

A Need to Reform Christianity?



This article contains the text of the two presentations given by Retired Bishop John Spong at our most recent CORPUSConference June, 2013.

You can enjoy the audio of these presentations along with Questions and Answers by going to www.corpus.org

Introduction by Anthony T. Padovano

Those who lead us best give us cognitive insight, emotional depth and spiritual liberation.

John Spong, born in Charlotte, North Carolina, is such a leader. He is one whose work is acclaimed across the nation and internationally.

John Spong completed graduate work at Episcopal Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia, and later, received an honorary doctorate from the Seminary and from St. Paul's.

He was ordained in 1955 and, as a priest, served in a number of churches for twenty-one years. His vast pastoral service was enriched after he became a bishop in 1976 and served for twenty-one years as the Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Newark.

In the last thirteen years since his retirement, John Spong has challenged God's people prophetically in lectures, articles and books. He is a brilliant speaker, an astute scholar and an apostle of inclusivity. Although his insights are startling, they are more nuanced than many realize. He is at once creative and consoling, challenging and compassionate.

He has written of himself that he chooses not to discard old insights but to journey deeply through them to find new visions from them. He seeks a dialogue between yesterday's words and today's knowledge.

I read John Spong regularly, hear him attentively, and am grateful for him at every turn. He has encouraged me with his courage, inspired and touched me by his presence and heart, delighted me with his humor.

We have been friends for some years who have walked as companions on a common journey. I present to you, my friend John Spong, with a measure of pride and prejudice.

I am delighted to be here at the CORPUS Conference. Christine and I were particularly delighted to meet Sister Simone Campbell last night. Let me say to you that so long as your church continues to produce people like Sister Simone, your church demonstrates that it still has power, vitality, an ultimate worth and a bright future. She is not a troublemaker in the body of Christ, as some of her hierarchical critics like to say. She is the yeast within the loaf of the Church's life that enables it to rise. She is the salt in the Church's soup that enables it to have flavor. She is the light within the Church's darkness that points the way forward. No church should ever be afraid of its prophets. They proclaim a future that is bright. So Sister Simone joins a list of my Catholic heroes that include people like Anthony Padovano, Sister John Chittister, Margaret Farley, James Carroll, Hans Kung, Rosemary Ruether, Edward Schillebeeckx, Leonardo Boff and Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, just to name a few. Each of these people has blessed my life in very powerful ways and each of them, I would note, is in trouble with the Vatican!

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I want to approach my assigned topic today—why there is a need to reform Christianity—from a different perspective. A close friend of mine, a fellow Anglican bishop, always began his sermons with this prayer: “Lord, when we would make much of that which cannot matter much to Thee, forgive us.” So I would like to concentrate not on the things that currently seem to be exhausting institutional Christianity in all of its forms and consuming public attention.

I will never forget Ari Goldman, an Orthodox Jew, and a religion reporter for the New York Times. He said on one occasion: “If you can just combine sex with religion, you can get on the front page of the New York Times” — and not always positively, I might add.

I do not find the Christian Church’s presumed knowledge on the issues of human sexuality to be particularly enlightened. This is the institution that said mandated celibacy is the way to holiness. We now know, however, that mandated celibacy may be the way toward anything but holiness. This is the institution that said to us that there is only one ideal woman and she is the Virgin Mother. That renders every other woman less than ideal. Maybe you have not noticed it is hard to be a virgin mother. So the next thing the church decided to do was to say to women: “Well, if you cannot be ideal, at least you can choose to be either a virgin or a mother — “So hi thee to the nunnery or have as many children as you can.” This is where the ban on birth control comes from. It is a definition of women on the basis of a biological principle. We do not define men that way. We only define women that way. So I have never found the Church in any of its voices particularly profound in its knowledge about issues of human sexuality.

The changes in our culture’s attitude toward women and toward homosexual persons are a matter of a rising consciousness that nobody is going to turn around. Consciousness rises whether we like it or not, and it never goes backwards. People are never re-enslaved once they have been freed. The vote will never be taken away from women, once it has been extended to them. The changes about sexuality are going to happen with or with-

out the Church’s blessing, and with or without the Church’s involvement. Please note the undoubted fact that throughout history, institutional Christianity, in all of its forms, has always had the tendency of putting its own survival needs well ahead of anything else, including a compelling need to bear public witness against any force or any prejudice that dehumanizes or diminishes a holy child of God. We have done that on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, left-handedness, mental illness and even religion.

I do not want to deal, however, with these public debates. I want us to go beneath these rather superficial issues that seem to muddy the waters of our Christian witness in public life and to spend our time this morning looking at what I call the crisis in faith that eats at the private soul of Christianity.

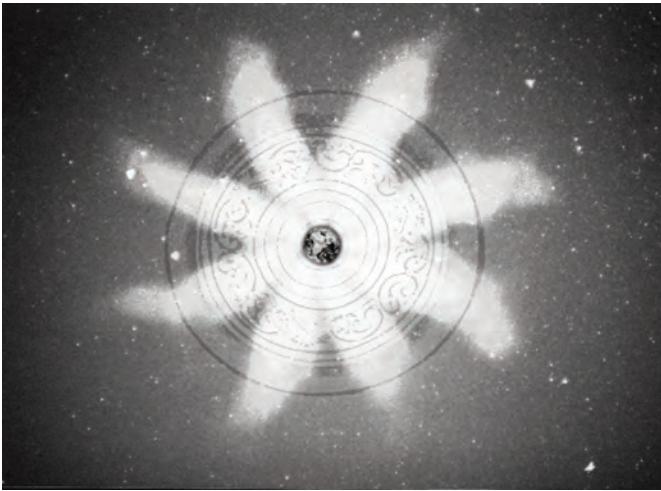
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I want to look with you at those things which will determine the future of this Church. I want to look at what is bothering Christianity itself—not its peripheral issues, but the very thing upon which this faith tradition hangs. So let me first outline what I think is the crisis.

Our faith tradition reads, as its sacred story, a book we call the New Testament. The New Testament was written roughly between the years 51, when First Thessalonians, which appears to be the first part of the New Testament to achieve written form, was actually written, and the year 135 of this Common Era, which appears to be the time when the epistle we call Second Peter was written.

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So the New Testament that we read came into existence between 51 and 135. It was written over the last half of the first century and into the first third of the second century. Now, what does that mean? It means that the New Testament is inevitably encased inside a worldview of a time that is quite different from our own, a time that made assumptions that you and I cannot make, a time that believed things that you and I cannot believe.



