn to trust the Lord, we prepare ourselves to live life with others who want these same things. A central way that we experience the hope, joy and peace of Jesus is through the intimate, and honest relationships we have with those in covenant community. While we need wisdom in how and with whom we go about such things, intimacy will always take an enormous amount of courage. Can God and others ever be trusted? It is in the Incarnation of Christ that God says 'YES', and it is in the way that Jesus lived where we see the possibilities.

### *It's Hard to Fake Authenticity*

Every once in a while, I get hooked into a documentary about art forgery. It is amazing the detail and work that goes into a good forgery, and correspondingly, the hours and expertise it takes to spot one.

But why make such a fuss over a good reproduction? If a painting looks so much like a Picasso that no one else can tell the difference without a special scanning device, then why all the uproar?

But for the art community, it does matter and it matters to the tune of thousands and sometimes millions of dollars. A painting by Picasso holds great value and prestige not only because of the beauty of the painting, but because of the history, skill, and context of an artist's life in a certain place and time. Authenticity, i.e., artistic purity is highly valued.

Moralism is the enemy of purity, integrity and authenticity. On its surface, moralism looks helpful, but the *surface* is deceiving. Moralism is very concerned with what it does and how it looks. It is obsessed with public relations and the perceptions of those that it is trying to impress or motivate. Moralism, in its most basic definition, is the doing of good things, the embrace of good behavior, and the *measurability of said things in comparison with others*. Moralism is self-serving under the guise of serving and sacrificing for others. This is why it is such a dangerous, capricious, and duplicitous enemy. It (and the Evil One's subtle use of it) often fools us all.

Moralism produces visible and short-lived behaviors without changing a person's beliefs and character. In other words, if the "heart" of a person or an organization does not change, a lasting, loving, authentic behavior will not take root. Integrity cannot be faked, and in the end is seen most clearly when one has something to be gained or lost. Only a "heart of flesh"<sup>10</sup> can be genuine in its intentions and good works.

Character is what you do when it matters, when the pressure is on, and when doing what is right trumps every other option...even if it means our pain and discomfort. We can fake activity and surface do-gooding, but our motivations remain what they are. Only resurrection power that is welcomed and embraced can change the condition of our true character.

### *A Different Kind of Community*

What about our shallow surfaces? How much time do we invest in digging below the surface of people, churches, and those we allow to shape our thinking and actions?

If we truly love people, why don't we spend more time getting to know them? How can we truly disciple people that we really don't know? Can people sense when we are truly concerned for them, versus when we are trying to "cover our bases", relieve our guilt, do what is expected, or get something from them?

How much time, effort, or monetary support do we put toward being people of self-evaluation, thoughtful discernment, or patient discovery? Where does the "testing of the spirits" fit into our approach with those convinced that they have special insights or abilities from God; those churches we are so excited about that we barely know; that moving of the Spirit in some distant part of the globe?

If we want the truth, then why do we keep pursuing "experts" who are personable, entertaining, but vapid? We seem drawn to churches who present a God akin to a genie, a waiter, or a retail website. We often desire clergy who present a simple, controlled, and safe Christianity with a God who lacks the mystery, complexity, or magnificence of the triune God of the Scriptures. We want a "tame God"; but God isn't tame.

What I am suggesting is that an authentic, living, breathing, kingdom-growing church is rarely sexy or impressive in the world's eyes, but contains Christians that actually want to be with one

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<sup>10</sup> Ezekiel 11:19-20



another. This doesn't mean that they always get along, but that they are constantly looking to learn and grow through any conflict or disagreement that they encounter. Because they expect relational difficulties, they are not surprised when they occur.

These kinds of churches are led by clergy that see their God-given roles and authority not as an opportunity to get power or control, but as a responsibility to help the people of God focus on those important and central things that must be prioritized about God's character and ways. The applications for faithfulness are varied, but loving under-shepherds know that their task is to encourage a spirit that embraces ministry applications together.

Healthy disagreement and discernment are encouraged, but a Spirit-led submission to appropriate and final decisions are required. This type of leader holds his or her "visions" loosely and develops disciples who are in time able to walk thoughtfully and wisely. He or she encourages a culture of accountability for all; there is an embrace of complexity without the sacrificing of integrity.

These churches contain people who have each other's backs when another is at their most vulnerable. They step up to support or help during a time of illness or crisis; look out for a brother if they are being overloaded; tell their sister the truth because it is the way of love.

They are disciples who will walk with one another no matter what, but out of love will refuse to do the needed spiritual work that another must embrace in courage and faith. When hurting believers reject their love, the authentic Christian community continues to love and engage them without encouraging their troubled behavior.

In their outreach with the Gospel, Kingdom people reach out to those in their deepest need but do so with compassionate and direct honesty. They are prayerfully patient with the unstable who are not yet ready to follow Christ but still want a connection to their church; they see this relationship as an opportunity, not an obstacle. Who knows how God might move in the future or may be working unseen?

Kingdom people know that God is always moving and going ahead of them, and they are looking and prepared to be faithful in being Christ to the world. Thus, the child of the Kingdom of God is out in the world, in the way, looking to be "light" and "salt". They are unhurried, but present. Ready and prepared, but not anxious. Loving, but trusting of God's timing and ways. They model and embrace the "gentle patience" of the people of God because of his "nearness".<sup>11</sup>

Does this describe the kind of *disciples* that we are making? Are these the kind of *clergy* that we are training? Are these the kind of denominational leaders that shepherd us?

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<sup>11</sup> Philippians 4:1-8

## *Seeing the Face of God*

We have been taught by many in the American Church that constant “other-worldly” experiences coupled with highly emotional and visible highs are necessary to handle our pain and placate our impatience. But does this teaching come from Jesus?

Matthew 12:

<sup>38</sup> *Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.”* <sup>39</sup> *But he answered them, “**An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.**”*

Luke 16:

**28** *for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’* **29** *Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’* **30** *He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’* **31** *He said to him, ‘**If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.**’”*

John 6:

<sup>30</sup> *So they said to him, “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?”*

<sup>35</sup> *Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”* <sup>36</sup> *But I said to you that you have seen me and **yet do not believe.***

Hebrews 11:1

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things **not seen.***

Why must we have everything right away, avoiding the hard work that produces something lasting and genuine? By settling for cheaper forgeries, we skip the development of an artistic skill, avoid the time (and satisfaction) of finding just the right materials, and forego the future maintenance that a painting of great worth might require.

We have no idea that the forgeries we embrace erode our spiritual lives and yet we often wonder why our churches have no lasting or staying power. We wonder why people do not see Christ in us or among us but instead view us as just another grasping, insecure, religious group looking for constant help from a seemingly reluctant god. This god must be constantly placated by the anxious, babbling incantations of a people who seemed characterized by their frantic busyness<sup>12</sup> and the firm conviction that everything is up to them.

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<sup>12</sup> Matthew 6:7-14; The context here being a pagan expectation due to the right incantations, done just the right way, for just the right amount of time so that their god will give them just what they desire. We don’t manipulate God, nor is he the small, reluctant, and petty gods of paganism. We follow an awesome and loving God who doesn’t need our help and can be trusted to do what is best. He wants us to seek him and uses our prayers in his plan, but ultimately he knows best and leads us in HIS wisdom. We passionately pursue him because he is worth it, not because he will make us successful on our own timetable and on our own terms.

*“American religion is conspicuous for its messianically pretentious energy, its embarrassingly banal prose, and its impatiently hustling ambition. None of these marks is remotely Biblical”.*

*“With programs shaping the agenda – not amazing grace, not stubborn sin – the pastor doesn’t have to be patient. We set a goal, work out a strategy, recruit a few Christian soldiers, and go to it. If, in two or three years the soldiers haven’t produced, we shake the dust off of our feet and hire on as captain to another group of mercenaries. When a congregation no longer serves our ambition, it is abandoned for another under the euphemism of “a larger ministry”. In the majority of such cases, our impatience is rewarded with a larger salary”.*<sup>13</sup>

-Eugene Peterson

Our anxious, self-righteous busyness is not reflective of the God of the scriptures or of his faithful, lasting Historic Church. It is reflective of the god of many self-centered American Christians (of multiple stripes) that insist on a religion of their own making. In the end, many of us would prefer the forgeries that come quickly and easily than to endure the cruciform life which is only lived in authenticity.

No one turns the lights on spiritually except the Lord, and no one can give authenticity to another who doesn’t get it or want it. That said, God wants to use his redeemed, covenant people to bring others to faith and salvation in their response to the Gospel, leading them into the waters of new birth (baptism). He calls us to walk as fellow brothers and sisters in the household of God (discipleship). He wants all to find a purity of life that only comes from the inner conversion of a person in the deepest part of their being.

*“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” Matthew 5:8*

In the end, those with a bigger, richer, and more substantive view of life will find the real “heaven” that the scriptures promise. It is not an eternity which provides them with a grandiose Caribbean vacation as envisioned by those fixated on the “American Dream”. It is a salvation where, through Christ, his disciples can experience *the presence of God* in the most realized sense possible for a limited, created human being<sup>14</sup>.

*“...when we speak of heaven, we do not really mean streets of gold and crystal seas, still less having everything we want. We cannot rest in that kind of thing. We cannot doubt that any world that is wholly God’s creation is altogether lovely and beautiful, but when we think about heaven as our home it is not because heaven is beautiful, but because God is there and we find our abiding-place in His Heart... ‘we do not find God in heaven, but we find heaven in God’.”<sup>15</sup>*

-Father Andrew

New Creation (heaven) is a new world, where everyone experiences to the fullest the humanity that we have always been meant to know in a restored relationship with the God who makes everything new...and, thus, makes everything right<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*, pg. 49

<sup>14</sup> Exodus 33:20-23; Rev. 22:3-5;

<sup>15</sup> Father Andrew, *Meditations*, pg. 203

<sup>16</sup> Rev. 21:5



## Chapter 9

### *Blessed Are the Reconcilers*

*“Blessed are the Peacemakers, for they will be called the Children of God” Matthew 5:9*

In 1971 John Lennon released the song “Imagine”. The song wistfully considers a reality where there is no heaven or hell, no countries or governments, no possessions or wealth, and no religion. Per the movements of the song, the removal of such things would render to humanity a world of peace and unity.<sup>17</sup>

In December of 1980 John Lennon's dream for nirvana was shattered through a senseless, violent act by a deranged fan. John Lennon's dreaming seemed to be just that. There was something within him that longed for some kind of peace and a unity among all people. But if there is one constant to human history it is that left to ourselves, we know little of real peace, i.e., genuine *shalom*.

The “blessed” here in Matthew 5:9 are not those who are “peaceful” in their demeanor (although, this may at times go along with “peacemaking”), but are those engaged in *making* peace. The Greek word here in the text is εἰρήνη and the corresponding Hebrew word in the Old Testament is שָׁלוֹם (*shalom*). *Shalom* means good welfare, well-being, or good health<sup>18</sup>. It carries with it the idea of things being right...or as they should be... in any situation.

In our culture, we tend to talk of peace as the *absence of strife* or the *absence of war*. But the biblical and covenantal idea of peace is much more than this. *Shalom* is a proactive reality connected to relational harmony and a sense of well-being under the blessing of God. It is desired by God for both humanity and the created order. This is where Christ, the ultimate peacemaker, comes into view.

Isaiah 9:

*<sup>6</sup>For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given,  
and the government will be on his shoulders.  
And he will be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, **Prince of Peace.**  
<sup>7</sup>Of the increase **of his government and peace**  
there will be no end.*<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Of course, what he is essentially describing is a world where mankind is not made in God's image, and the created order (including the appropriate development of human culture) gets replaced by some other kind of “other-worldly/non-material” reality. The Biblical viewpoint is that creation and her human structures (culture) is not the problem; the rebellion of mankind and the curse on creation is.

<sup>18</sup> BAGD, *A Greek-English Lexicon*. Brown-Drivers-Briggs (abridged), *Hebrew-English Lexicon*

<sup>19</sup> *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. (1984). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Isaiah 52:

<sup>7</sup> *How beautiful on the mountains  
are the feet of those who bring good news,  
who proclaim peace,  
who bring good tidings,  
who proclaim salvation,  
who say to Zion,  
“Your God reigns!”*<sup>20</sup>

Christ comes to bring true peace, and thus, he brings reconciliation between God and humanity; between God and the created order; between humanity with humanity. Yet, how is this peace?

In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis discusses the dynamic nature of words and their definitions. He uses the example of the term *gentleman*, which originally meant something very specific: A gentleman was someone who owned land and had a family coat of arms (thus, some wealth). The word then progressed (or in Lewis’s view, decayed) as a reference to someone who had valor, nobility, and courage. As time progressed the word took on the form of a general compliment for a likeable person. In the end, the word *gentlemen* became cliché and certainly had little coherence to its original definition.<sup>21</sup>

Comparatively, when we Americans hear the title *peacemaker*, we may think of someone who keeps their head down, doesn’t rock the boat, and can pretty much get along with anyone no matter what their beliefs or orientations in life. But this understanding barely scrapes the surface of the deeper and fuller meaning of the *shalom* of the Gospel.

Matter of fact, while Jesus came to bring peace, he also came to disrupt the peace so that others would find true life and salvation.

Matt 10:34-39

**34** *“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.*

**35** *For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;***36** *and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.*

**37** *Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me;***38** *and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39* *Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*

Essentially, Christ is teaching that a part of his peacemaking mission was to knowingly and willingly bring conflict that must be embraced and expected by his disciples!

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity*, Intro, pg. xii

As we will look at in our next chapter, it will cost people much if they choose to be a peacemaker in the Kingdom of God. Living out the Gospel and Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ may cause us strife and pain within our own families and marriages. Will we keep our faith and courage, or become a “peacemaker” in the worst kind of way?

And yet, the peacemaker is not needlessly confrontational, disruptive or divisive. The reconciling behavior of the peacemaker is done out of love for God, and love for others. Yet, the peacemaker knows that true life and love will not be embraced or engaged by all people. Loving people for the peacemaker will at times mean the expectation of rejection and misunderstanding by those who they are attempting to love.

The best way to avoid conflict (if that is your goal) is to avoid Christ altogether. However, it is also true that Jesus did not seek conflict out for the sake of conflict. He did not challenge people for his own selfish needs, impatience, and ambitions. His motivating drive was a love for his Father and for those he had come to redeem.

While people will lash out against the Gospel and those who follow the call of reconciliation, his disciples are to bear this harshness and forgive those who react to the truth with hostility. Sometimes his followers will face abuse outside of the Covenant Community, but often Kingdom Children will face the real pain inside the church itself.

I Peter 3:9-11

*9 Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing. It is for this that you were called—that you might inherit a blessing. 10 For*

*“Those who desire life*

*and desire to see good days,*

*let them keep their tongues from evil*

*and their lips from speaking deceit;*

*11 let them turn away from evil and do good;*

*let them seek peace and pursue it.*

## *The Need for Reconciliation*

In the Garden of Eden relationships were broken and shame, guilt, and fear made their first appearances.