One of the assumptions of the New Testament is that the earth is the center of a three-tiered universe. We read in Matthew's Gospel, when he records the first narrative of the birth of Jesus, that there was a star that appeared in the sky to announce the birth of Jesus. What is the assumption behind that? The assumption is that it is quite easy for God, who lives above the sky, to hang out a new light any time God wants to make an announcement. That is a rather strange idea to us today. Then keep reading that story and we discover that either God or one of God's angels, pulls that star, perhaps on a string, along the floor of heaven (or the roof of the earth) slowly enough so that wise men can actually follow it. A three-tiered universe is in the background. Even that star does not seem to know where it is going because it has to stop at Herods's Palace to get some new directions out of the book of Micah. That star then reappears to lead the three wise men down a six-mile dirt track between Jerusalem and Bethlehem until it stops and shines over the house in which Mary, Joseph and the Christ Child are presumably living. Now, can you imagine a modern-day astrophysicist

listening to that story being read in worship and hearing someone say at the end of that story: "This is the word of the Lord" with the assumption being that he or she has to listen to it as if it were literal truth.

The concept of a three-tiered worldview also lies behind the synoptic gospels' narratives of the story of Jesus's baptism. In Mark, Matthew and Luke, the heavens open. It is as if the universe is a giant astrodome with a sliding roof, which God, who lives above the sky, can open, giving God the ability to pour the Holy Spirit down on the newly baptized Jesus. Jesus becomes at that moment, according to Mark, the first gospel to be written, a God-infused human life. Now, try translating that narrative to those who today spend their time collecting data about the size and shape of the universe from the Hubble telescope!

In the book of Acts we read that at the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, he returned to God. How did he do that? He did that by rising up off the earth and going into the sky, because everybody knows God lives just above the sky! It is a strange idea. Space-age people know that if a person rises up from earth far enough, that person does not get to heaven, but goes into orbit or sinks into the infinity of space. Before he died in 1996, Carl Sagan, probably America's best-known astrophysicist, was a friend of mine. About two years before his death we were attending a conference in Washington, D.C., where he informed me with great glee that if Jesus literally ascended into the sky, and even if he could travel at the speed of light, 186,000 miles per second, he has not yet escaped our galaxy! Carl was so excited I thought he was going to have a religious experience! He went on to say that our galaxy—we call it the Milky Way—has in it more than 200 billion stars, most of which are bigger than our sun—some of them are bigger than our earth's orbit around the sun—and that our galaxy is so large, that it would take light, traveling at the approximate speed of 186,000 miles per second, 100,000 years to go from one end of our galaxy to the other. Beyond our galaxy, we now know there are billions and billions and billions of other galaxies, maybe as many as a trillion galaxies in the visible universe.

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Do you now see the problem that the language of our scriptures presents to 21st century people? If the Christian faith is going to live in the 21st century, we must separate the truth of scripture from the world view of the 1st century in which that narrative is encased. The question then becomes: Can we do that?

The Christian Church's record for making and accepting change is not encouraging. Look at what happened when Galileo made his inconvenient discoveries that challenged this worldview. The church did not engage his thought, but put him on trial for heresy and forced him to recant—with his fingers crossed, I suspect. He was denied the right ever to publish his thoughts again, and was confined to house arrest for the balance of his days. He probably could enter this plea bargain because he had a daughter who was a nun and he had friends in high places in the Vatican. It was not until 1991, well after the launch of spacecraft, that the Vatican finally issued a paper in which they said, "We now think Galileo may have been right."

That gives us some idea of the enormous gap between Christian proclamation and contemporary knowledge. If the Christian Church sees itself as needing to control truth in order to keep its traditions and understandings alive, in order to survive in the same old pattern, then we must ask is that even a possibility in our world. Is there actually a future for an unexamined faith of our fathers and mothers?

Interpreting the scriptures is only one of our problems. The Christian creeds, which most Christians recite in worship to this day, are primarily the products of the 4th century of this Common Era, which means that those creeds are encased in the world view of 4th century people and 4th century thinking. Yet most of the Church's doctrines and its dogmas, including its identifiable core doctrines, like Incarnation and Holy Trinity, are based on those creeds and are reflected in those creeds.

Those creeds reveal a way of thinking that none of us can employ today. They assume a radical dualism that marked the Greek-thinking world at the time the creeds were being formed.

What does dualism do? Dualism says that God and human life are two different categories of being. God was a being who inhabited heaven. God was male. God is supernatural in power. God periodically invades the realm of the human, usually in miraculous ways, to accomplish some divine purpose. God comes into this world to answer our prayers. God comes into this world to heal a sick person. God comes into this world to do a miracle. God comes into this world to allow Jesus or the Virgin to appear in some unlikely place. It was against these unstated assumptions that we began to define both the work of Jesus and our understanding of God.

If the Christian faith is going to live in the 21st century, we must separate the truth of scripture from the world view of the 1st century in which that narrative is encased.

So God becomes a divine invader and Jesus is the manifestation of this divine invasion. If one reads the New Testament closely enough, we become aware that the New Testament is first of all quite sure that God was in Christ in some way. The underlying premise of the New Testament is that in some form, through some manner, by some means, in the human Jesus God had been met, encountered and engaged.

There were lots of questions about how the God who lived above the sky was incarnated in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who lives upon Earth. Yet on the basis of that claim, the Church began to claim for Jesus that he was fully human and fully divine. Perhaps that made sense in that dualistic world, but have you ever thought about how that union of those two distinct realms was achieved in the person of Jesus?

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How did that union of the human and the divine get accomplished in Jesus? If you read the New Testament carefully, it is apparent that there is a great debate occurring and the various writers do not agree. I will illustrate this by looking at the New Testament in the order in which its books were written, which means we go to Paul first.

Paul died before the first gospel was written. Paul did not know that there was a gospel. Paul cannot be read through the eyes of the gospels, Paul must be read through the eyes of Paul, which is something the Church has never quite learned to do. Paul says in Romans:1:1-4 that the way Jesus became divine is that God lifted Jesus into the being of God at the time of the resurrection. That would later be called adoptionism and would be defined as a heresy, making Paul a heretic. That's an interesting idea!



Next comes Mark, written in the early years of the eighth decade, around 72. Mark says that the way God got into Jesus was that a completely human Jesus came to be baptized by John the Baptist in the River Jordan, and at that baptism God poured the Holy Spirit from heaven above upon Jesus. Jesus then became God infused. It was still adoptionist, so Mark is also a heretic by later standards.

Matthew, the second gospel, was written in the middle years of the ninth decade — 82 to 85, I would guess, although dates are always debatable. Luke wrote about a decade after Matthew, maybe as early as 88 or 89, maybe as late as 92 or 93. Some people would even date Luke into the second century. I think they are wrong, but the debate is still raging.

Matthew and Luke tell their story by saying that God entered into Jesus at the moment of conception. Please note this is when the Virgin birth entered the Christian tradition. I find it fascinating that people do not realize that the Virgin birth was not primary in the Christian story; it is a ninth decade addition to the developing tradition. The Virgin birth makes some assumptions that 21st century people cannot make. When the story of the Virgin birth was created in the 9th decade, the Christian community was not aware of some basic facts about biology. They did not know that the woman had an egg cell. The egg cell was not discovered until the first quarter of the 18th century. The analogy of birth in the New Testament came from the analogy of a farmer planting his seed in the soil of Mother Earth. The woman was understood as the soil of Mother Earth. She did not contribute to the farmer's seed; she only nurtured it to maturity. If one, therefore, wants to tell about a divine origin, one has only to remove the human father, since the woman is not a genetic contributor. Once it was known that there is an egg cell, then it becomes clear that every woman is a co-creator, the equal co-creator genetically, of every life that has ever been lived and that the newborn life is a genetic blend between the mother and the father.

Now, would that give us a Jesus fully human and fully divine? No. That would give us a Jesus who is half human and half divine. If the Virgin birth is literalized, Jesus becomes something like a mermaid. This story was not written to be biology, at least not in the way you and I understand biology. The New Testament and the Creeds both reflect points of view and attitudes that no educated, thinking person in the 21st century can affirm.

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To continue my trip through the New Testament, the last gospel, John, says that Jesus did not enter into divinity at his resurrection, which Paul asserted, or at his baptism, which Mark asserted, or even at his conception, as Matthew and Luke asserted, Jesus was part of who God is from the dawn of creation. If the divine and the human are two separate realms, if God is a being over against our being, but with supernatural power added, then does not this theology finally suggest that Jesus is to God something like what Clark Kent is to Superman, that Jesus is really God in disguise, not fully human? We then fall into the heresy of docetism.

Can you now understand why so many modern people no longer believe that Christianity speaks to them with any kind of relevant power? From the Church's perspective then, why do we not engage this debate? Is it not possible that deep down, we know we cannot win this debate and so we refuse to enter it? Fourth century creeds cannot sustain Christianity in the 21st century. The Church, however, seems to have no other alternative and so we close our minds to knowledge and wonder why there's a mass exodus of educated people from church life. Do you see any church leaders anywhere who are suggesting that perhaps the creed should be rethought or that maybe we ought to go back to the Council of Nicea with the knowledge that we now possess in the 21st century and re-argue the great debates of that crucial council?

So the New Testament is encased in a first-century worldview and the Christian Creeds are encased in a fourth-century worldview, and we wonder why so few people are listening. But there is one other part of our life that we also need to look at — our liturgies. The liturgies of almost all Christian churches are rooted most significantly in the thought forms of 13th century Europe.

What these liturgies do is to portray God as the author of our salvation. God is the redeemer who comes to us in our helplessness to save us from our sins, and in order to show the greatness of God's act of redemption, the Church seems to be committed to spending most of its energy showing its people the depths of

their own human depravity. We really are into human sin. There is in the liturgical forms of all of our churches, an enormous concentration on human ineptitude, human sinfulness, human depravity. Have you ever analyzed the words of the liturgy? Have you ever wondered why it is that we say over and over and over again, ad nauseam, "Lord have mercy!" What does that say about who we are? What does that say about what we believe God is? "Lord have mercy!" We don't say it just one time, we have a threefold kyrie, we have a ninefold kyrie. We even add these words to our prayers: "Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer." Have you ever thought about what a strange thing that is to say to God? Crying out for mercy might be the appropriate response of a trembling child before an abusive parent. It might be an appropriate response for a convicted felon standing before a hanging judge. Is it, however, the proper response for a child of God standing before the heavenly Father?

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What kind of strange theology is this, that concentrates on human depravity? Look at the posture that we recommend for worship. We are to kneel devoutly upon our knees. Is that a proper stance in worship? That is a stance that a slave might use before a master. That is a stance that a serf might use before the lord of the manor. That is a stance that a beggar might use before the source of his or her next meal. But is that the proper posture of one who bears the image of God when he or she is before his or her creator? Self-deprecating phrases abound in our liturgies. It is as if we are being taught to hate our humanity. We say things like: "There's no health or wholeness in us" or "We are

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not worthy to gather up the crumbs under your table” or “We are miserable offenders.” We cannot even sing the hymn, Amazing Grace, without reminding ourselves that the reason God’s grace is so amazing is that it saves a “wretch” like you or me. Are we then wretched? Is that what we are? Is that what the gospel teaches us to think about our humanity? Wretched?

Those of you who remember the crusades of Billy Graham know that before Billy came out to preach, he would send George Beverly Shea out to warm up the crowd. George Beverly Shea had a baritone voice that sounded so full and holy that he should have played God in the movies! He would sing what was destined to become a very popular hymn in America called “How Great Thou Art.” People still sing it today. If you listen to the words of that hymn, before the end, we are told that the reason God is so great is that God stooped to save a worm like you or me. Is that a proper definition of our humanity?

What happens to us when we are told over and over and over again how wretched, miserable, sinful, lost and fallen we are?

What happens to us when we are told over and over and over again how wretched, miserable, sinful, lost and fallen we are? What happens is that guilt becomes the coin of the realm in which the Christian Church operates — guilt, the gift that keeps on giving. We even extend that guilt into the afterlife, because when the theology of life after death is examined, heaven is the place where we get the reward we have earned for our goodness and hell is the place where we get the reward we have earned for the evil of our lives. If any of us makes it into Heaven, it is because of the infinite grace of God, because no one deserves that honor.