Genesis 2:

<sup>25</sup> *And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.*

This verse jumps out to the modern reader. “*Naked?* What in the world does this have to do with anything?” As one continues to read in following chapter, the reader is given little clarification until verse ten of chapter three.

Genesis 3:

<sup>8</sup> *They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.* <sup>9</sup> *But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?”* <sup>10</sup> *He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because **I was naked**; and I hid myself.”* <sup>11</sup> *He said, “**Who told you that you were naked?**”*

Being “naked” is positioned here by the writer as an indicator of an enormous change in the nature of the relationship that humanity would now have with their Creator... and, thus, the relationship that they would now have with one another. Nakedness symbolizes the realization of vulnerability, guilt, and shame. From these realities come self-preoccupation, self-protection, and fear. The clarity and emotions in connection with their nakedness now become default settings for the man and woman...and, thus, for all future humans as well.

So, they engaged in the main tasks that now come to us instinctively at birth before our earliest days of self-awareness on this planet: We are masters at self-protection and hiding (even while we are in a crowd of people). And as we continually make ourselves the center of our existence, we fuel the fires of our own loneliness, anger, and despair.

As he continues to do today, the Deceiver took truth and mixed it with error to hurt and destroy the man and the woman. After rebelling against God, the man and woman **did** gain more knowledge regarding their own vulnerabilities and the realities of their finite<sup>22</sup> states. However, this knowledge became a curse to them, not a blessing. In the hand of their loving Creator, they were never at risk, and did not need any external knowledge or power so that they might get their due. God was not holding out on them, but had blessed them in ways that were only going to lead them to continuing life, peace, and joy.

Now, when confronted with their culpability in disobeying the Lord, the man and woman deflected any personal responsibility, and focused on others as the source of their current dilemma. Welcome to the world, oh, sweet denial!!!

Genesis 3:

<sup>12</sup> *The man said, “**The woman whom you gave to be with me**, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.”*

<sup>13</sup> *Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “**The serpent tricked me, and I ate.**”*

So, Adam blames God and the woman, and then Eve blames the Serpent. So familiar isn't it? It is astounding how our minds work and how we can confuse, rationalize, and excuse ourselves

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<sup>22</sup> *Finite* being defined here as that which is created, limited, and vulnerable in contrast to the OTHER and incomprehensible character of Yahweh (The Old Testament Covenantal name of our redeeming and saving God, usually translated “The Lord” in the English versions). Yahweh is never in danger or concerned with someone who might defeat, abuse or over-power him. The Triune God of the scriptures needs nothing and no one but himself.



while finding someone (or something) else on which to deflect the gaze of our judges and accusers.

Our judges include: God, Satan, ourselves, and every other human being in our lives. God is the righteous judge who longs for us to find real *shalom*. Satan is the great “accuser of the brethren” who wishes us ill and destroyed. In regards to ourselves and other humans, it is a mixed bag within the community of the redeemed in Christ. Some critique us because they truly want our best, others because they truly like to feel superior...or less broken.

We can always pretend that we are not culpable, but if we are after the truth and no longer worried about judgment, why would we continue to need denial? What do we reveal about ourselves when we constantly need certain accolades, status, or a blanket exemption from critique? Are we open to our deficiencies, or do we just hope we will perform well in front of others when we receive their criticism?

The following verses in Genesis 3 reveal the results of the rebellion of humanity - i.e., The Fall. There was now conflict between God and man (especially highlighted in the rejection of mankind in following false gods instead of Yahweh), conflict between man and the created order, and conflict between humanity with one-another (especially realized in the power struggle between the sexes). Living in the created world would now take more work and require more pain.

But ultimately, the final consequence was the greatest. Where true *shalom* had once existed – i.e., the wholeness and unity of life without conflict or fear - physical and spiritual death now emerge.<sup>23</sup>

Genesis 3:

<sup>19</sup> *By the sweat of your face  
you shall eat bread  
until you return to the ground,  
for out of it you were taken;  
you are dust,  
and to dust you shall return.”*

<sup>22</sup> *Then the LORD God said, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”—<sup>23</sup> therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken.<sup>24</sup> He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.*

Romans 5:

<sup>12</sup> *Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned—<sup>14</sup> Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.*

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<sup>23</sup> Genesis 3:12-18

Our great-great grandparents represented the human race when they rebelled against their creator and lord. A separation and hostility thus arose into which all of humanity is now born. Paul teaches us that Jesus who is the Christ came to rectify this situation by being our *shalom*, our peace with God. While we initiated hostility and enmity, God did not leave us to our own self-destruction, but sent his son as the ultimate solution to our problem. As has already been mentioned, the first Adam got it wrong, but the second Adam got it right.

Romans 5:

*Therefore, since we are justified by faith, **we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,**  
<sup>2</sup> through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand.*

*Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. <sup>10</sup> For if **while we were enemies**, we were **reconciled** to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been **reconciled**, will we be saved by his life. <sup>11</sup> But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received **reconciliation**.*

Colossians 1:

*<sup>21</sup> And you who were once estranged and **hostile in mind**, doing evil deeds, <sup>22</sup> he has now **reconciled** in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him—  
<sup>23</sup> provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven.*

Mankind does not just need a “tweak” or a slight moral adjustment. Outside of Christ, we are hostile to our creator and His ways; we are his enemies. No matter how nice or moral we may think ourselves to be, the ways of the “flesh” are the ways of hostility to God. His wrath is set against our rebellion and self-destructive way of life, but he lovingly and willingly sends his son so that we are spared an eternal separation from true *shalom* found only in Him.

The work of Christ on the cross is the ultimate peace offering.

## *The Ministry of Reconciliation*

*“Blessed are the Peacemakers, for they will be called the Children of God” Matthew 5:9*

It is the task of the children of God to continue to bring his peace to the world. From the reconciliation and hope that we have, we give out the peace of God. It is our task to live in such a way that the reconciling work of Jesus Christ is lived, breathed and proclaimed. To whatever vocation and tasks that we are called, the love, *shalom*, and hope of Jesus goes with us.

It is a way of life that offers healing between humanity and the loving God of the universe. It brings the promise of healed relationships with those around us. It reveals a growing desire (and ability) to love others instead of using them for our own designs.

II Corinthians 5:

<sup>16</sup> So from now on we regard no one from a worldly<sup>24</sup> (fleshly<sup>25</sup>) point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. <sup>17</sup> Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!<sup>26</sup>

While much ink has been spilled by commentators regarding the above phrases, it is this author's opinion that what Paul is teaching in II Corinthians 5 he later more clearly spells out in his Epistle to the Romans (cf., chapters 6-8). Before the Corinthians were "in Christ" they lived and were in harmony with the realm of the *flesh*. The realm of the *flesh* is connected to the hostile and self-destructive world of those in rebellion to God's rule and life.

In the realm of the Spirit, the child of the Kingdom of God has a new nature and a changing character. Thus, if we are truly in Christ, our behavior and life will reveal desires and actions consistent with the work of the Spirit. When the Christian sins, he or she *dips* into the realm of the flesh, but the child of God dwells in the realm of the Spirit. Those that live consistently according to the flesh, are those who reveal that they do not know Christ or understand what it means to be a covenantal member of his church.

Romans 8:

<sup>5</sup> For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. <sup>6</sup> To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. <sup>7</sup> **For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God;** it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, <sup>8</sup> and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

II Corinthians 5:

<sup>18</sup> All this is from God, **who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation:** <sup>19</sup> that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. <sup>20</sup> We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, **as though God were making his appeal through us.**<sup>27</sup>

It is we who live out the gospel and kingdom of God according to the gifts of the Spirit that we are given so that others can see and engage the salvation of the Lord of life. We proclaim the Gospel in the hope that others will find the same joy of redemption that those living in the realm of the Spirit know so well.

## *Jesus wasn't Nice*

*Though it may not seem like it at face value, pastors are persecuted in North America, and I don't believe I am exaggerating when I say that it is far worse than in more seemingly hostile*

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<sup>24</sup> The RSV and NRSV translation of as σαρκῆς as "human" is less helpful here. The problem is not a creational problem, it is a rebellion and sin problem.

<sup>25</sup> The New American Standard Version translates the word σαρκῆς literally, and in this case, preferably as "flesh". The "flesh" is a reference to the residue of sin left from our old way of life, and to the kingdom of this world's rebellion against the Kingdom of God.

<sup>26</sup> *The Holy Bible: New International Version.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

*countries. Our culture doesn't lock us up; it simply and nicely castrates, neuters and replaces our vital parts with a nice and smiling face.*<sup>28</sup>

-Eugene Peterson

What I am about to tell you is vocationally dangerous for any clergy person. This is why I assume so little has seemingly been written about it in recent years, or so few clergy seem willing to engage it in discussion. I have never heard the below preached or taught (in person anyway) by a professor or clergy member<sup>29</sup>, but I believe it to be consistently and categorically true throughout the whole of the Scriptures.

*Love does not equal "always being nice". In addition, Jesus wasn't always nice, and he hasn't called us to always be nice, either. Love is not rude, but often what is appropriate and loving in certain and limited situations can (and will) be easily construed as offensive and rude by many.*

Those who are hostile to the entirety of the Gospel, thus, committed to only parts of the Gospel (and its implications to their way of living) will do all they can to discredit and ignore those who are trying to bring them peace through the Gospel living, teaching and preaching.

Romans 10:

<sup>15</sup> *And how can men preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news!"*<sup>16</sup> ***But they have not all obeyed the gospel; for Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?"***<sup>17</sup> *So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ.*<sup>30</sup>

Matthew 21:

<sup>45</sup> *When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them.*<sup>46</sup> ***They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.***

Mark 12:

<sup>18</sup> *And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching.*<sup>19</sup> *And when evening came, Jesus and his disciples went out of the city.*

Many churches have clear and easily defined ways of knowing what behaviors are "right" and "wrong", "good" and "bad". They know when they (or others) have not been nice...thus, they know quite clearly who the "loving" or the "unloving" in their churches really are. Anyone who breaks their pre-determined manners in which they have been reared (or trained), are by definition wrong. Thus, anyone who treats them in an *unapproved* way, are easily dismissed, and their appraisals easily cast aside.

However, this approach knows little of a Christian life in process. Embracing a *life in process* means that believers accept that they can walk with love and integrity through the power and leading of the Holy Spirit, and still be engaging blind-spots and unknown (or unseen) sin in their

<sup>28</sup> Peterson, *The Unnecessary Pastor*, pg. 183

<sup>29</sup> Of course, this does not mean that it isn't happening in some places

<sup>30</sup> *The Revised Standard Version*. (1971). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

lives. The spiritually mature understand that in this life they will never get the Christian life “right” in some crystal-clear and vacuumed sealed way. Thus, the mature will give others a listen when sincerity and wisdom are displayed...even if the listen is painful.

Thus, God in his mercy uses his servants where they are in their sanctification. If we Christians, are going to grow in truth and love, then we need to seek out those who love us enough to challenge us with the truth. Can we listen to thoughtful yet imperfect brothers/sisters even when they don't meet up to our exacting expectations?

The best way to avoid this confrontational love and peacemaking is just to hide in the shadows where it is safe; to engage self-protection so that no one will be displeased with us; to make sure that we stay in the mainstream of what everyone is thinking within our chosen group. It is easy to mess up when confronting others, and easier just to avoid the potential misunderstandings or complexities involved with confrontational love. But when does silence mean cowardice?

For the clergy, if we avoid conflict at all costs it can make for smoother church member interactions, well-greased vocational networking, and a much sounder economic future. As many in denominational leadership will tell you, no one wants a “trouble-maker” as a pastor. In addition, and as we will see in our next chapter, it is often the trouble-makers that end up getting persecuted...and crucified.

If we are unwilling to ever address the systemic and repeated problems in our churches (and in our lives) we end up protecting ourselves behind the fig leaves of our fear. Silence often promotes a selfish, impotent, and self-cannibalizing form of Christianity, but much time may need to pass before the rooted destruction shows its flower. It is an amazing reality how long a dead or toxic church body...local, regional, or national... can last.

It is also amazing how many local churches which initially shine bright and shallow will then within decades disappear. While burning bright, the church is praised as exciting, “anointed”, and (insert more individualistic, subjective, and simplistically used Christian-eeze here). When the church splits, crashes and burns, or shows its true colors, the “Christian-eezers” are nowhere to be found as most will have likely moved on to their next exciting ministry or experiential movement. This is not Christianity; it is foolishness and it hurts our witness.

What is lost on a-historical and short-term thinking Christians is the damage done to the name of Christ. What is also lost is the future of many that may have considered Christ as their Lord if a patient, faithful and discerning church would have remained.

We clergy can either acquiesce to the way of the “fleshly” leadership around us, or we can lovingly address the patterns of destruction and spiritual attrition we see. Through the wisdom and power of the Holy Spirit, we look to address the rot in the branches and roots of the tree, so that the rest of the entity can thrive.

The difficulty, however, is knowing how to do this. As was mentioned in an earlier chapter, *context is the enemy of the immature, the insecure, and the manipulative*. It is at times much easier to settle on a concrete and arbitrary rule that never changes or bends with a situation. In

this scenario, we can know if we did well or poorly without the need for mystery, tension, or grace. However, this is not the way of the peacemaker.

We *can* be *shalom* builders and life givers, but not without embracing courage and the cruciform life. For prospective clergy, if your number one goal is risk-avoidance, I urge you to reconsider your vocational plans. The church doesn't need more spiritual professionals and sales-persons, she needs more gracious, grounded, patient, and courageous pastors. The reality is that those that live faithfully will often have to risk getting things wrong, relying on God's grace, and keeping their hands on the plow even when it makes no sense to do so.

I submit that when we embrace the timely, unsubtle (and sometimes downright bizarre) challenges of the Old Testament prophets, of John the Baptist, of Jesus, and of the Apostles we will at times risk being viewed as judgmental, arrogant, and as individuals who are "not team players" by those with clear delineations between the "right" and "wrong" way to do things.

However, if our motive is love, we can be encouraged that our direction is sound. Listen to the words of St. Augustine:

*See what we are insisting upon; that the deeds of men are only discerned by the root of charity (love). For many things may be done that have a good appearance, and yet proceed not from the root of love. For thorns also have flowers: **some actions truly seem rough, seem savage**; howbeit they are done for discipline at the bidding of love. Once for all, then, a short precept is given you: **Love, and do what you will**: whether you hold your peace, through love hold your peace; whether you cry out, through love cry out; whether you correct, through love correct; whether you spare, through love do you spare: **let the root of love be within, of this root can nothing spring but what is good.**<sup>31</sup>*

St. Gregory of Nazianzus<sup>32</sup> is also helpful here:

*As then the same medicine and the same food are not in every case administered to men's bodies, but a difference is made according to their degree of health or infirmity; so also are souls treated with varying instruction and guidance. To this treatment witness is borne by those who have had experience of it. Some are led by doctrine, others trained by example; **some need the spur, others the curb; some are sluggish and hard to rouse to the good, and must be stirred up by being smitten with the word; others are immoderately fervent in spirit, with impulses difficult to restrain, like thoroughbred colts, who run wide of the turning post, and to improve them the word must have a restraining and checking influence.***

*Some are benefited by praise, others by blame, both being applied in season; while if out of season, or unreasonable, they are injurious; some are set right by encouragement, others by rebuke; some, when taken to task in public, others, when privately corrected. For some are wont to despise private admonitions, but are recalled to their senses by the condemnation of a number of people, while others, who would grow reckless under reproof openly given, accept rebuke because it is in secret, and yield obedience in return for sympathy.*

*For our treatment does not correspond with virtue and vice, **one of which is most excellent and beneficial at all times and in all cases**, and the other most evil and harmful; and, instead of one and the*

<sup>31</sup> St. Augustine, Homily 7 on the *First Epistle to John*. New Advent Resources, Church Fathers.

<sup>32</sup> The Eastern Father who served in the Cappadocia region (modern day central Turkey) as a faithful bishop and theologian.

*same of our medicines invariably proving either most wholesome or most dangerous in the same cases— be it severity or gentleness, or any of the others which we have enumerated— in some cases it proves good and useful, in others again it has the contrary effect, according, I suppose, as time and circumstance and the disposition of the patient admit. Now to set before you the distinction between all these things, and give you a perfectly exact view of them, so that you may in brief comprehend the medical art, is quite impossible, even for one in the highest degree qualified by care and skill: but actual experience and practice are requisite to form a medical system and a medical man.*<sup>33</sup>

The bad news is that in this life when we try anything, we are guaranteed to get it wrong at times. Some choose to avoid failure in areas that are challenging by not trying at all. The idea seems to be “if I can just avoid certain approaches and behaviors, I can avoid the pain and misunderstandings that may accompany them”. Of course, the question should be asked, who indeed is this approach about? Are we seeking to love our neighbor as ourselves, or is our number one goal pain avoidance and self-preservation?

When we try to address something in context, it might not be understood, and, indeed, we might at times be part of the problem. It takes wisdom and maturity to know when one is frustrated by a situation (and impatient), versus direct or passionate in an appropriate way. Most of the time, the angel Gabriel does not come down and tell us when we got it right. For those who are sensitive (or oversensitive) this can be quite painful.

Some personalities will struggle with different kinds of selfishness. Some may be silent when confrontation is needed, while others may confront when no good will come from their attempts. Contrary to some slogans, it is not always the right time to speak the truth. Christ touches on this reality when he states:

Matthew 7:

<sup>6</sup> *“Do not give what is holy to dogs (**ouch!**); and do not throw your pearls before swine (**ouch!**), or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you.*

Sometimes sharing truth directly in a situation is downright unwise. Not only will what we give in love be maligned by disrespectful and unhearing persons, we ourselves can be deeply and needlessly injured. As Christ instructed his disciples in their interactions with others and in the preaching of the Gospels:

Matthew 10:

<sup>16</sup> *“See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.*

It has been often said of the ministry of Jesus that he gave people what they needed to hear in their context. But we reveal some very poor incarnational theology when we choose to believe that Christ in his sometimes creative language, bluntness, and anger was being “God” not man when he engaged in such counter-cultural ways.

Jesus did not switch from being man and then sometimes God as it suited him during his life on earth. While he is/was God, he gave up the glory of being God taking on the form of a servant.

<sup>33</sup> St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 2, selections from articles 30-33*. New Advent Resources, Church Fathers.

Anything less or more than this would be considered fallacious by Chalcedonian<sup>34</sup> standards. Whatever Jesus did in his human form reveals a faithful, obedient human being who at the same time is God. There is never a separation between his natures.

Yes, in the cleansing of the temple Jesus was making a stark and direct Messianic point, but he did not stop being the New Adam while he did it. Anything that Jesus did as a human, came from the empowering and leading of the Holy Spirit. His premeditated weaving of cords, flipping of tables, driving out of money changers, and guarding of the temple entrance after the abusers left - were all done as a man. His path of salvation is the one we are to follow, and his anger and actions were justified in their context no matter how difficult this may be for us to parse.

### *Do no Harm*

Of course, we are all quite vulnerable to being judgmental with hypocrisy and impatience. Often Christians reveal behavior that is simplistic, pompous, and needlessly abrasive. Our hurts and un-forgiveness can easily turn to unhealthy frustration and hurtful actions spurred by an unhelpful anger. We should be repentant when we know that we have truly harmed someone<sup>35</sup> through demonizing, bullying or violence. In this instance, we need to be “peacemakers” literally looking to reconcile the relationship in love for our neighbor.

And yet, there are these repeated themes in Scriptures:

I Samuel 11:

*<sup>6</sup> And the spirit of God came upon Saul in power when he heard these words, and his anger was greatly kindled. <sup>7</sup> He took a yoke of oxen, and cut them in pieces and sent them throughout all the territory of Israel by messengers, saying, “Whoever does not come out after Saul and Samuel, so shall it be done to his oxen!” Then the dread of the LORD fell upon the people, and they came out as one.*

Matthew 3:

*<sup>7</sup> But when he (John) saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”*

Matthew 23:

*<sup>13</sup> “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them. <sup>15</sup> Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.*

*<sup>27</sup> “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. <sup>28</sup> So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.*

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<sup>34</sup> Here referring to the earlier mentioned Chalcedonian Council which secured the doctrine of the Incarnation in regards to the natures of Christ.

<sup>35</sup> Of course, there is a difference between true harm verses an offence as perceived by the perpetual victim looking to manipulate or castigate others around them.



## Galatians 2:

<sup>11</sup> *But when Cephas (Peter) came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned;*

## Galatians 4:

*You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?*

## Galatians 5:

<sup>12</sup> *I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!*

## Ephesians 4

<sup>25</sup> *So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. <sup>26</sup> Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, <sup>27</sup> and do not make room for the devil.*

However, we don't get to pick the scriptures we want while leaving others that might challenge our learned patterns of behavior, unloving attitudes, personal unhealed hurts, and latent desires:

## Matthew 5:

<sup>38</sup> *"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' <sup>39</sup> But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; <sup>40</sup> and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; <sup>41</sup> and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.*

<sup>44</sup> *But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> so that you may be children of your Father in heaven;*

## Romans 12:

<sup>14</sup> *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.*

<sup>16</sup> *Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. <sup>17</sup> Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup> **If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.** <sup>19</sup> Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."*

## I Corinthians 13

<sup>4</sup> *Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup> it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup> It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

Galatians 5:<sup>36</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. <sup>14</sup> For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."<sup>15</sup> If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.*

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<sup>36</sup> I find it extremely interesting that verse 13 comes immediately following a verse where Paul mentions that the false prophets in Galatia should castrate themselves.

<sup>9</sup> Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, <sup>20</sup> idolatries, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions...

<sup>22</sup> By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, and self-control.

Feeling any theological and applicational tension yet??? (I certainly am!)

## *Being the Children of God*

In Galatians Paul said some pretty direct and edgy things. Subtlety and diplomacy are engaged at times in the letter, but not that often! Yet it is in this same epistle that Paul teaches us the spirit and norms of how we are to lovingly bear with the burdens of sin in which others are snared.

Gal 6:

*My friends*<sup>37</sup> (lit. brothers), if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. <sup>2</sup> Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. <sup>3</sup> For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves.<sup>4</sup> All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. <sup>5</sup> For all must carry their own loads.

While we do not have space to dig too deeply into this rich little section of scripture, suffice it to say that Paul is encouraging this Christian family in Galatia to be reconciling, patient, and committed lovers of one another.

There are some in the church that are struggling with sin and need others in the body to walk with them. Yet, Paul instructs his children in the faith to support one another in the understanding of their communal frailty and their need of the resurrection power of the Holy Spirit. Any new creation in Christ, is still a sinner helping other sinners.

Thus, with a clear realization of our position in Christ and our continuing need, a humility and gentleness is to characterize our normative approach with others in the body. The burden-bearing brothers and sisters walk as co-equals in Christ with one-another, not as superior moralists stooping to help the less valuable.

However, neither are the burden-bearers to be “rescuers” doing work for others that they themselves must do for themselves.

<sup>4</sup> All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. <sup>5</sup> For all must carry their own loads.

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<sup>37</sup> This is an unfortunate translation of the Greek word ἀδελφός, literally “brothers” here. Paul constantly uses family terms in his letters to communicate an intimacy and shared life as the body of Christ (we do see the NRSV translating ἀδελφός as brothers and sisters in Galatians 5:13 which does catch the spirit of the new identity of the New Covenant people of God as no longer “male or female, slave nor free”).

While we in the body are to help one another see and handle the sin in our lives, all the Children of God are to responsibly engage the pursuit of honest repentance and faith. However, it is also clear that he wants us to engage this amazing and sticky reality *together*:

James 5:

*Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.*

Romans 12:

<sup>15</sup> *Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.* <sup>16</sup> *Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.*

What is often missed in the American Protestant Church is that we have little foundation for a Scriptural and historic evangelism without a true unity and love for one-another.<sup>38</sup> Whatever flurry of activity we engage in benevolence, local outreach, or world missions will be stunted and short-lived if we are not able to learn to love one-another in the messy reality connected with interpersonal interaction. If we are not continually growing in our love one for another as an intimate family in Christ we are undermining the future of our churches and the discipleship of our individual converts<sup>39</sup>.

An approach to “mission” that *assumes* that people will *naturally* love and minister together often reveals a person’s theological bias. The overwhelmingly popular, a-scriptural, a-historic, and anemic theology of the salesmen of our age separates its evangelism from its ecclesiology (and, thus, they separate their evangelism from their discipleship<sup>40</sup>).

However, the truth is that a growing love of one another in the messy reality of parish life creates the fertile soil by which we communicate the Gospel to outsiders whether they are among us or we are among them. *Shalom* is the rich, black, fertile soil in which God’s people and new converts can hungrily put down roots and find nourishment.<sup>41</sup>

Matthew 22:

<sup>36</sup> *“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”* <sup>37</sup> *He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’* <sup>38</sup> *This is the greatest and*

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<sup>38</sup> And here my primary application is to individual and local churches, although the contexts and applications from key passages of Scripture would include all the church regionally and globally as well.

<sup>39</sup> While beyond the scope of this book, one also must wonder how Protestants can encourage real unity and love (around central things), when as a mark of their *protesting* heritage, there are constant and repeated divisions, sectarianism, and denomination making.

<sup>40</sup> I suggest that this poor theology is also one of the main reasons that Protestants have seen the Sacrament of Baptism lose its connection and rightful place in conversion. Instead of conversion also being engaged communally, embracing the mystery that only God converts a heart and does so in connection to the entrance rite into the New Covenant Community, many have cleanly separated the church from conversion. This approach is in clear and obvious conflict to the teaching found in the creeds, prayer books, catechisms, and confessions of most of the historic churches. Essentially, many are embracing a theology of conversion which is overtly individualistic, rational, and mediated by NEW pietistic sacraments (no matter the other names we give them) that are replacing the ones established by Christ. What matters in conversion now, happens outside of the church, and despite the church. Our Baptist brothers would applaud this direction for sure. In America, it is truly hard to argue with personal experiences and surface, short-term results.

<sup>41</sup> whether knowingly or unknowingly

first commandment. <sup>39</sup> **And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’** <sup>40</sup> *On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”*

John 13:

<sup>34</sup> *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.* <sup>35</sup> **By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”**

John 17:

<sup>18</sup> *As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.* <sup>19</sup> *And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.*

<sup>20</sup> *“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word,* <sup>21</sup> **that they may all be one.** *As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.* <sup>22</sup> *The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one,* <sup>23</sup> *I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*

True *shalom* is only paired with a genuine love for other Christians and those in need of Jesus as their Lord. We can do all kinds of things in the name of the Lord (even make converts, – as we saw earlier with the Pharisees), but to truly do these things from pure motives instead of selfish ones we need the resurrection power of the Holy Spirit...and the constant pursuit of his help through humility and spiritual hunger.

It is this new creational *shalom* found in our New Covenant communities (and in our hearts) that proclaim to ourselves, to others, and to the world that we are truly the children of God.

## Chapter 10

### *Blessed Are the Expectant*

*“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven” Matthew 5:10*

In my first sole pastorate, I had a local clergy friend who often said, “the source of most of our disappointments comes from our unrealistic expectations”. I am sure that this idea was not original to him, but it truly resonated with me. I can think of no statement that better summarizes the surprise we have as American Christians when we choose to live as kingdom people. We don’t expect to be ignored, treated rudely, or villainized as we are trying to faithfully live out the teachings of Christ...especially in the church

We think, “hey, if this is what Jesus is teaching, if this is what God has called us to be, if this is how the church in the scriptures views itself, if this is what the church has believed from the earliest of times and the overwhelming majority of its existence...then why wouldn’t others that claim Jesus as Lord want to hear, or in the least give genuine consideration to these things?” But the reality is that *most* do not welcome push-back from others regarding things in conflict with their pre-established experiences, beliefs or presuppositions about their form of Christianity.

The norm in history, the scriptures, and in our culture today, is that people like to have things pretty well handled and settled; no one wants their apple-carts upset. A life lived dealing with the unknown, expecting theological tension, rethinking assumptions, and accepting complexity in applying the truth, well, this sounds down-right scary. Even though it is a façade, we still like the idea that we have control over our lives; that we have things pretty well-handled.

I truly love the words of C.S. Lewis at the end of *Mere Christianity*. This paragraph alone is worth the purchase of the entire book:

*"Give up yourself, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions and favorite wishes every day and death of your whole body in the end: submit with every fiber of your being, and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in."<sup>42</sup>*

I think we are prone to believe that following Christ will mean blessings and ease (I mean, God is on *our side*, isn’t he?), and I think that this is the gospel that has been sold to a lot of American consumers. The reality is that we often long to follow Christ while hoping people in and outside of the church will throw us a ticker-tape parade for doing so. I must admit that I see myself as one of those with way too many frequent flyer miles on this particular airline.

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<sup>42</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pgs. 226-227

But we have certainly not gotten this idea from Jesus.

John 15:

<sup>18</sup> *“If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you.<sup>19</sup> If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you.*

The Greek word here for *world* is κόσμος, and is a reference to that system of life and belief which is in contrast and conflict with the Kingdom of Heaven. As the book of Hebrews makes clear, the figure head of this rebellious kingdom is Satan, and he has been dealt a death blow through the death and resurrection of Christ<sup>43</sup>.