Now, ask yourself a question: Do you know anyone who has ever really been helped by being told how evil and wretched they are? Those of you who are parents, do you want to try that with your children? Imagine bringing your child home from the maternity ward and placing that child upon your lap and saying, “Kid, I want you to know that you are scum. You were born evil. There is no health in you. You have no hope unless God reaches down and redeems you.” Do you think you would raise a healthy and whole adult? Does the Christian Church really think that by our dumping negativity on its people Sunday after Sunday after Sunday, constantly telling them how wretched, miserable, sinful, fallen, and evil they are, that this somehow creates human wholeness? That is a strange idea. Because when we have defined human life as evil, hopeless and lost and corrupted, we have then decided that the only way we can tell the Christ story is to tell it as God’s answer to this human problem. Jesus becomes God’s answer to the problem of human sin and evil and fallenness. That is why in Protestant circles, we say strange things like “Jesus died for my sins.” Have you ever heard that? Have you ever tried to figure out what in the world that means? The Catholics are also not let off this hook. When they speak of the Eucharist, they refer to it as the sacrifice of the mass. The Eucharist becomes the liturgical reenactment of the moment when Jesus died for your sins. If you really believe that Jesus died for your sins, does not that make you a Christ killer? Are you not responsible for the death of Jesus? Can you imagine any other message that could produce more guilt? In the Middle Ages, we used to come out of our churches on Good Friday and look for Jews that we could persecute, beat or even kill because they were Christ killers, and yet our theology, expressed through our liturgies, also defines each of us in this rather negative way.

That is why we Christians taught that if you were unbaptized and died, you would never make it into the beatific vision. That was not just a Catholic idea. Read the story of Elmer Gantry, who was portrayed as a Mid-Western evangelical. It is a strange idea based upon a strange definition of human life. Imagine a God who would consign to the outer regions of the afterlife innocent babies who had died before their parents got them bap-

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tized. Who would want to worship such a deity? That is a religion of fear, not a religion of life. Yet when we call Jesus “savior,” we are also defining ourselves as those who need to be saved. When we call Jesus “redeemer,” we are defining ourselves as those who need to be redeemed. When we call Jesus the “rescuer,” we are implying that we are lost and in need of being rescued.



Are you aware of how often the New Testament calls Jesus ‘savior’? Not once in Paul, not once in Mark, not once in Matthew. The word ‘savior’ makes its first appearance in the New Testament in Luke in the Magnificat, where Mary sings “My soul rejoices in God my savior.” So the first reference to “savior” is not a reference to Jesus, but to God! It is only when the angels sing to the shepherd: “Unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior” that the title “savior” is applied to Jesus in the Christian tradition. Behind that word is the Hebrew concept of “messiah,” a very Jewish word. It did not mean “savior” in the sense of 13th century theology. The only other time the word “savior” appears in the gospels is in John in the story of the Samaritan woman by the well. She goes back to her village and says, “We have found the savior.” Once again, however, that word here means “messiah” and in the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament the word “savior” has been replaced by the word “messiah” in John 4. The idea of Jesus as savior is not the primary idea in the New Testament.

It is a later development as our creedal theology began to explain human life in terms of negativity, depravity and sinfulness. This is when the concept of original sin was developed. The prescription for original sin, the prescription for human evil, is to have an outside rescuer, while our humanity is written off as almost unsaveable without supernatural intervention.

These are just some of the problems that you and I face as disciples of this Jesus in the 21st century. Was the death of Jesus necessary for our salvation? What kind of God is represented by this theology? If we were that sinful, why could God not simply forgive us?

Why does God have to take out the divine wrath upon the divine son? What kind of God is it that we think needs a human sacrifice, or a blood offering? Look also at the fetish that we attach to the blood of Jesus. We have given to the blood of Jesus cleansing power. Protestants want to be bathed in it. That’s why we have all those bloody hymns in evangelical hymn books about being saved by the blood or washed in the blood. We are really into blood! Catholics, on the other hand, like to drink it. It probably indicates that Protestants are more upset about sins of the flesh and Catholics are more upset about sins of the spirit—the inner sins. Maybe that is a compliment. I do not know.

What kind of God is it, however, who cannot forgive and requires the suffering and the death of the divine son? What kind of theology is this? Does it not make God into an ogre? Does it not make God the ultimate child abuser? We portray God as an abusive deity and then wonder why abuse marks the life of the Christian Church.

Our scriptures reflect a 1st century worldview, our creeds reflect a 4th century world-view, and our liturgies reflect a 13th century worldview. Try to imagine an astrophysicist relating to the Star of Bethlehem. Try to imagine someone trained in psychology trying to relate to the idea of original sin and the destructive power of guilt. Try to imagine a person trained in ethics trying to relate to an institution that has a history of hating Jews, crusading against Muslims, seeking to change left-handed people

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into being normal, supporting slavery, opposing equality for women, persecuting homosexual people and defining them as deviant people against the insights of everything we know about modern medicine and modern science, and pretending that these acts of human violence are in fact not evil. Yet that is what we continue to perpetuate in the sacred traditions of the Church. Try to imagine the appeal of that to 21st century people. If you can focus on these things, then you will begin to understand the real crisis that is facing the Christian Church today. It is not about individual issues that force us to change. It is about being caught in the past, becoming irrelevant in the present and facing death in the future. That is where the Christian Church institutionally is today. That's the diagnosis.



If the patient is not diagnosed accurately, no therapy will ever work. But if we can accept this diagnosis, then what is the prescription? What might lead us back to health? Is health even a possibility? Can we find a way, we Christian people, we followers of Jesus, to engage the future without losing the essence of our faith? Can we find a way to engage the future without getting lost in a sea of relativity? Those are the issues that I think we have to face, and those will be the questions that I will try to address in my second presentation. I hope I am now leaving you quite disturbed. Thank you very much for your attention.

Lecture 2

I want to begin this second presentation building on the first, but asking you to embrace a crucial distinction that in the field of religion we frequently do not quite understand. There is a difference between an experience that is real, an experience that is transformative, maybe even an experience that is eternal, and the explanation of that experience, which like all explanations, is always time-bound and time-warped. There is no such thing as an explanation that is not bound in time, so if you literalize an explanation, the experience itself is inevitably compromised, and ultimately, if you do not escape the literalization of your explanation, the experience will die. There is no such thing as an eternal explanation, because all explanations are caught inside the frame of reference, the time in history, and the level of knowledge of the person doing the explaining, and that is always changing.