Those that are enemies, and thus, hostile to God, will be enemies and hostile to his disciples; they will be hostile to the children of the Kingdom of Heaven who live out the aforementioned beatitudes. If we don't care to engage the kingdom principles of Jesus, we will probably be able to float with ease in a vast sea of differing groups and organizations.

So what kind of Jesus do we want? The one revealed in the scriptures, the one we have been given by a faithful church that has come before us, or the one we prefer to find?

Let's review:

Matthew 5:

<sup>3</sup> *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, **for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***

<sup>4</sup> *“Blessed are those who mourn, **for they will be comforted.***

<sup>5</sup> *“Blessed are the meek, **for they will inherit the earth.***

<sup>6</sup> *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, **for they will be filled.***

<sup>7</sup> *“Blessed are the merciful, **for they will receive mercy.***

<sup>8</sup> *“Blessed are the pure in heart, **for they will see God.***

<sup>9</sup> *“Blessed are the peacemakers, **for they will be called children of God.***

<sup>10</sup> *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, **for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***

<sup>11</sup> *“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, **for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.***

I don't believe that it is an accident that Jesus ends his teaching about “those that are blessed” with the idea of the coming and expected persecution for those who embrace the beatitudes. For those who truly live out what they believe in this regard will find themselves living and speaking in counter-cultural ways in every corner of the created order.

These ideas are dangerous because they undermine existing power structures in subversive ways, and those who try to control the adherents of these beliefs end up finding allusive targets. Trying to manipulate or intimidate Kingdom children can be compared to the tacking a square of Jell-O

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<sup>43</sup> Hebrews 2:14

to a bulletin board. Their actions just don't make sense to those in or enmeshed with the power structures of this world.

Because they are not concerned with the world's use of power and are not impressed by the hollowness of that which is impressive to others, they cannot be turned. Because of their respect of others, their passion for the weak, and their lives lived by conviction, they earn the admiration of those around them; even from those who despise them and who want to silence them.

Notice that Jesus starts his teaching with the eschatological phrase in verse three "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" and ends with the eschatological phrase in verse ten with "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven". In literary terms this is called an *inclusio*, and it is being used here by Jesus (or Matthew in reporting the teaching of Jesus) as the beginning and the end of his teaching on the beatitudes.

I believe that his point is this: If you take the my "blessed" teachings seriously, then you had better expect unloving push-back and pain; being a child of the kingdom means that *suffering is a given*.

### *Surprise!*

At this point many American Christians may be tempted to say, "WHAT??? Whoa, whoa, whoa! This is NOT what I signed up for! I mean, yea, I need a little bit o' Jesus in my life, and I think church is a good thing, but suffering for the Gospel and Kingdom? I don't remember *that* in the gospel presentation that I was given."

Exposing people to the core teachings of Jesus will likely slow the building of mega-churches, throbbing emotional movements, and creative initiatives that promise easy answers, quick results, and formulaic success. Suffering, discipline, and sacrifice tend to thin the crowd.

Ask Jesus, he knows all about this, and he never gave himself over to the hype and value-systems of the masses. Jesus kept his Kingdom calling and his obedience to the Father's perspective always before himself:

John 2:

<sup>23</sup> When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. <sup>24</sup> But Jesus on his part **would not entrust himself to them**, because he knew all people <sup>25</sup> and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew **what was in everyone**.

John 6:

<sup>14</sup> When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world." <sup>15</sup> When Jesus realized that they were **about to come and take him by force to make him king**, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

<sup>53</sup> So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. <sup>54</sup> Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; <sup>55</sup> for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. <sup>56</sup> Those who eat my

*flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.* <sup>57</sup> *Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father; so whoever eats me will live because of me.*

<sup>66</sup> *Because of this many of his disciples **turned back and no longer went about with him.*** <sup>67</sup> *So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?”* <sup>68</sup> *Simon Peter answered him, “**Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.**”* <sup>69</sup> ***We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”***

It is a reasonable assumption to make that many welcoming Jesus into the city of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday declaring “Hosanna in the highest!”, were also in the crowd screaming “Crucify him!” on Good Friday. That is just how large group psychology and dynamics work. This is how fickle and flaky we humans truly are.

Have you ever heard a clergyperson or teacher make the following statement: “Jesus was a wonderful communicator, just look at the parables!” One has to wonder if these same people have ever read the parables. When asked by the disciples why he spoke in parables here is the reply of Jesus:

Matthew 13:

<sup>10</sup> *Then the disciples came and asked him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?”* <sup>11</sup> *He answered, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.”* <sup>12</sup> *For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.* <sup>13</sup> ***The reason I speak to them in parables is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.’***

Paraphrase: “I speak in parables so that those who get it will follow me (and, like the disciples, come for more teaching and learning), and those who don’t will go on their way.”

If you read some of the parables, you figure out right away that they are not trite illustrations given to a thoughtless crowd to remove all their theological and spiritual tensions while they listen to Jesus. Instead, they are often complicated so that only those who want to learn will seek him and find out what it is that he is truly talking about!

How is this teaching technique being used in *your* ministry, AND why are so many of us continually trying to make Jesus in our own image? Jesus often made it difficult on people who said they wanted to follow him. Unlike many of us, Jesus was more interested in making DISCIPLES than finding giving units that could fill the pews and take on some “dynamo guru’s” version of a Christian moralistic America.

Like Jesus, we clergy should be bridging to *and* stretching people as we communicate the Gospel and the truths of Holy Scripture. If we are not causing tension in our people at times regarding God and his ways, it is a pretty safe bet that we are giving the people a comfortable God of our own choosing. As we will flesh out in the next chapter, this is not the God of the historic church or of the Holy Scriptures.

I have yet to see a church sign that reads: “Come Grow and Suffer with us”! or “Hope, Joy, and Peace while suffering...come check us out”! These churches don’t know the opportunities they



are missing! I am sure with signs like these, churches would have people flocking to their worship services.

But maybe Jesus is just *suggesting* this whole suffering thing in the hopes that we might consider it from time to time. You know, he wants us to consider the idea of suffering in the unlikely event that we are among the unlucky few who must experience it.

Another option? Jesus wants us to adjust our expectations and lay aside our surprise when rejection and angry resistance (both aggressive and passive) comes our way. Maybe being persecuted for following *all* of what Jesus taught *is* a part of the cruciform life?

II Timothy 3:

<sup>10</sup> Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, <sup>11</sup> **my persecutions, and my suffering the things that happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. What persecutions I endured! Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them.** <sup>12</sup> **Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.**

I Peter 4:

<sup>12</sup> Beloved, **do not be surprised** at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. <sup>13</sup> But rejoice insofar **as you are sharing Christ's sufferings**, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. <sup>14</sup> If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you. <sup>15</sup> But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief maker. <sup>16</sup> **Yet if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear this name.**

What I am suggesting is that in Matthew five “suffering as a Christian” has been defined for us in the seven verses in the beatitudes before these final verses. Yes, there is more development of these things<sup>44</sup> in the scriptures (and in the continuation of the sermon in chapter five), but if we are going to “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” we now know the starting place to understand what Jesus was talking about.

It is in these previous seven verses that we find the heart of Kingdom living and thinking. It is here we find the character and actions of the children of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Thus, the more you understand Jesus, the Gospel, and the Kingdom (and the complexities involved in living these things out), the more you will find yourself a threat and an oddity to those who have little interest in such things. Seeking and knowing God will constantly change how we view and live out our faith in the world around us.

A part of real Christian growth then will *normally* include becoming less like the family system we grew up in, less like the friends we have always had so much fun with, less American (no matter the stripe or party), and unfortunately at times ...less like many church cultures and their primary values.

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<sup>44</sup> And their implications

## *What is Persecution?*

Matthew 5:

<sup>10</sup> “*Blessed are those who are persecuted for **righteousness**’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

<sup>11</sup> “*Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely **on my account**.* <sup>12</sup> *Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets **who were before you**.*

The problem that the Covenant People of God had with the prophets was similar to the problem that the leadership in Israel had with Jesus. Both the prophets and Jesus were *unpredictable*. They seemed gleefully unaware of what the established leaders had decided mattered and the appropriate way that people under their leadership were expected to act and think. Thus, by their very nature they were threats to the preconceived directions and visions of the appointed leadership.

The prophets were not threats because they had thugs that did their bidding or an army at their beckon call. They did not encourage the violent overthrow of whatever existing government (usually a rule mixed between the religious and civil). They were threats because by the very nature of their counter-cultural message (coming from the very proclamation of the “word of God”), it was hard to prepare for them or manage them politically. Their unpredictability meant that they were not easily controlled, and that they could quickly become a threat to pre-packaged and previously formed directions. This was especially problematic for kings who were more likely to listen to prophets who would tell them what they desired to hear, instead of what God was truly saying.

The prophets, like Christ, were unconcerned with the subjective visions, emotional claims, and unconfirmed truths of those proclaiming “thus sayeth the Lord, when the Lord had not spoken”. Certainly, there were emotional and mystical aspects to the way that Spirit of the Lord moved among and communicated with his prophets, but these were in keeping with... not in contrast to... the tradition of Israel regarding Yahweh and *the ways he had always chosen to move among his people*<sup>45</sup>; the way he moves among his Covenant People today.

But, what is persecution?

In its base etymology<sup>46</sup> διώκω<sup>47</sup> means to run toward or pursue someone or something. The idea of persecution then comes from the pursuing or pressing on someone who conflicts with another’s desires or values. People thus persecute others to punish them for hindering their own

<sup>45</sup> It is good to mention here that while the events of prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah were occurring, the Israelites were also receiving direct revelation from these prophets that would later be recorded and treated as Holy Spirit inspired Holy Scripture by the Israelite Community. Thus, the Old Testament Prophet as an office was an important way that God communicated to his people, and in turn gave them more Holy Spirit inspired scriptures as events unfolded. Later, the Lord would use the New Testament Apostle in a similar way.

<sup>46</sup> The development of a word in the history and use of a particular language.

<sup>47</sup> διώκω - See BAGD *Greek-English NT Lexicon*, Louw and Nida *Greek-English NT Lexicon*, Kittle, *TDNT – Abridged*, and Colin Brown’s *The NIDNTT Vol. 2*, pgs. 805-807.

designs. Persecution is an aggressive act against others whose words, station, or behavior is perceived as a threat.

But who is Jesus referring to here as the “persecutors”? While few would deny the general application of this verse to various sources of persecution, the immediate context is clear. Jesus is first referring to persecution from people *within* the Covenant, not by people outside of it.

Jesus says this:

Luke 13:33

*‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. <sup>33</sup>Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, **because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.**’ <sup>34</sup>Jerusalem, Jerusalem, **the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!** How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!*

Jesus came first to the Covenant People of Israel. The reference to the “persecution of the prophets” was not directed to the peoples of Edom, Moab, Philistia, Assyria, Babylon *or* Rome. The persecution front and center came from people who had been given direct revelation through the faithful acts of God, through the Holy Scriptures (especially the Torah and the Prophets), and now through the confrontation with the very Messiah himself.

In Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, we find that Jewish Christians were struggling with the Gentile Christians in their midst. Paul writes to this divided church in Rome to address this mixed Jewish and Gentile congregation as they adjusted to life under the New Covenant. Careful study reveals Paul’s intent: His lists of sins in chapter one were intended to help the Jews see how equally culpable they were before God.

Thus, Paul is not teaching in Romans 1 that the *ultimate* sin is homosexuality, but that *any* sin which breaks God’s law makes all of us equal in our rebellion against our Creator and in need of a Savior. Paul is setting the Jewish Christians up in chapter one to help them look at their moralistic hypocrisy. The sins that these pious Jews so easily attributed to those nasty Gentiles, are now put on the same level with their sins, their rejection, and their rebellion.

Chapter two is poignant in its clarity:

Romans 2:

*Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, **are doing the very same things.***

<sup>9</sup> *There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek,<sup>10</sup> but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. <sup>11</sup> For God shows no partiality.*

*<sup>12</sup> All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.*

In my opinion and experience, modern American moralistic Christians have misinterpreted and misapplied Romans chapters 1 and 2 more than most other passages in scripture. In the public arena, this enables many to believe that they are on the right team, and that their lists of sins... prejudice, selfishness, greed, judgementalism, slander, hatred of their enemies, and unforgiveness... are not that big of a deal. Certainly, these sins are problematic, but it is those on the other team that are the real problems and have the truly terrible sins.

The moralists on the other team use the sins listed in the first two chapters of Romans as if they are optional in contrast with their wonderful, individual, and modern reasoning. In the end, then, the sins clearly taught by Paul in Romans 1 are not that big of a deal. The thinking is that Modernism/Post-Modernism and our current reasoning today have trumped Paul's silly list of sins (and his antiquated way of life). Thus, one not need take any of his admonitions that seriously. What we experience and believe within our own opinions is what truly matters, and no authority has a right to counter our ultimate claims. Our new morality is what really matters

Through our modern lenses we make Paul in our own image, using wide-sweeping speculation and an absolute "reboot" of any historic interpretation by the "one, holy, apostolic and catholic church". So, a reader-centered, culturally derived group-think feeds what the constantly shifting American popular culture has already decided is truly right and moral<sup>48</sup>. The church in this model is a young calf lead morally and ethically by the cultural whims of populous America. Oh, it takes the church time, but eventually many in the Protestant church end up with the morals of the culture in which it is immersed<sup>49</sup>.

As we will continue to flesh out in the next chapter, moralists (of any kind) who have a settled national enmeshment<sup>50</sup> will find the teachings of Jesus a threat, indeed. He offers no promises of the things desired by citizens of a kingdom that is not his. However, those that challenge these enmeshed citizens best prepare themselves for a painful and uphill climb.

Those convinced that a formulaic external morality will keep them and their nation "happy, safe and prosperous" will react defensively with a marked vehemence and fear when their presuppositions are attacked. Their often unrealized and unspoken belief is that their views and "team" must be right so that they can be safe and prosperous in America. Their happiness and the future of their family depend on such things.

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<sup>48</sup> And then, of course, many in every area of the arts, literature, popular culture, politics, and education pound their "gospel" and "ethics" down on the populous to reiterate their beliefs and to secure their corner of power and influence. It is not enough to be respectful in disagreement with these views, but, like most moralists, disagreement with their viewpoints is tantamount to oppression and bigotry. Not exactly a context for relationship and dialogue.

<sup>49</sup> Of course, the reality also exists that the push-back of the culture does help the church look more closely at what it believes and why it matters. Just read the Epistles of the New Testament or read Christian History to confirm this reality.

<sup>50</sup> and the on-demand economic stability and safety desired by this kind of concrete and tangible kingdom

The moralist will normally require a boxed theology where God and his ways can be controlled, theological tension avoided, and the mystery of salvation managed. The undomesticated “loose cannons” like Jesus and the Prophets are ignored until they get in the way of the current definitions of “progress” or “effective ministry”. When they step over the line, however, the prophets are dealt with so that their enemies lose no programmatic momentum.