Let me illustrate. Since the beginning of history, human beings have had a daily experience of watching the sun rise in the east, travel across the sky, and set in the west. It is a very common experience. Look, however, at how that experience was explained in ancient Egypt when they were worshipers of the sun. They thought the sun's rising, its traveling across the sky and its setting in the west was the activity of the sun God Ra. That is why the pharaohs in Egypt were so often named Rameses. Ra was from the name of their sun god, and the "Meses" is the same stem from which we get the word "Moses." It is an Egyptian name. These Egyptians explained the journey of the sun as the sun god, Ra, driving his divine chariot across the sky, so that this God could observe all human behavior. The Egyptians knew if they really wanted to misbehave, they should pick a cloudy day when God could not see quite so well! The sun was believed to be the gigantic and thus visible wheel of the divine chariot. It made perfect sense in the worldview of ancient Egypt. Twenty-first century people, however, would view the same phenomenon and would explain it as the earth turning on its axis every 24 hours as it makes its 365 and a quarter day elliptical orbit around the sun. Please note that the experience is the same, but the explanations vary widely.

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Another example: A first century epileptic seizure and a twenty-first century epileptic seizure are identical — clinically identical. There is no difference. Epilepsy has not changed in twenty-one hundred years. When a first century person, however, explained the phenomenon of an epileptic seizure, the explanation involved demon possession, which in that world made perfect sense. Here was a person, perfectly normal, when all of a sudden he or she was seized by some uncontrollable, invisible force that shook him or her violently and then threw him or her to the ground. That was their explanation. A twenty-first century person, seeing the absolutely identical phenomenon, however, would talk about an excessive electrical charge that leapt the tracks of the brain's ability to process that charge, which resulted in the violent shaking of the victim, the loss of consciousness and the fall to the ground. The experience was identical. The explanations reflect the time and place in history, the level of knowledge and the view of reality of the explainer.

Now look at Christianity. Jesus is a first century life through whom people thought that they had experienced the presence of God. They thought that they saw the eternal in the physical — his was a life through which transcendence was met, and a new perspective on humanity was gained.

When they began to write the New Testament, however, and especially the gospels, they turned that experience into an explanation. Inevitably, like all explanations, it was based on the first century's understanding of life, the first century's level of knowledge, the first century's view of reality.

You and I need to embrace that people who lived in the first century did not know that there was such a thing as a germ or a virus; they had no insight into cardiovascular accidents, and no concept of tumors or leukemia. When a person got sick in the first century, the only way people knew how to interpret that phenomenon was to see it as divine punishment. Sick persons must have done something that had incurred the wrath of God and so God had struck them with an illness. That is why they treated illnesses with sacrifices and with prayers. They wanted to stop the wrath of God from afflicting these persons.

First century people also did not understand how the world operated, so whenever something did not fit into the categories of what they called normal behavior or normal events, they assumed it was a miracle. People sometimes say that the age of miracles is over. Maybe there never was an age of miracles, but maybe people interpreted as miraculous that which we might interpret in a radically different way because of a different level of knowledge.

*We need to embrace the fact that
Christian theology, from our
earliest creeds to the later
development of doctrine and dogma
is always nothing but
an explanation based on how
people understood life's problems
and upon the definitions abroad at
their particular time in history of
what it means to be human.*

Behind the gospels there was an experience of God that was real, but the explanation of that experience, which is what created the New Testament, does not share in ultimate reality, because no explanation can or does. We need to embrace the fact that Christian theology, from our earliest creeds to the later development of doctrine and dogma is always nothing but an explanation based on how people understood life's problems and upon the definitions abroad at their particular time in history of what it means to be human. If the subjective presuppositions that lie behind the creeds and the doctrines and the dogmas of the Church change, as they inevitably do and inevitably will, then the creeds, the doctrines and the dogmas are doomed. One cannot defend the indefensible forever.

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Let me now turn to one of the primary presuppositions on which Christian theology is built. Underlying the way we look at God and Jesus is a definition of human life as something that is somehow fatally flawed. We looked at human life in that era and we saw a deep imperfection. We saw in every human life a propensity towards destructiveness, the quality of self-centeredness. Unable to blame this imperfection in human life on God, for God could only create that which was good, we had to define this sinful humanity in some other way. In the fourth century, we developed the Christian understanding of humanity as fallen, distorted and evil. We were created perfect, we said, because God could not create anything that is not perfect, but we must have done something ourselves that has produced imperfection and that has given rise to the fatal flaw that is universal in human life.



We call that, in typically patriarchal language, the “fall of man.” That became our explanation for the source of human evil. The “fall of man” assumes that there was an original perfection from which we have fallen, and this fall thus explained why there was no longer human perfection. We called it “original sin.” “Original” meant not just that it had always been so, but that it was universal and that no one thus escapes it. It was a fatal flaw and everyone was equally affected. Another part of that explanation was that people recognized that they could do nothing about it. They felt themselves helpless to overcome this flaw in humanity and so had to wait for God to act so that this fatal flaw could be overcome.

It was Augustine who put together the first two chapters of Genesis to create the ongoing parable of our origins. Augustine was a brilliant scholar, but he was not a Biblical scholar, and he had no idea that the first chapter of Genesis was written some 500 years after the second chapter of Genesis. He believed the first two chapters of Genesis were simply the dictated words of God.

Chapter 1 gives us the story of our original perfection. God created everything and God looked out upon all that God had made, including male and female, including bodies, and God pronounced it all to be good. It was so complete and so perfect that God could actually rest from the divine labors and take a day off, and that is how the Sabbath was created. Those ancient people, however, also knew there was something wrong with human life. They saw the self-centered quality of their lives, so they developed the myth of the fall, which is Chapter 2 of the Book of Genesis. It is a marvelous story. Adam and Eve are perfect people in a perfect garden, with a perfect relationship with God. It was so perfect that God even came down in the cool of the evening to take a walk with God’s friends, Adam and Eve. God knew better than to come out in the heat of the day. They did not have any air conditioning in those days — only mad dogs and Englishmen come out in the middle of the day!

One day, however, after Adam and Eve had disobeyed God and eaten the forbidden fruit, which, by the way, was not an apple tree until Jerome translated the Vulgate. After they had eaten this fruit, God was no longer their friend. God was their judge and no one likes to walk around with his or her judge, so they went and hid in the bushes. Now here comes God with a cane and straw hat walking in the cool of the evening and God cannot find Adam and Eve. So God says, “Adam, Adam, where are you?” Since this was the first time in human history that the game hide-and-seek had ever been played, Adam and Eve did not quite understand the rules, so Adam says: “Here we are, Lord, hiding in the bushes!” In this story God says: “What in the world are you doing in the bushes?” Then it dawned on the divine mind that they must have broken the law. “Have you eaten of that fruit?” Adam so typically says: “Well, it was not I.

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It was that woman. You remember, God, that woman you made." Then woman says: "It was not I, Lord, it was that serpent." At that moment buck-passing entered the human enterprise. God then pronounced judgment upon this flawed humanity.

It is quite interesting that the Pope did not get to be infallible until the 19th century. I wonder what happened in all those previous centuries?

The story also becomes the way that Jews explained a lot of things that they did not understand. Why does a snake crawl upon its belly? Because of the fall! Before the serpent had tempted Eve, he had obviously walked on two feet and had spoken perfect Hebrew! Now he had to eat the dust of the earth. Why do women have pain in childbirth? It is because of the fall. That was part of their punishment. Why do men have to scratch out a living from the earth that sometimes produces more thorns and thistles than it does food? It is because of the fall. Why do human beings die? It was because of the fall. Since all human beings die, all human beings must be sinful, all must be fallen. This is the divine punishment. Adam and Eve were banished from God's presence in the Garden of Eden, and from that moment to this, no being has been able to live in Eden. We have all had to live "east of Eden," to coin a phrase from John Steinbeck.

It was on the basis of that story, that Christian theology began to define its doctrine of creation, its doctrine of original sin and its doctrine of the fall. It matched their human experience, but they did not understand that the first chapter of Genesis was written

in the sixth century before the birth of Jesus, but the Adam and Eve story was written in the tenth century. Once this anthropological understanding was set, then the Jesus story had to be told in terms of that understanding of the origins of human evil. Jesus was thus portrayed as the savior of the sinful, the redeemer of the worthless, the rescuer of the lost, and they put together their assumptions about the evil and the flaw in human life with their interpretation of Jesus as God's rescue operation. The explanation was not yet complete.

It seemed to serve us well until human knowledge developed a different understanding of human origins and our knowledge of the origins of human life began to expand beyond those that were available in the fourth century. Then all of our conclusions that were based on these assumptions came crashing to the ground. That should not bother us. There's no such thing as an eternal creed or an eternal doctrine or an eternal dogma, or even an eternal theology.

Theology is always an attempt to explain an experience. It is not identical with the experience. There is no such thing as an explanation that lasts forever, for life is always in transition; knowledge is always growing. That is why no explanation can ever be literalized, whether it is scripture or a creed, because it is the God experience and not the God explanation that is eternal. The explanation will always be in flux. So theology is a process, never a fixed enterprise. It is always in flux. There can, thus, be no such thing as an infallible, ultimate truth that anybody possesses. There may be an infallible, ultimate truth, but no one can possess it.

No human explanation can ever capture truth in a written or propositional form. With that realization all the claims that are made by every religious system are relativized. There is no such thing as the God Allah, who dictated the Koran to the prophet Mohammed. There is no such thing as the God Yahweh, who dictated the Torah to Moses. There is no scripture that can ever be inerrant. There is no hierarchy that can ever be infallible, not even when speaking ex cathedra on matters of faith and morals.

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It is quite interesting that the Pope did not get to be infallible until the 19th century. I wonder what happened in all those previous centuries? Someone said the Pope and the Virgin got together in the 19th century and he pronounced her immaculately conceived and she pronounced him infallible and we have all lived happily ever after!

Does this mean that Christianity is destined to drown in a sea of relativity because we cannot grasp ultimate reality, ultimate truth? Or does it mean that the theological task is something quite different from what we have assumed?

It is always to point beyond the hierarchy, beyond the scriptures, beyond the creeds to the truth that no human words can ever capture. Is our faith designed to make us secure, or is our faith designed to give us the ability to embrace the radical insecurity of life and still to take steps into the future with integrity? Those are the questions I want to address. So let me look with you this afternoon at the nature of human life as we now understand it today, and then try to look at the Christ story against that definition.

Anthropologists are now quite convinced that there is no such thing as an original perfection from which human life has fallen. We are a part of an evolving process, not one of a perfect creation and a fallen descent. Think about what that means for just a moment. If there was no fall from an original perfection, then there's no such thing as original sin. Original sin becomes nonsense. And if there is no original sin that corrupts all of us, then there is no need for a savior to come to rescue us from that from which we cannot rescue ourselves. There is then no need to baptize infants for the forgiveness of sin, and the primary explanations of Christianity begin to collapse.



When we see this happening, as it is happening all over the world today, many of us feel that Christianity itself must be dying. What are really dying, however, are the explanations of antiquity. What we have been doing is to identify the Christ experience, which I believe is still true and still real and still eternal, with the Christ explanations of the 4th century, which are always transitory, always changing, and always flawed.

Ultimate truth can never be captured in human words; it can only be pointed to. Perhaps this is why the Fourth Gospel has no miracles. It has supernatural stories, but it calls them signs, not miracles, and a sign is something that points beyond itself to that which words cannot capture. So the question of the psalmist now needs to be our question: How can we sing the Lord's song in the strange world of the intellectual development that we call the 21st century? If we can learn how to sing the Lord's song in the accents of our day, then can we

be certain that the Christianity of the future will have enough in common with the Christianity of the past that we can see continuity? Can we walk into that future in faith?

I think it was quite possible for people who lived in 13th century Europe to look back and see the Christian Church of the catacombs that had no power at all and to recognize that it was their predecessor. What is more difficult is for people living in catacombs to imagine the 13th century. How could anybody who lived in the catacombs have predicted the great cathedrals of medieval Europe and the domination of their faith over the life of the whole civilized Western world? How can those of us who live in the 21st century imagine the Christianity of the 22nd century.

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My goal this afternoon is to try to find a way to take our current view of human life and tell the Christ story against it. So let me start at the beginning. This universe in which you and I live began as a lifeless explosion of physical matter into a void of space some 13.7 to 13.8 billion years ago. About 10 billion years later, life emerged out of that lifeless matter. How did that happen? Did the theistic god intervene and create life 10 billion years later? Or is there something about physical matter which, when it develops to a certain level, inevitably produces living things? All we know is that about four billion years ago on this planet life appeared. It was quite simple life – a single-cell — and life began its journey in time. It was an interesting journey which I do not have time to chart. I only have about 45 minutes to cover 13.8 billion years!