Of course, persecution is experienced outside of the church as well. The Apostles, the Early Church, most of the early Bishops, and many in the global church today know this reality quite well. But we must remind ourselves that whatever context, culture, or organization we are called to, being salt and light will always encourage push-back and hostility.

It is disillusioning to experience hostility from people who we love so dearly and expect support from, but with the Lord’s protection, strength, and blessing, we can persevere in our faithful walk of obedience.

### *Blessed are the Victims?*

The word *victim* can refer to the content of a burnt offering in antiquity, can be a reference to someone who has endured legitimate criminal violence, or in today’s psychological vernacular describes a person who tends to find emotional persecution in the most unlikely places. In application, I am focusing on the third use of the term.

When we play the emotional victim, I suggest we play into several realities and into some very poor thinking. A person playing the victim believes:

- I should never suffer or experience injustice
- If I do experience injustice, someone should have to pay for their injustice and admit that they have harmed me.
- When I go through any difficulty in my life, someone else is to blame. I am never the one causing my own problems or difficulties.
- When others respond to me, I will be the final arbitrator regarding the justice I received, and the reparations I am owed.

Of course, when we are treated poorly by people in relationships it isn’t enjoyable, and sometimes we are legitimately injured by others and need to confront their behavior. However, our motivation for these things should not be the punishment of others for their sins, as their sins (and ours) have already been paid for at the cross. Our desire, especially within the Covenant Family, is to have a reconciled and loving relationship with people in this life *when possible*.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Romans 12:18

However, we must embrace the fact that we are not in charge of others behaviors, thoughts or feelings. Because we want or prefer others (including those in our culture and governments) to act or behave in a certain way, does not mean that they will. How do we lovingly and wisely approach such things?

When others are upset with us, or if we are upset at them, there is a huge difference between a true assessment of “harm” in scripture versus getting our feelings hurt. We may want someone to treat us in a certain manner or with certain responses, but this does not necessarily mean that they are “harming” us (or we, them).

Nor are other’s feelings and viewpoints of us the starting place for how we love God or our neighbor. What we believe is. Whatever or however we choose to reconcile with others must be based on what we truly believe is God’s perspective regarding the situation in which we find ourselves.

The same is true regarding how we evaluate ourselves as well. We must realize that our emotions and energy about something does not necessitate that we are right regarding the matter at hand. We may feel a certain way, and our feelings may indeed be in line with what is truly occurring. Or, because we are playing the victim and unwilling to step outside of ourselves, we may be finding what we want to find. Again, ours is a communal faith and salvation, and thus, we continue to need the insight and help of others to see ourselves more objectively.<sup>52</sup>

When we choose to live as Christ calls us, it is painful to be misunderstood, marginalized, or ignored. It is easy to slip from the expectation of being “persecuted” to believing that we deserve to be treated in a manner of our own imagination.

That said, as we learn to expect certain negative push-back, we can find ourselves better prepared to endure trials, and thus, more willing to separate our needs and misconceptions from a real persecution for the truth. Again, it is easy to find what we want to find, versus finding what is really present. It will often take time, discernment, and others in the Community of Christ to help us sort all of this out.

In addition, we are taught in scripture that how we respond when we are truly persecuted also matters:

Matthew 5:

<sup>43</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ <sup>44</sup> But I say to you, **Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,** <sup>45</sup> **so that you may be children of your Father in heaven;** for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. <sup>46</sup> For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? <sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? <sup>48</sup> Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Philippians 1:

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<sup>52</sup> And this assumes a developing relationship with people that we trust and respect.

<sup>27</sup> Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, <sup>28</sup> and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. **For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing.** <sup>29</sup> For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well— <sup>30</sup> since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

How we live communicates more than we often know. How we suffer can communicate to those persecuting us regarding what, and especially WHO, we are all about. As discussed in a previous chapter, there is a time for confrontation, but once we have had our say, how we live and love may create space for others to consider our message. As the well-known saying goes “what you do speaks so loudly, that I cannot hear what you say”.

When there is no avenue for our verbal message, our presence still matters. In addition, we may need to be present in someone's life for a while before we can be heard at all. The timing of our message may evoke responses we never considered, but the Spirit of the Lord and his timing must go before us.

But the reality also exists that being “prophetic” in any meaningful way is often a lonely task. So, what do we do when we have responsibly “said our piece” in our relationships, our covenant community, or in any other setting or group?

I have found the below quote immensely helpful in the pursuit of being lovingly engaged with those uninterested in evaluating or questioning their assumptions and presuppositions:

*“The colossal misunderstanding of our time is the assumption that **insight** will work with people who are unmotivated to change. If you want your child, spouse, client, or boss to shape up, **stay connected while changing yourself** rather than trying to fix them.”<sup>53</sup>*

-Edwin H. Friedman

Sometimes the best way to communicate is by visible, authentic, and consistent living. But we can hinder the clarity of our message in any relationship if we continually badger those we love or if we choose to disengage from them all together.

## *Accepting our Path*

Of course, there also those that create their own suffering and pain by their unrealistic and unscriptural views of the world. In this life, we will always to some degree be “in the world but not of the world”. I would suggest that many in the American Church set *themselves up* for disappointment by continually expecting the world outside of the Covenant Community to act and live as if they are Christian. Many of our disillusionments are fed by our misconceptions.

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<sup>53</sup> Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick-Fix*. Preface, pg. ix.

There are many Christian organizations that raise a lot of money from their constituents by using fear, guilt, and manipulation. Morally and politically, THE END<sup>54</sup> is always near, the next huge disaster for Christians is right at the door, and time is always of the essence for the money they require. Their letters and communiqués encourage guilt, fear, and confusion.

No organization is so important that the Lord becomes indebted to them for their service, or so irreplaceable that “the gates of hell would prevail against the church” were they to cease. There is a large contrast in *spirit* and *action* between those Christians engaged in faithful stewardship, and those who believe that it is their responsibility to do God’s job for him.

It is one thing to work hard and fight for justice, and another to put our hope in our own desired outcomes. Thus, with many groups, it is their expectations and assumptions that are the source of many of their tensions. The constant anxiety found in their written and spoken appeals for support and action often gives them away for who they are and what they believe. Much of their perceived persecution and suffering is self-inflicted, and they seem eager to spread their pain around.

As mentioned in an earlier chapter, there is a real grief to watching the world around us choose death and corruption over life and a true freedom in Christ. The moral degradation of any society is characterized by misplaced values, confusion, and instability. As family systems erode and ethical chaos grows, people become less connected to those that might offer them a sense of stability and reliability.

How then we choose to live and engage this kind of culture will either open up or continue to polarize our true ability to be “salt and light” to a “dark and decaying world”. We need to give up more of our need for power, safety, and comfort, and be more desirous to accept suffering, pain, and persecution. If we choose this route, we may have a greater opportunity to stem the tide of moral decay, speak to the hypocrisy of our national polarizations, and live the Gospel among people who respect us instead of see us as their biased, ill-informed,<sup>55</sup> and power-grasping enemies. Fear is NOT a fruit of the Spirit, and it will push people from Christ, not draw them to him.

**Nowhere** do the scriptures teach that a cold, dead morality (of any kind) will continue to endure in any culture held by people with unconverted hearts. Morality and order are still necessary and important, but without the power of the Holy Spirit secured by the cross and resurrection of

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<sup>54</sup> Henny Penny: “The sky is falling”!!!!

<sup>55</sup> One of the most egregious tendencies which clearly reveal the biases and hopes among many clergy and laity (and their thoughtless, intellectual, and spiritual laziness) is the sending of chain e-mails and posts on social media that reveal that these same people have done ZERO objective source checking to confirm their facts. It is surprising and gut-wrenching to receive these e-mail strains, responded to people I love regarding these manipulated and deceptive e-mails (revealing the clear addition or manipulation of the facts contained therein), and then watch as these same people (who proclaim that they care about truth) act as if these things don’t matter. Jesus is the truth; Satan is the father of lies. If Christians of any stripe are unwilling to confirm if something is genuinely true or not (from unbiased sources) then at least we should have the integrity not to spew our ignorance across the internet, pushing people toward the kingdom aligned with the manipulation of facts and truth. This Kingdom is certainly NOT the Kingdom of God, and if people are “persecuted” for such things, they have only themselves to blame. Thoughtfulness and careful discernment matters!



Jesus, no person has the ability to do the *right things for the right reasons*. Thus, by our very ascent to historic orthodoxy, our basic theology teaches us that people removed from conversion *can do nothing eternal on their own*...and this includes the people leading the United States of America.

The way to heaven in this life and the life to come is paved with persecution and pain for we who are in Christ, but it is the path to real life and the lasting glory of God.

In the words of Paul:

Philippians 3:

<sup>10</sup> *I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and **the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.***

Do we truly want to know Christ?

## Chapter 11

### *The Comfortable God*

*“If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.” John 11:48*

In a big house in the English countryside, a solitary country squire entertained four siblings from London to keep them safe from the bombings of the German Luftwaffe during World War II.

Upon arriving in the evening, all the children looked forward to exploring the outdoors on the next day. However, upon waking up they were greeted by a wet and soggy rain. Thus, they decided to stay inside and explore the large manor. In time, they came upon a room that was empty save a few things including a lone wardrobe. Unbeknownst to them, this wardrobe was a secret and magic doorway to another world.

In the end, all four of the children find themselves in the magical world of Narnia. And as they wander through the wood, they find that it is filled with some very unusual residents. Eventually, they are taken in by Mr. and Mrs. Beaver who are very concerned for the children’s safety.

The children are cold, hungry and full of questions. Soon they are warm, comfortable, and eating in a cozy little cottage at a quaint little table. The structure of the Beaver house sits right on top of a frozen river and is integrated with the wooded dams that the beavers had constructed in the river over time.

Following the meal (and once Mr. Beaver’s pipe is well lit), the conversation turns to the happenings in the wintery land of Narnia. Among other things, the children find out that the true King of Narnia has returned and is now roaming the land. The possibility now exists that the children could find themselves face to face with a lion named, Aslan.

*“Is—is he a man?” asked Lucy.*

*“Aslan a man?” said Mr. Beaver sternly. “Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor-beyond-the-Sea. Don’t you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion—the Lion, the great Lion.”*

*“Ooh!” said Susan. “I’d thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.”*

*“That you will, dearie, and no mistake,” said Mrs. Beaver; “if there is anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they’re either braver than most or else just silly.”*

*“Then he isn’t safe?” said Lucy.*

*“Safe?” said Mr. Beaver; “don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? Course he isn’t safe. **But he is good.** He is the King, I tell you.”*<sup>56</sup>

One can hardly fault children who know only city life (and even less about Narnian history and culture) for being a bit concerned upon hearing that a lion is roaming in some wood they are about to traverse. And yet, as the children would soon discover, Aslan, while terrifying, unpredictable and confusing was also gracious, approachable, and comforting.

But why would a great, magnificent, and kind ruler be a safe ruler? If Aslan was a tame lion, a house-broken lion, a lion to gawk at while visiting the zoo from time to time, well, who is the *master* in these scenarios? Behind the caged bars of this thinking, Aslan becomes a pet under human control and subject to human whims.

Similarly, a tame god is a controllable god. With a tame god, we humans are the lords. Even in human terms a tame ruler is not capable of ensuring true peace, dispensing justice, or guaranteeing any kind of protection for its citizens. We should not *want* a tame god, but often this is exactly the god we pursue. We fabricate our deities to meet our own perceived needs and desires.

In keeping with this, the Jesus we follow tends to look an awful like us with our values, our assumptions, our views of relationships, our nationalistic beliefs, and our theology. Growing up, my father would often joke, “I am sure that Jesus is a Chicago Bears fan!”. And while we can identify with the humor of this statement, it is unsettling how close to the truth this sentiment often gets.

That we have these kinds of biased tendencies shouldn’t surprise us, but they constantly do. In addition, as often as we see the delusions of others around us (especially those we consider our enemies), we have a practiced ability to avoid any search for our own potential idol-making, all the while surrounding ourselves with people who will encourage us to continue our chosen paths. To quote the words of Paul in Romans 1:

*<sup>32</sup> They know God’s decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them.*

Misery truly does love company and the more the merrier.

Our Triune God is not safe, so it should come as no surprise that Jesus was a huge threat to those enmeshed with multiple other kingdom perspectives and values. Jesus was dangerous when he walked the earth, he is dangerous now, and he will be dangerous when he returns at his second coming.

The way of the Gospel and the Kingdom of Heaven is NOT SAFE. Those that “seek first the Kingdom of God” will find true life and shalom, but they will also be perceived as threats to those who must have their lives and individualistic beliefs fixed like hardened concrete for happiness and comfort. Real change and growth is just too scary.

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<sup>56</sup>Lewis, *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, pg. 75-80

## *One Bride for Seven Brothers*

Near the end of his ministry and just before his crucifixion we are given insight into the real concerns of the spiritual and civil rulers of Israel when it comes to Jesus of Nazareth:

John 11:

<sup>45</sup> Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. <sup>46</sup> But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. <sup>47</sup> So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. <sup>48</sup> If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, **and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.**"

They sound a lot like we American Christians, don't they? Above all, they desired political safety and national comfort on their terms and by their own making. In their minds, a choice to follow Christ and honor him as Messiah was a choice to give up their extraneous<sup>57</sup> interpretations of scripture, their Temple, and their political security.

In reaction to the past abuses of The Covenant People in Old Testament history, the Jewish people and their leaders gradually constructed their theology regarding their worship, institutions, and lives to avoid yet another diaspora<sup>58</sup>. But as the histories of both Israel and the Church reveal, the embrace of **a reactionary theology and applications** in the end create as many problems as they hope to fix.

Our narrow and limited viewpoints in a limited time and space should be interpreted holistically in both scriptural and historic ways. But to do this, the Church of Jesus Christ must prioritize such things as we seek to be faithful to God. Discernment does not come easy, it takes effort, time and discipline. If you don't want it, you WILL NOT pursue it.

Even though Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, and proclaimed historic, prophetic truth in keeping with Messianic fulfillment, these leaders did not even consider the *possibility* that Jesus was exactly who he claimed to be. It was just too big of a stretch for them. They just had too much other central teaching to overcome; it was going to be much easier to just keep defaulting to what they already believed and assumed. Their group-think hummed in unison bringing them comfort and reassurance...and a rebellion against Yahweh and his ways.

How wise Solomon is when he proclaims:

Ecclesiastes 1:

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<sup>57</sup> Being used to refer to theologies external and unrelated to that which should have been core in their (and our) belief systems as followers of Yahweh.

<sup>58</sup> A reference to the judgement of the Lord on the Nation of Israel through the captivities by Assyria and later, Babylon. The Jewish leaders and the people viewed Roman occupation as an affront to their identity and religious hope, and yet they learned to make an uneasy peace with the reality of their presence.