What we do know is that at some point in time, consciousness emerged out of life. It probably emerged as a kind of antenna system to protect living things against the perils of the environment. But as soon as consciousness emerged in life, it began its journey through time, and consciousness grew. A dog or a cat has a much higher level of consciousness than a snail or a clam or even a lobster, and you and I know that, because we do not mind putting living clams and living lobsters into boiling water to prepare them to eat, but we would not do that to our cats and to our dogs. We recognize that they are closer kin; they are more conscious creatures.

This consciousness continued to grow until something happened in a particular creature called *Homo sapiens*, somewhere between a million and 100,000 years ago, when out of the consciousness present in the primate family, a barrier was crossed and self-conscious creatures emerged — you and I are those self-conscious creatures. I would like to tell you it is not easy to be self-conscious. We are the only creature in the world who knows that we are finite. That means we are the only creature in the world that knows we are mortal and will die. People tell me about elephants going off to the elephant burial ground, but that is instinctual behavior. Elephants do not buy life insurance policies. Elephants do not make out last wills and testaments and

plan their funeral services. Those are the activities of self-conscious beings.

So you and I are self-conscious mortal creatures, who know that we are self-conscious, mortal and that we are going to die. It takes a lot of strength to be human, and it is an ongoing struggle. The trauma of self-consciousness is why human beings are drug addicts. “Oh,” you say, “I’m not a drug addict. That’s something that happens to urban young people.” OK! But let’s examine some facts. How many of you could not get up this morning without caffeine? What makes you think you’re not a drug addict? How many of you cannot end the day without alcohol? Who do you think supports the multi-billion-dollar pharmaceutical industry that produces tranquilizers? It does not surprise me that human beings are all drug addicts because life is difficult. It is difficult to embrace finitude, to know that one is on a one-way street and that death is the end. Only self-conscious creatures suffer this anxiety.



In the process of understanding life, we have begun to understand connectedness. Individualism increasingly appears to be a myth. Connectedness is the truth. How do we know? Look at the history of life. It is all related. Your body and my body are made up of the same stuff that forms the farthest star in the farthest galaxy of this universe. All of us are made out of stardust. We have only discovered DNA about fifty years ago, but DNA teaches us that life is one unfolding whole and we are simply the self-conscious part of it. We are all interrelated. We know

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through our DNA studies today that human life is not just kin to the great apes, where DNA is about 99.9 percent identical, we are kin to the cabbages, we are kin to the plankton of the sea. All life is a whole. We are all interrelated.

There is also no such thing as original perfection. It is an ongoing process. If there is no original perfection, then there could not have been a fall from a perfection that never existed. If there was never a fall, there is no such thing as original sin. And if there is no fall and no original sin, then there is no role for a savior, a redeemer or a rescuer. What we know is that there is evolving life and that sometimes we have glimpses of what we could be, the barriers are broken and we see a new vision of our potential. Now, how does the Jesus experience connect with this understanding of human reality?

When we see what's happening....many of us feel that Christianity itself must be dying. What are really dying, however, are the explanations of antiquity.

If one studies human life, one knows that it is the nature of every living thing to be survival-oriented. That is the definition of life. Everything about us is designed for our survival. The only difference between human beings and non-human creatures is that human beings know that they are survival-oriented.

We went to the jungles of the Amazon to study life. One does not think of vines as being thinking creatures, yet they seem to have an innate ability to snake along the forest floor until they come to the darkest part of the forest, which somehow they recognize is where the tallest trees are, and attach themselves to the tallest trees and they climb up so that they can get the life-giving rays of the sun. Vines are survival-oriented.

Have you ever seen 10,000 parakeets at once? It's an incredible sight. The parakeets live off the seeds of the fruits found in the Amazon forest. The only trouble is the seeds are toxic. Parakeets need the seeds to live, but if they eat the seeds they will die of toxicity. The parakeets, not because they thought this process out intellectually, have developed a survival technique, which was only discovered about 25 years ago by a Peruvian scientist. Throughout the Amazon forest, there are places called "clay licks," and the clay in these clay licks is filled with anti-toxins. Once a day the parakeets come in green waves, descending upon these clay licks to eat the anti-toxin soil in sufficient quantities so that they can then go and eat the toxic seeds of the fruits of the forest and survive. They get their Alka-Seltzer before they eat their dinner! Nature is incredible in its ability to survive. Survival is part of the definition of life.

When visiting the Great Barrier Reef off Northern Queensland in Australia, we discovered there is a tidal river near Cairns where there are mangrove trees on each side. The mangrove tree is a freshwater plant, but living in a tidal river means it must absorb massive amounts of salt water. The mangrove tree has adapted in two ways in order to survive. It has developed an incredibly thick root system, designed to filter out the salt, but still too much salt is absorbed; so this plant, in a way that nobody quite understands, channels salt to certain leaves, which turn orange and then drop off. These leaves are called the "sacrificial leaves" of the mangrove tree. They die so that the plant can live.

We went to Kruger Park in South Africa, probably the largest game preserve in the world. Every animal in Kruger Park is equipped with what we call a flight-fight syndrome. They flee danger whenever it appears and when they are trapped, they turn and fight with all their strength for one more minute of survival before the predator pounces. We even discovered that in some of the herds of the deer family, like the springboks or the impalas, they actually put the older and less productive members of the flock out at the edges so they will be more vulnerable to the predators — kind of a natural death panel.

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If survival is the nature of all living things and if some of us become self-conscious, then survival becomes self-consciously the *modus operandi* of human beings. If my survival is installed as the highest value of my life, I cannot help but be self-centered. I put my survival above every other value, above every other person. It was this behavior that our ancient forebears looked at in human life and interpreted to be a fatal flaw, a fall from perfection. That is, however, not what it is. It is something rooted in our evolutionary biology.



The result is that we are survival-oriented human beings, who fear anybody who is different. That is what xenophobia is all about; that is what racism is all about; that is what homo-phobia is all about. We see anybody who is different as a threat to our survival. We do not know how to process differences. Our xenophobia is rooted in our biology. There is no such thing as an unprejudiced human being. Prejudice is born in our quest for survival. So is that human propensity to build ourselves up by tearing someone else down.

That is also why we are a tribal people to the core. That is why Harvard people do not like Yale people, and Cambridge people do not like Oxford people. It is why Republicans do not like Democrats and Democrats do not like Republicans. That is why Catholics and Protestants tend not to like each other. That is why Muslims do not like Jews and Jews do not like Muslims. These are all manifestations of tribal identity.