<sup>9</sup> *What has been is what will be,  
and what has been done is what will be done;  
there is nothing new under the sun.*

In the below passage, Jesus is confronted by the Sadducees with a specific question designed to ridicule the theological basis of a resurrection of the dead<sup>59</sup>.

Matthew 22:

<sup>23</sup> *The same day some Sadducees came to him, saying there is no resurrection; and they asked him a question, saying,* <sup>24</sup> *“Teacher, Moses said, ‘If a man dies childless, his brother shall marry the widow, and raise up children for his brother.’* <sup>25</sup> *Now there were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died childless, leaving the widow to his brother.* <sup>26</sup> *The second did the same, so also the third, down to the seventh.* <sup>27</sup> *Last of all, the woman herself died.* <sup>28</sup> *In the resurrection, then, whose wife of the seven will she be? For all of them had married her.”*

The problem described by the Sadducees is clearly dealt with in the Mosaic Law in regards to remarriage and the promotion of a living heir within a specific family structure.<sup>60</sup> The situation in general is probable, but it is taken to a logical extreme to make a point. If the resurrection of the dead is possible, then how will relationships be handled in the next life?

The initial response of Jesus is powerful and telling:

<sup>29</sup> *Jesus answered them, “You are wrong, because you **know neither the scriptures nor the power of God.***

A few years back, I was watching the video segment of a question and answer session with a newly elected bishop within our province. After one of the questions from the audience, the new bishop jokingly referred to a Seminary Education as “cemetery”. It absolutely shocked me.

This is not a sentiment one hears coming from people who value depth and thoughtfulness, and who have a growing humility regarding the need for theological discernment regarding the complexities and mysteries of knowing and applying the character of our God in everyday life. Thoughtful and discerning people understand that we all have informing traditions...no matter the scriptural wisdom and understanding (or lack of) contained in them.

However, this kind of sentiment *is* popular and common among pragmatic, individualistic, and intellectually disinterested pietists who constantly separate their *being* from their *doing*. Thus, the importance of one’s growth and development intellectually, theologically, and

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<sup>59</sup> A key theological difference and area of contention with the other main theological and ruling body in Israel, the Pharisees.

<sup>60</sup> Gen. 38:8; Duet. 25:5

philosophically is largely removed from how one chooses to seek God, live life, and lead ministry<sup>61</sup>.

Those who tend to make such flippant statements are usually impressed and overtaken with measurable production, experiential highs, and manageable simplicity. Whether wittingly or unwittingly, their condescending attitudes communicate that a growing and grounded theological development is somehow a hindrance to seeking and knowing God. The use of the intellect is not to be trusted; in the very least it is optional.

This is a Gnostic<sup>62</sup> like sentiment that positions a part of the creation (and being made in the image of God) as a problem in and of itself. But the Creator and his creation are NEVER the problem; how we use his creation IS. We are to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, being, and MINDS. Growing intellectually in loving our God is, thus, central to being a Christian.<sup>63</sup> There is truly no such thing as an ignorant or anti-intellectual Christianity.

We engage in false teaching and, thus, false living when we position the created order in conflict with its good Creator. Left to ourselves we will corrupt anything we touch, but it is the misuse of creational categories which needs to be countered and discerned not the categories in and of themselves.

What Jesus is responding to with the Sadducees is their skewed and error laden theology. They embraced a complex and rigid theology which had little to do with loving God and serving their people. Jesus taught and lived out his theology among the people he was reaching. His very life communicated the importance of righteous thinking and living<sup>64</sup>.

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<sup>61</sup> This is a central reason for what is often labeled the “chasm” between the seminary and the parish congregation in American Christianity. We seem to have little need regarding the importance of the theological application of truth as lived out in our individual or parish lives (i.e., pastoral theology). By our very acquiescence to the negation of such things, we encourage a “Sunday only” or “church program only” kind of Christianity whether we intend to or not.

<sup>62</sup> A heretical teaching condemned in the early centuries of Christianity for many different reasons, chief among them being the villainizing of the physical creation and the idealizing of the ethereal and unseen.

<sup>63</sup> When a seminarian puts value in a disciplined theological/ministerial education (and the ordination processes that are thus required) they are not saying that everything in their teaching and everyone who teaches them will be important and/or valuable. What they are communicating is a humility that recognizes their need to learn, the importance of building on the shoulders of those who have gone before them, and the SUBMISSION to a God-given authority whose responsibility it is to train and equip future clergy to lead churches with passion, credibility, and truth. The arrogant modern needs no such things because he/she has no clear and scriptural respect for covenantal accountability, respectful and appropriate submission to authority, needed communal support, and the applicational complexity of incarnational faithfulness in parish ministry.

<sup>64</sup> This is also the reason why we can acknowledge the Apostle Paul as both the most well-known evangelist and the most well-known theological mind in the Epistles of the New Testament. What we believe and how we live are to go hand in hand; our gifts will often determine to what degree we engage different aspects of Christian living and serving, but no one has the freedom to neglect the seeking of God in ANY area of life in which has called us to be faithful. We are all to continue to grow wherever and whenever we have opportunity.

It is true that the use of the intellect can easily become an idol. But it is also true that *every person* has a theology about life and God no matter how informed, developed, or anemic. Whatever the case, the use of our intellect is not first of all about us, but about seeking and knowing our God with every fiber of our being. We think well so that we can worship well, live well, and love others well.

The Sadducees and Pharisees had lost sight of this and came to Christ with pre-made theological boxes of their own choosing. Their Jewish “orthodoxy” was extensive, rigid, and narrowly applied. They had created theological boxes that had no room for the true Messiah. Their boxes positioned Jesus, the Gospel, and his Kingdom as threats to their existence and the kingdom they wanted to build. Do our theological boxes have room for Jesus?

I would challenge the reader to consider again the monumental and striking statement that Jesus makes to these men: “You don’t know the *scriptures* or the *power of God*”. These were the theological experts and leading voices in Jerusalem, but they were misinterpreting and misusing the scriptures for their own ends and purposes. Thus, they were negating the power of God in their lives, because their theology and rule were not reflective of a true “hungering and thirsting after righteousness” and, by extension, a hungering and thirsting after their Covenantal God.

They were also trying to squeeze a transcendent, holy, and magnificent God into pre-formed shapes. They desired a predictable and safe god. But the triune God will not be caged like a pet lion. If we are his children, he will continually crush our boxes and show us our need for himself. But we must also want to have our boxes crushed. We must want HIM above all things, all people, and all other ways.

Is this the Christianity we are living and giving to the world around us?

### *Embracing the Unknown*

<sup>30</sup> *For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.* <sup>31</sup> *And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God,* <sup>32</sup> *‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is God not of the dead, but of the living.* <sup>33</sup> *And when the crowd heard it, they were astounded at his teaching.*

In the New Heavens and the New Earth, the state of marriage relationships (sexuality?) was going to change to a point where the human, redeemed, created and glorified body would have

some continuity<sup>65</sup> with the existence of angels. Jesus probably also mentions the angels because the Sadducees did not believe in them.

Jesus was challenging the assumption that the day of the resurrection had to include the marriage relationship as it was known and practiced by the Sadducees. Jesus is suggesting that human corporeal<sup>66</sup> existence will be much different than we now know, and will far surpass the limited nature of relationships in this life due to the reality of sin. Jealousy, exclusivity and parasitic love will be no more.

In this new way of living, the power of God will create a new reality. While it will be in continuity with our current existence, it will also go beyond a pure resuscitation of the life that we now experience. Love will function in a much more inviting and engaging way in keeping with the character and unity of the triune God. It is a life that can hardly be imagined because of what we experience in this sinful world, but God will make it so.

It is not clear in this passage to what degree the resurrection life will influence the structure of relationships. Does this mean that there will be no relationships that are “closer” or more intimate than others? Jesus does not elaborate.<sup>67</sup> However, what *is* clear is that love will take on radically new horizontal dimensions. Dissension will be no more, and unity will be a constant.

Christ reveals to the Sadducees that they are misinterpreting and are blind to the very Scriptures that they claimed as authoritative. Like many today, the Sadducees too would have proclaimed the importance of the authority and reliability of the scriptures, while rejecting and plotting the very crucifixion of the Light of the World. They took a “don’t confuse me with the facts, I already know what I believe” approach to the Messiah and his message. Many of us take this same approach to Jesus and his Kingdom teaching today, while claiming him as our Savior.

Like many American Christians, the Sadducees also would have been vehement against the influx of Gentile immigrants, the whores, the filthy ceremonially unclean lepers, the Jewish traitors who worked for Rome collecting taxes, the ruination of their Jewish society, and the hatred of their Roman oppressors...all while (wittingly and unwittingly) hating and despising the precious son of God. They were lost, but thought they were among the elite of God’s chosen people. How about us?

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<sup>65</sup> A continuation with similarity to the life we are now living

<sup>66</sup> Related to the physical body usually in contrast with their spirit/inner selves.

<sup>67</sup> The Apostle Paul’s later elaboration of the physical resurrected body of the redeemed (I Corinthians 15) also raises as many questions as it gives answers.



Unlike Christ, many American Christians today are not looking to “take up their cross” and die to themselves in obedience to the Father, expecting persecution and crucifixion (as Christ did). Instead, personal fulfillment, self-determined purpose, and temporal blessing is what many Christian leaders promise in this life by following Jesus. No, we are looking to have our piece of heaven now, and we will support with vehement passion and fear those people (in whatever realm of power) who will tell us what we want to hear. So, our foolishness, fear, and misplaced hopes are on display for all of America to see that, in the end, we Christians are not that different from anyone else in our self-absorbed and fear-infused citizenry.

*And* like other Americans, we look for quick-fix answers to the decline and challenges to the American church. We don’t see our problems as deep character issues, but as challenges to be overcome by methodology, technique, and a borderline work-a-holism. But faithful living *always* begins with faithful thinking and believing.

So, we stir up more simplistic and a-historic church mission initiatives, revivals, movements, and programs...all destined to pass away in time. However, God’s clear plan for bringing the Gospel to the World is his historic, covenantal, communal and faithful CHURCH; we are PROMISED that against his church, not even the gates of hell will prevail. But we have better, more exciting, and more impressive ideas. Nothing new under the sun, indeed.

<sup>33</sup> *And when the crowd heard it, they were astounded at his teaching.*

The people listening to this public theological exchange between the Sadducees were not “astounded” because Jesus brought a live goat up on the stage while teaching from Leviticus or because of his power-point graphics. They were astounded at his teaching because it rang with truth in comparison to the hollow, man-centered theology and control to which they were normally exposed. From the very beginnings of his public ministry the teaching of Jesus rang of transcendent and authoritative truth:

Mark 1:

<sup>22</sup> *They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes (Pharisees).*

Jesus then quotes the well-known phraseology that is used throughout Genesis, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”. Jesus states that God is the God of the living and not the dead. At first glance it might appear to the 21<sup>st</sup> century reader that Christ is merely

arguing for a life in the hereafter (the Sadducees also denied the immortality of a person as well). However, in this setting a resurrection of the body was assumed if immortality was to be accepted.

In short, Jesus is telling the Sadducees that they were not only wrong about the final resurrection of the dead, but were interpreting the scriptures generally in manipulative and self-directed ways. In the end, they were more worried about themselves, their worship, and their “ministries” than they truly were about knowing and following God. Thus, when he came and dwelt among them, when he threatened their way of life and their thinking, they hated and killed him. So, what would we do with Jesus, if he were to come among us today?

### *Our Editorial Ways*

I find the wonderfully complex passage in I Samuel 15 magnificent and challenging at the same time. The wickedness and rebellion of Saul is so reminiscent of the temptations we face daily.

Saul was given clear directions to attack and decimate the people of the Amalekites<sup>68</sup>. Saul chooses another route while obeying *most* of God’s directions.

*I Samuel 15:*

<sup>13</sup> *When Samuel came to Saul, Saul said to him, “May you be blessed by the LORD; I have carried out the command of the LORD.”* <sup>14</sup> *But Samuel said, “What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears, and the lowing of cattle that I hear?”* <sup>15</sup> *Saul said, “They have brought them from the Amalekites; for the people spared the best of the sheep and the cattle, to sacrifice to the LORD your God; but the rest we have utterly destroyed.”* <sup>16</sup> *Then Samuel said to Saul, “Stop! I will tell you what the LORD said to me last night.” He replied, “Speak.”*

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<sup>68</sup> Many have found a capricious and vindictive God in this passage. However, if one accepts that God is the judge of all the universe, that he sees the depth, intentions, and wickedness of the human heart (and where this wickedness will lead), and then remember the treasure trove of scriptures that reveal the patient, loving, and forgiving God of the Old Testament, these objections melt away. Not only did God pour out his *hesed* (unfailing, steadfast love) on the Jewish people, he also sent prophets and called non-Jewish people to repentance. If we want to find a harsh, unloving God in the Scriptures, we will find him. But I submit that this is not the God that is taught by the scriptures nor by the faithful historic church. God is just, so he cannot allow evil to rule the world, but he does not leave us in our filth and rebellion. He engages us in love and sends his son, but he will not be our genie, man-servant, or house-pet. People must find another god for those things.

Saul, with some pressure likely coming from the people and his own ego fully engaged<sup>69</sup>, greets Samuel with his carefully prepared narrative: “Welcome, Samuel, I have followed the Lord, because I am declaring it to be so...thus, because I am insistent and verbally passionate that I am right, please go along with this statement without discerning or helping me see my conscious and unconscious rebellion. Remember, I am God’s anointed, and God gave us the victory, so...I must be honoring God!”

Many of we clergy would have eaten Saul’s words up like a juicy steak: “Wonderful! I am looking to avoid any conflict or tension with a ten-foot pole. Were you well-intentioned? Did you do some good? Do you have some measurable ministry results and are finances up? Wonderful, let us all cheer and worship God together! Strike up the band!”

Nope. Not what happened. Samuel simply says: “Stop! I am tired of listening to your sales pitch. Let me tell you what is really going on here”.

*<sup>19</sup> Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD? Why did you swoop down on the spoil, and do what was evil in the sight of the LORD?” <sup>20</sup> Saul said to Samuel, “I have obeyed the voice of the LORD, I have gone on the mission on which the LORD sent me, I have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and I have utterly destroyed the Amalekites.<sup>21</sup> But from the spoil the people took sheep and cattle, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the LORD your God in Gilgal.”*

Yes, Saul, if you just keep saying it repeatedly...with passion...maybe then it will become true; or not. We often get upset and become defensive when challenged in an area that we are insecure about because we are trying to convince ourselves and others that we are just fine.

It is the Garden of Eden 101 as handed down by Great-grandpa Adam and Great-grandma Eve:

- Deny your true desires and sinful behavior<sup>70</sup>
- Blame others for your culpability and misplaced priorities
- Find out that what you thought would bring life outside of obedience to God and his ways, truly brings you continual anxiety, anger, and depression.

<sup>69</sup> In verse 12 we are even told that Saul had erected a monument to himself. Saul probably spared King Agag for reasons of parading him around as a trophy of his victory.

<sup>70</sup> Which will normally not be discovered without wanting to see these things and, then, surrounding ourselves with people who love us enough to help us figure them out.

The rebellion of Saul comes after multiple reminders from the prophet Samuel in chapters 10 and 12 that the establishment of the monarchy was a rebellion of the people against God. However, Samuel promised that in the establishment of the monarchy, the Lord would still be gracious and bless them if the King and people would turn their hearts toward him afresh.

In addition, Saul had previously disobeyed the Lord in his responsibilities as King in I Samuel 13. Saul is not *getting it* or learning from his mistakes. What he *is* doing is revealing the condition of his heart by his repeated actions no matter what his mouth may be proclaiming.

<sup>22</sup> *And Samuel said,*

*“Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices,  
as in obedience to the voice of the LORD?*

*Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice,  
and to heed than the fat of rams.*

<sup>23</sup> *For rebellion is no less a sin than divination,  
and stubbornness is like iniquity and idolatry.*

*Because you have rejected the word of the LORD,  
he has also rejected you from being king.”*

In the end, we find the things that we are truly seeking. Again, the words of Karl Barth:

*“Our conduct becomes governed precisely by what we desire. By a strict inevitability, we reach the goal we have set before us. The images and likenesses, whose meaning we have failed to perceive, become themselves purpose and content and end.”<sup>71</sup>*

Saul, like the Sadducees, was more concerned with his kingdom and its values than he is with God's Kingdom and a heart that was committed to him. He was focused on an outward and visible religion removed from a changed and changing heart.

Any worship removed from a pliable, contrite and teachable heart is empty. Saul was more concerned with surface, ceremonial obedience than with a genuine obedience grounded in a love for Yahweh. The sacrifices we bring to the Lord in ceremony are to communicate a true and heartfelt love for the gracious and magnificent God we serve.

*“...the acts of the cult (communal worship), ordinarily good and proper in themselves, (with Saul) become vain deeds of hypocrisy.”<sup>72</sup>*

**Make no mistake about it:** Choosing to listen to portions of the teachings of Jesus and Holy Scripture, while ignoring other portions we see as unimportant or in conflict with our own

<sup>71</sup> *The Epistle to the Romans*, Barth, pg. 51.

<sup>72</sup> McCarter, AYB Commentaries, *I Samuel*, pg. 267

desires and kingdoms is NOT OK. ***It is rebellion and stubbornness in keeping with the worship of false deities and the reliance on dark spiritual powers.***

The call to baptism and discipleship is not an offering of a smorgasbord of options to support your cultural Christianity, your favorite theology, or your lordship. What he is offering you is a seat at Marriage Supper of the Lamb. The courses for this meal have already been set.

Do we see our preoccupations with the worlds definitions and callings as a rebellion to the Kingdom of God? Our defensiveness and the lack of honesty about our lives does not reveal a slight moral need. We don't determine what is truth and life. The Lord does.

So, what are the sources of our truth? When the truth of Jesus comes in conflict with these other sources, who do we choose to follow? Who do we choose to honor? If the truth of Christ conflicts with:

- The parent who you love and respect?
- The spouse from whom you desire love, support, and physical comfort?
- Your favorite author, pastor, speaker, or personality?
- That friendship that you just can't lose?
- That wonderful experience you had during a certain time-period in your life?
- The ministry comradery which means so much?
- That professional network upon which you have always relied?
- The family culture where you have always felt so safe?
- Your children that you long to protect?
- The mortgage that you need to pay?
- The only church you have ever known?

Matthew 19:

*<sup>29</sup> And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life.<sup>30</sup> But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.*

Luke 14:

<sup>26</sup> *“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. <sup>27</sup> Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*

Are we serious about dealing with our own penchant to rebellion and stubbornness? If so, there are clear and measurable ways in our lives to observe such patterns. Do we want to see our blind-spots and our poor default settings learned from those in conflict with Jesus Christ and his Kingdom?

A gracious, forgiving God already sees our errors and sin. He sent his Son to deal with them, and provides a process of sanctification and the power of the Holy Spirit to rid ourselves of that which keeps us from knowing and living Christ in deeper ways.

Are we looking for our tendencies to edit God’s truth, defaulting to those things that “make sense to us”? If so, we are going to have to seek after the righteousness which will clearly show us our need for repentance. But, if we don’t want to see our need, we won’t. God won’t force himself or his help on us.

<sup>3</sup> *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

<sup>6</sup> *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

I was once asked to give advice to someone whose parents were exhibiting the classic signs of meddling, manipulation, and interference in her relationships and with her children. These were the kinds of people that would not take “no” for an answer, would badger the family until they got their way, and used guilt and shame like sword and spear.

When I explained to this person what I believed was going on, and how she was going to need to confront the unhealthiness and selfishness of the situation she blurted out: “I just can’t see my parents that way!”

In the end, she never denied the reality of her parent’s problems, nor did they cease to bring her pain and resentment. However, she could not bring herself to lay aside the dream of the “wonderful parents” that she had been given as a child. In the end, if she was going to care for herself and her family, love her parents, and honor God she was going to have to engage the truth regarding her parents and their poor behavior. But this would mean running into the pain, not running away from it.

However, her choice was to ignore the real problems at hand, and continue to “respect and honor” her parents by the same definitions she had always been taught by these same parents (and the rigid, simplistic Christianity in which she was raised). Her cage was one of her own making, and there was going to be no freedom until she desired the help to get out. It was going to take faith on her part to follow the Lord over and above the poor teaching and emotion in which she was so tangled.

Following Jesus is scary, indeed.

### *Play-doh Jesus*

I remember teaching a high-school Christian education class where I was trying to introduce the concept of being made in God's image. I decided to bring in enough modeling clay for each person to make a clay "image" of themselves. Of course, they enjoyed this and while I later had to spend a good time explaining how "God is a spirit and does not have a body like man" it certainly helped launch the discussion.

What was interesting in this exercise is that no one *play-doh* image that the kids made looked like another. Oh, there were some general similarities, but that is where it ended. Similarly, this is often what we see with the Jesus that so many American Christians form with their own hands, beliefs, and actions.

So, who is the Jesus that we follow? Is he the Protestant Jesus, The American Patriot Jesus, the Fundamentalist Jesus, The Evangelical Jesus, The Baptist Jesus, the Pentecostal Jesus, the Muslim Jesus, the Conservative Jesus, the Liberal Jesus, the Mormon Jesus, the worshipped-only-in-the-woods Jesus, the personal-relationship Jesus, the rigid religious Jesus, the church-I-grew-up-in Jesus, the hippie Jesus, the suburban Jesus, or the \_\_\_\_\_ Jesus?

But that is the point, isn't it? No one person or group gets to create the Jesus that they *want*. What all disciples of Jesus Christ should be desirous to find is the authentic Jesus of the historic Scriptures as handed down by the faithful historic church of Jesus Christ. The Lord has guided this process and has always communicated these truths through a faithful community of people throughout the ages, but all individuals and groups are accountable to Jesus in the end. He is the one to whom we should be hungering and thirsting.

Christianity has always been and will always be a mystical faith. It is only Yahweh who calls and must be called upon through the power of the Holy Spirit so that we may find our way to him. Our search above all things is to seek the Triune God of Christianity with all our hearts, souls and minds. We only come to the Father through Jesus, his son, the Messiah.

But, is it Jesus who we *truly* want?

If we choose him we choose life, shalom, joy, and hope, but we never choose comfort and self-reliance. Choosing him means losing our life in him, and trusting him when it makes no sense. He is the way, truth, and the life, but following Jesus is *anything but comfortable*.



## Conclusion

No person or church tradition is ready to make any decisions of consequence if they do not have clear sense of who they are and to whom they are accountable. When we lay aside honest, historic and scriptural assessments, we leave ourselves to the whims of our cultural influences, predispositions, and presuppositions.

Discernment takes courage, work, and time. We must pursue accountability and purposely surround ourselves with those who can help us wisely navigate our futures. Who are those people, those influences, those truly guided by the Kingdom of God who will help us maintain our integrity and distinctions? What are our FIRST THINGS?

As the American Church continues to fragment, one must wonder who will steer the various rudders of our future. What beliefs and movements will be informing our Christianity in 30 years? What distinctives will remain that will aid us in understanding and interpreting Holy Scripture, or will we be left unaware of how or when we changed? What are the things that should guide us, and how do we maintain them? What are those instruments of unity that help us maintain and track our developments and foundations? What helps us sort out the primary from the merely important? In the future, will the American Church be more God-centered or man-centered? What kind of disciples are we developing now for the church to come?

### *Starting Where You Are*

The best place to begin any evaluation of ourselves or our churches is right where we truly are. There is nothing to fear. While, individually, we will have limited insights, this is fine. God is in no hurry and looks to lead us. That said, he has revealed much to us through Holy Scripture and his faithful church, so we already have some strong guides and examples in place.

C.S. Lewis says this in his chapter on the Trinity:

*"...the one really adequate instrument for learning about God is the whole Christian community, waiting for Him together...that is why all these people who turn up every few years with some patent simplified religion of their own as a substitute for the Christian tradition are really wasting their time...if Christianity was something we were making up, of course we could make it easier. But it is NOT... anyone can be simple if he has no facts to bother about"<sup>73</sup>*

Through the power of the Holy Spirit giving us great courage, we can walk away from the simple religions to the magnificence of Yahweh. The Lord is gracious to those who are humble and teachable, and thus in humility we can constantly be aware and unafraid of our needs and deficiencies. He hasn't set it up that we grow right away or ever come to some kind of complete and final knowledge in this life; so, we can trust his grace and his ways. He will bring us to the brink of our faith, but he will always come through in the end.

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<sup>73</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pg. 165

Our approach is not to gain all knowledge and truth in a short amount of time...this only leads to anxiety and more self-idolatry. What he calls us to do is to “seek his face” and “be still and know that he is God”. We are responsible, but we know that his grace can be relied upon. He keeps his promises.

And yet, he wants us to continually grow in all the areas to which he has given us responsibility both in the church and in the created order. The Lord has given gifts to his church to be used so that the Body of Christ might be built up into Jesus, the Son of God. This growing, healthy body will then be poised to reach out to a world in need of redemption with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Our spiritual gifts and vocations will dictate where the lion-share of our individual effort and time is spent. That said, this is never an excuse to ignore the entirety of what God has called his people to engage. The prioritizing of our time involves all areas where Christ has called his church to faithfulness.

Some might not have the outpouring of natural mercy endowed to those who are energized by aiding the sick, walking with others in hospice care, or grieving with those in a counseling ministry. That said, it is important that all believers engage the visitation and care of the sick and in need (at various points or another). We journey with those as they “walk through the valley of the shadow of death” out of love for our covenant family and others who need the comfort of the Lord. This may not come naturally for us, but helping those in grave need is a calling for every Christian. The Lord will patiently walk with us as we learn how to do these things, but we must want grow in these areas.

In a similar way, a person may not have a teaching gift or see themselves as particularly eloquent, but they may still find themselves from time to time speaking of Jesus to someone in need to hear of or from him. How this appropriately works itself out is not always clear, but none of us get to choose to be negligent with things that don’t suit us. As we stay alert and obedient, God surprises us with how he desires to use us; how he desires to bless and reach others through our limited “clay” vessels..

Many who work long, hard hours to provide for their families, have decided that those who don’t subscribe to their particular work ethic are *lazy*. Thus, while many American Christians are lazy unawares in a *host* of areas, they believe that it is others who are deficient. As usual, the words of Jesus challenge us and redirect us.

Matthew 6:

*25 “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? 27 Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?”*

**28** “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. **29** Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. **30** If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? **31** So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ **32** For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. **33** But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. **34** Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

One would think that Jesus was teaching us to be lazy; he is not. He is also not teaching us that being a good provider for your family is the highest of our Kingdom priorities.

What he *is* teaching is that those who put his Kingdom first, will be provided for. He is *not* promising us our material and financial dreams, however. He can be trusted as the ultimate gift-giver, but we must accept his working in our lives. Thus, many hard-working, driven Americans are unaware that their motivations and values end up encouraging them to be:

- Spiritually Lazy - neglecting the clear teaching of scripture regarding the regular worship of God through Word and Sacrament, disciplined prayer, meditation, and a growing familiarity with the truths of scripture.
- Communally Lazy – keeping a purposeful distance from covenantal communal participation and relationships for a host of various reasons *which they have no intention of investigating.*<sup>74</sup>
- Emotionally Lazy – avoiding honest intimacy in a host of different relationships for personal safety and the avoidance of pain. There is an unwillingness to honestly assess their inner struggles and their need for help from a trusted covenant family member, pastor, or counselor.
- Intellectually Lazy – engaging scripted self-talk that says “I am not smart”, “I can’t learn” or “I am not a reader”, thus, avoiding most avenues where one might have to

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<sup>74</sup> Serving the church will always take sacrifice and commitment. That said, I think it is important to add here that many congregants who have been in Evangelical Churches will often distance themselves from too much ministry involvement due to past experiences with parasitic ministry philosophies which treat communal engagement as a kind of participation through *exhaustion*. This is not what is being referenced here, and clergy should be held accountable when they build their kingdoms on the backs of parishioners. This approach skews the family trust and relationships of covenantal living and loving. At some point, however, the individual Christian must “get back up on the horse” and learn to trust again, hopefully, in a more grounded and loving environment. Of course, parishioners also must learn to be more emotionally and spiritually healthy, by not allowing those we love and respect to use us (no matter how well meaning they are). In the end, everyone in the church suffers when we don’t protect ourselves in keeping with all of our kingdom callings and responsibilities in life.

grow, change or be accountable...in any area of the created order (how does one grow in any area without reading manuals, directions, or other?? Is it possible?)

- **Materially Lazy** – ignoring the repeated and clear teaching of scripture regarding the helping of the disadvantaged, marginalized, handicapped, or suffering; Habits of spending not saving; extravagance instead of simplicity; and the *need* for certain possessions instead of a loose grip.

Are we willing to give up our other callings to get what we want when we want it? Is this how the Lord is pleased with our “hard work”? God is not asking us to be infinite like him, but within our finiteness be faithful to the vocations to which he has called his people.

Thus, rigid, wooden definitions of our spiritual gifts and the finding of our “purpose in life” can encourage us to over-simplify our existence while side-stepping all of God’s desires for his kingdom children. This is why it is better to listen to Jesus and the Apostles, than those creating “simple religions” (both inside and outside of the church). The simple religions sell better, and they clean up nicely, but they leave the buyer with tons of remorse and the need for their next quick spiritual fix. Only God and his ways truly satisfy.

### *The Guides We Follow*

I remember a conversation with a friend where I expressed concern regarding what I saw as the simplistic and shallow teachings of a popular pastor who was influencing many churches in their ministries. The certain approach to ministry (the fad has now passed) was being espoused by most of the larger churches in the Chicago area of every Protestant denomination. Without any engagement regarding the beliefs and actions regarding my concerns, he blurted out in frustration: “*Yea, well...I don’t know about that, but this guy is doing some great work over in Africa!*”

This thinking is an epidemic in the American Church; EPIDEMIC. The philosophy and thinking behind his statement is this: If a person has visible and good success in one perceived area(s) of ministry, they do not have dangerous, unhelpful, or destructive blind spots in their thinking and leading in another (or multiple others)<sup>75</sup>. And yet, in his teaching Jesus says this about some impressive ministry people:

Matthew 7:

**21** “*Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ 23 Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’*”

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<sup>75</sup> This is the simplistic, rigid, either-or approach of the moralist. This person may accept the theological concept of being a “saint and sinner in process”, but in emotional and practical terms can only live in the black and white, right or wrong, good team or bad team way of thinking.

These people, like King Saul<sup>76</sup>, did some amazing things through the power of the Holy Spirit! They prophesied, cast out demons, and did legitimate miracles! And yet, they are found to be inauthentic and counterfeit in regards to their commitment to Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

I had a favorite professor in seminary who taught us that to get to the central and best scholarship when studying the New Testament, we needed to find the few, key sources to whom the other commentaries, dictionaries, and journals constantly appealed. If we were to find those few sources (in any passage or with any idea), we would be more likely to have the best information.

Time and time again, I found this advice to be true, and in the process, I ended up saving myself a lot of time avoiding scholars who were not trying to be objective<sup>77</sup>, but had a theological or traditional axe to grind. In addition, I have found this advice to be grounding for me in any pursuit of knowledge and truth in any part of the created order.

In a similar way, discernment takes work for us all. There is a lot of Christian literature out there and a lot of self-proclaimed Christian ‘experts’ calling for the attention of the everyday Christian. What is it that makes a book worth reading, or an author worth listening to? What makes someone more likely to help, versus more likely to promote themselves and their own narrow viewpoints? How do we separate those with a sectarian and a-historical spirit from those in keeping with God’s faithful work throughout time and space?

I believe that we clergy need to bolster our determination to encourage a more thoughtful, culturally unencumbered, and honest church in America. I submit that we:

- Be life-long seekers, learners, and teachers of Jesus, his Gospel, his Kingdom, and the applications of such things to everyday living.
- Model, lead, and teach the importance of knowing what we believe theologically and historically<sup>78</sup> and why it matters to how we all live.
- Have the courage in our Spiritual gifting to be prophetic and honest for the love of our Covenant Communities, even if this causes us professional or familial discomfort.
- Lead our people through word and deed away from the merry-go-round of “the next big thing”, fad, movement, or exciting idea amid populist, emotionalized, and subjective forms of Christianity.

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<sup>76</sup> I Samuel 10:9-11

<sup>77</sup> N.T. Wright has stated repeatedly over his ministry that modernistic “objectivity” is an illusion. While he is certainly right due to our various influences, informing traditions, and blind spots, the pursuit of honesty and truth (while being aware of our biases) among clergy, authors, scholars and parishioners gains us much credibility to those who might have “ears to hear”. Ironically, I find this spirit of honesty among much of Tom Wright’s writing and speaking (even with his treatment of those who oppose him and his views), and I personally gravitate to similar “authorities and sources” who pursue objectivity as a virtue.

<sup>78</sup> For Anglicans, the Patristics should be playing a more central role in our thinking. We are often reading back our Modern Pietistic Evangelicalism into the Church Fathers, and, thus, easily lay aside the theological clarity of our Articles, Liturgy, and the context of the key Ecumenical Councils; this ought not to be.

- encourage believers to pray diligently for a lasting and grounded faith<sup>79</sup> developed in the midst of a lasting and grounded community...reminding them of the faith of those in Hebrews 11 who had “not yet received what was promised” and who are waiting for the church present/future to be “made perfect” in that final day<sup>80</sup>.
- Teach and preach in such a way that leaves the parishioner with more understanding of a text of scripture, more focused on how the church has viewed this text through the centuries, and more determined in their desire to apply the truth amidst the complexities and challenges of life.
- Have the humility and trust in the Lord to allow people to be in process, avoid micromanagement, and to embrace the pain of complexity.
- Have the security and confidence to develop disciples who can think and discern the world around them, and who can keep the clergy accountable to the FIRST THINGS.<sup>81</sup>

I suggest that all of us that name Christ consider who it is we listen to, and why. I believe that our sources of direction should be those that prioritize the things that Christ prioritized. We need to look to/for authorities, churches, authors, and clergy who:

- genuinely care for people whether they benefit from the relationships professionally or not.
- reveal an openness to a potential moving or leading of the Holy Spirit within the context of a prayerful, discerning, scriptural, and historic accountability.
- teach all of the Holy Scriptures, thus, preaching passages of scripture that will make all people uncomfortable, upset, or unsettled at times...out of love for the Church of Christ!
- help congregants constantly understand why they believe as they do, and why it matters.
- embrace context, complexity, conviction, and grace in helping others apply transcendent truth.

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<sup>79</sup> Theological truth in action

<sup>80</sup> Hebrews 11:39-40

<sup>81</sup> I am not encouraging here the tendencies among power-brokers in the American laity, however, who are looking for an excuse to justify their inability to accept decisions in non-essential areas and appropriately submit to God-ordained church authority. Authorities of any kind never get it right (by definition as indicated by being finite and blind through unseen sin). Say your peace, work for change, but do so in appropriate and prophetic ways, not in divisive and power-mongering ways.

- are not consumed by numbers, money, and things that are impressive in the kingdom of this world.
- will lead parishioners away from political entanglement, to faithful engagement in all of the created order with King Jesus on the throne.
- care deeply and identify themselves closely with all of the *poor in spirit*, i.e., the marginalized: the unborn, the underpaid, the sick, the single parent, the rejected, the unemployed, the self-destructive, the immigrant, the minority, the handicapped, the lonely, the mentally ill, the prisoner, and those facing a terminal illness or old age.
- who are *not afraid of failure in the world's eyes*, because they believe that God can be trusted, and that he always provides for the needs of his adopted sons and daughters.

God calls us to be faithful right where we are. It seems likely to this author that *few* reading these words find themselves in toxic or rigid church cultures that would require them to quick action or a church transfer of some kind<sup>82</sup>. All Christians are members of imperfect churches, surrounded by many other different kinds of imperfect churches (including imperfect clergy and congregants). The last thing that the American church needs is more American consumers wandering around searching for that super-church that will meet all of their spoken or unspoken desires (or more churches bent on catering to them).

However, the reality also exists that very few people will grow deeply in their faith without others who can help them do so (whether in communities, relationships, or print).

No matter what our critiques or concerns, the starting place for this kind of growth is still the Church of Jesus Christ. When we have clergy and faithful laity in our churches that take prayer, depth, and truth seriously, we have found a good thing. But, all clergy and people have strengths and deficiencies. We don't desire perfection from our churches but a *direction* toward those things that are central and transcendent.

If we do not surround ourselves with thoughtful, humble, and discerning people, it will be difficult to know what such a life truly looks like in practice. But, that is okay; God is in control and will lead us. There is no easy or quick fix to suggest as we seek to engage such things, but wanting, praying, and seeking after them is the place to start. We continue in our congregations because we know that this is what it means to be faithful in the context of where we find ourselves in our local or life situation<sup>83</sup>.

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<sup>82</sup> Although, this possibility certainly exists

<sup>83</sup> As a follower of Christ and clergyman, there came a time for me to move into a more historic, Covenantal church context. However, I pursued this slowly, prayerfully, and with counsel. While this involved great pain and discomfort for me and my family, I am thankful for the process. That said, it is not the right process for everyone, and I am thankful for God's work in every faithful community that names him as Lord.

In addition, we can be an influence and voice in our church families regarding the importance of Gospel and Kingdom truths depending on our gifts, God's timing, and his plans. He can be trusted.

But being in a context that meets our demand for "orthodoxy", does not mean that we will avoid discernment and pain. To watch the perceived and repeated violation (or neglect) of the clear teachings of Jesus related to the outworking of his Gospel and his Kingdom is no easy task<sup>84</sup>. To love those with whom we agree is normal and takes little effort. To love those who disagree with us (and do not think or do as we believe they should) reflects our need for the conversion power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. When we pray, seek and open our hearts to this kind of patience, humility, and love, we open the door to continued freedom.

We long and work for change, but we do not put our hope in our own desires or in our own control. Jesus says:

Matthew 11:

*28 "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."*

In the end, it is only in the ways of Jesus where we find true life. No matter where we find ourselves, we are constantly faced with a repeated choice when faced with kingdom decisions: we either believe him when he speaks, or we don't. It is Jesus that we should truly want as our Lord, and what matters is his Kingdom, not ours.

Thanks, be to God.

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<sup>84</sup> And there *is* a limit to how much of this will be truly helpful in a community if one longs to live out and grow in a foundational and incarnational way, thus, engaging in Kingdom living.



## Appendix

### *A Growing Distance?*

This writer submits that there are at least three major cultural and societal influences that distance today's American Evangelicals (and Progressives) from the Reformers and the church that existed before them<sup>85</sup>.

The first is the “Pietistic Movements”<sup>86</sup> of the 17th and 18th centuries where wedges were gradually driven between: *A covenantal and a personal salvation; historic church authority and personal holiness; the subjective individual experience and the theological propositions of the Creeds and the Confessions.*<sup>87</sup>

The Second, is the Enlightenment<sup>88</sup> including the later developing tenets of Modernity.

Third, the frontier spirit and the hope (and promise) of the American Dream informed by capitalistic and materialistic bias.

What were some of the key outcomes of these developing radical changes and beliefs within the culture and the church?

#### In the Greater Culture:

- A mistrust of any organization which required the submission and allegiance of its adherents; a growing embrace of individualism (the hope and centrality of the single person and his/her own ability to reason). Again, only individual reason can be trusted (a special emphasis of Immanuel Kant).
- The decentralization and democratizing of every aspect of human life with an inherent distrust of any authority (especially kings!).

<sup>85</sup> Admittedly, these are general and overstated due to space and intent.

<sup>86</sup> Including Lutheran Pietism and English Puritanism, with some later “cross-pollination” between the two in the developing American frontier churches and revivals. Admittedly, the Reformers did contribute to some of these realities positively and negatively, as they too were children of their age.

<sup>87</sup> Van Horn, *“Within My Heart”: The Enlightenment Epistemic Reversal and the Subjective Justification of Religious Belief* (Dissertation). This is an important read for consideration of the direct connections between Pietism, the Enlightenment, and Modernity. A book of a similar title by Dr. Van Horn is slated to be Published by Wipf and Stock Publishing in 2017.

<sup>88</sup> “Although the intellectual movement called “The Enlightenment” is usually associated with the 18th century, its roots in fact go back much further. This is one of those rare historical movements which in fact named itself. Certain thinkers and writers, primarily in London and Paris, believed that they were more enlightened than their compatriots and set out to enlighten them. They believed that human reason could be used to combat ignorance, superstition, and tyranny and to build a better world. Their principal targets were religion (embodied in France in the Roman Catholic Church) and the domination of society by a hereditary aristocracy.” Nicely summed up by Prof. Paul Briens, Washington State University (public domain document from website).

- A great trust in the Scientific Method and the progress of man (any mystery can be figured out or obstacle conquered if humanity just has the time and resources)
- An almost absolute commitment (in society and organizational structures) to that which produces faster and more measurable results.
- An emphasis on the value of a person based on what they produce or accomplish, instead of one's identity being realized in a group, creed, or tradition (i.e., valued relationships, family, or position)

#### In the Church:

- A theological and practical shift from a theology of Biblical covenant (and a communal salvation for those in the church) to an individual salvific experience outside of the church (and, thus, outside of her sacraments).
- A growing mistrust of tradition and the marginalizing of the importance of historical influence in the Protestant Church and her offshoots.
- An emphasis on the immediacy of experience and one's own perceived holiness (and the perceived holiness of their fellowman). In conjunction with this comes the highlighting of subjective and narrowly discerned experiences (and, thus, theologies) by people in a local or regional setting. These theologies are not worked out ecumenically *with* other people, but are largely done *to them*. "Christian" theology is developed without ecumenical agreement or disagreement in regards to any standards regarding validity or coherence with Holy Scripture, previously held beliefs, or a core of historic precedent in how the church decides truth from error. In most of the history of the unified church this would be considered *sectarianism*.

Certainly, there is good to some of the above mentioned developments and the reasons they came about. The Reformation, Renaissance, and the Enlightenment were a response in part to inequities in social, economic, and religious life. There had been a habitual abuse of organizational power, a negation of individual skills and abilities in favor of those in control, and a sense of entitlement by the few. In addition, there continued to be an assumption in the ruling class that those with status, wealth, and blood-lines were superior and deserving.

Within the Post-Reformational Protestant church specifically, there was evidence of a doctrinaire<sup>89</sup> and a scholastic spirit which seemed to encourage right-thinking over authentic and passionate Christian living. Certainly, an authentic, personally engaged Christian life is central to the continuation of the Church of Jesus Christ and the hope of any person<sup>90</sup>. In addition, the

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<sup>89</sup> *doctrine for the sake of doctrine usually applied in a rigid way.*

<sup>90</sup> I also submit that Luther and Calvin assumed some kind of a healthy historic tradition in their development of theology. Yet, because of the context of their time did not emphasize it as such (likely, in fear of giving the Roman Catholic Church and the Papacy any undue credit with their over-emphasis on tradition). There are times

Christian life does include mystery, the unexplainable, and the subjectivity of spiritual experience.

However, the abuse of authority, the misuse of the intellect, the idolatry of the creedal, or the mishandling of the sacramental does not negate these creational and scriptural categories as important for the Church of Jesus Christ. In addition, we do not honor our Lord and his ways with humanity by neglecting those who have gone before us in faithful Christian teaching and living.

It is no new heresy that takes the good in the created order (or the worship of the church) and finds evil in it instead of blaming the misuse of good or important things by those acting wickedly or selfishly.

Anything good in the created order (and any truth) can be abused or worshiped as an idol unto itself. An undiscerning over-reaction to abuse hinders the pursuit of an enduring and living church. The culture around us and the abuses of others should not direct the church. The truth in context with historic application will always take courage, discernment, and patience considering the conditions of any time, space, or challenge.

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that both Luther and Calvin in their emphasis on the authority of Scripture and the importance of the conscience of the individual, set the stage for the coming and growing over-reaction which negated the need for communal and historic accountability. They unwittingly prepared the way for an unhealthy individualism, but they had no idea the course it was to take in the coming developments within the culture and church. Whether it is a Pope or a commoner with the Bible in their hands, both are fallible and in need of the “one holy catholic and apostolic Church” (to quote the Nicene Creed).

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