This is the human experience to which we once explained as the result of original sin and it is still alive and well in all of us. To be self-conscious is to be universally self-centered. We cannot deliver ourselves from it. That was and is the experience which historically was explained in the myth of the fall.

On the basis of the myth of the fall, we have developed our understanding of this Christ story. Since we could not save ourselves, God had to come to our rescue, to lift us out of our sin and restore us to our original perfection. We said that only God could rescue us from this fall, this sin, and since Jesus was the rescuer, Jesus must be of God. We said those who were not rescued, were doomed. We said there is only one church, there is only one true religion, there is only one doorway to God and that is through my faith tradition. No one comes to the Father but through the way I understand God. Once we take that ancient definition of life away, then what happens to the Christ experience? Can we still tell the Christ story?

Let me now go back to the gospels and probe beneath the words to try to determine the Christ experience. What caused the explanations of antiquity to emerge? What was the experience that people had with Jesus that made them think he fitted into this frame of reference? What was it about Jesus that caused them to say: "I believe I have met the Holy God in this human life"?

It did not have anything to do with miracles, because miracles do not come into the Christian story until the gospel of Mark in the eighth decade. It did not have anything to do with his special birth, because the Virgin birth did not come into the Christian tradition until the ninth decade. This experience is far deeper than either of those.

What was there about Jesus that caused people to write those stories? Let me suggest that Jesus was a new breakthrough in human consciousness. Jesus affirmed human life as it was. We later would call that justification. Then Jesus was experienced as calling and empowering us to become all that we are capable of being, and we would later call that sanctification. Jesus was

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perceived as breaking the barriers that trap us inside the modes of survival, the one-upmanship games. Jesus called us into a new humanity that knew no distinction between the human and the divine, between God and humanity. The way to become divine is to escape the limits of the human and to enter into the oneness of God. Indeed, the way into the divine is to become so fully human that the divine can flow through us into a kind of mystical oneness.

Perhaps the leaders of the Christian Church got it all wrong, but they got it all wrong because they were trapped inside their frame of reference. They talked about Jesus as one in whom the divine had become human. What about the possibility that in Jesus, the human became divine?

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Now, hold that thought for just a moment and let me go quickly through the New Testament and look at it from this perspective. Paul, writing to the Galatians in the second epistle that he wrote probably in about 52, said a very remarkable thing. He said once inside the Christ experience, all human barriers disappear. Inside the Christ experience there is no longer Jew and Greek, Jew and Gentile; there is no longer male and female, no longer slave and free. We could expand the list. Inside the Christ experience, there is no longer gay and straight, no longer Communist and capitalist, no longer black and white, no longer Jew and Muslim, no longer Protestant and Catholic. There is simply a new humanity, a new creation. A new humanity appears a new wholeness, a new opening into God.

Next turn to Mark, the first gospel, written around 70-72 CE. The fascinating thing about Mark is that at the end of his story, he portrays a Gentile standing beneath the cross of the deceased Jesus interpreting the meaning of the crucifixion. That is astonishing — an unclean, uncircumcised, non-Kosher, non-Torah-obeying Gentile, in Mark's Gospel, interprets the Jesus experience. He is a Roman soldier, who looks at the cross where the limp and dead body of Jesus is still hanging and he says, to quote Mark, "Truly, this man was the son of God." Now, that is not what he said. That is a Council of Nicea translation from 400 years later. This Roman soldier did not suddenly pass Council of Nicea Theology 101 and pronounce Jesus the second person of the Holy Trinity! He was saying that when you see a human life that can get beyond its survival mentality and actually give itself away and even love those who are killing him, then you see a new dimension of what it means to be human; you see the divine and the human coming together. It is a fantastic conclusion to Mark's Gospel.

In the next gospel, Matthew, written in the early 80's, writes his story inside what I would call an interpretive envelope. In the first part of the envelope, he tells the birth story. He talks about a star being placed in the sky. Have you ever thought what was so unusual about a star? It did not just shine on the land of Jews; the star was a universal symbol. People saw it all over the world. Matthew says that star had the power to draw people beyond their tribal boundaries into the presence of Jesus. That is what the wise men are about. They are not people who escaped from a costume party and hopped on camels to follow a star that wandered so slowly through the sky that they could keep up with it. Think of what we do when we literalize these great stories. These are people drawn to whatever it is that this Christ experience was, that transcended all of their survival mentalities. They were Gentiles being brought to the brightness of God's rising.

At the end of Matthew's story, he completes his envelope. In Matthew the risen Christ makes only one statement. It is the first statement the risen Christ has said and it comes in the ninth decade. It is what you and I call the great commission. "Go into all the world. Preach the Gospel." This was not a missionary

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imperative to go out and make everyone Catholics, or Anglicans or Baptists? The great commission means: “Now that you understand the power of this Christ figure, you must go beyond your own boundaries of security. You must go out to those people who you have proclaimed as unclean, unbaptized, unsaved, unwashed, uncircumcized— however you would characterize them. You must go into all the world beyond your own security levels and tell them the story of the infinite love of God. There is no one who is outside the boundaries of the love of God. You’ve got to get beyond all of your boundaries of exclusion in order to hear and to relate and tell the Christ story.” That is what the great commission is all about.

Next comes Luke, written probably between 88 and 93 CE. In the second volume of Luke’s gospel that we call the Book of Acts, he tells the story of Pentecost. At Pentecost, says Luke, the Holy Spirit fell upon the gathered community. It did not make them religious. It lifted them beyond the boundaries of their tribal

separations. That is when they found that they could communicate in a language that everybody understood. The language of love is universal and when people escape their survival mentality, human community is found and the language of love can always communicate. Pentecost is about a new humanity.

Finally, look at John, written in the late 90’s, where the mystical oneness between God and human life is spelled out. It is not the language of 4th century incarnation; it is the language of Jewish mysticism. So Jesus can say: “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father” and “I am in Him and you must be in me as I am in Him.” Jesus can also say: “I am divine and you must dwell in me so that my life can flow through you.” Jesus can say: “My purpose is not to make you religious. My purpose is to

give you life and to give it abundantly; to call you to a new dimension of what it means to be human.” The experience is that in Christ, God has been encountered. Next we need to get beyond the definition of God as an external, supernatural being who lives above the sky in a three-tiered universe and who periodically invades the world in miraculous ways, to see God as the source of life that permeates the universe calling us to live. If God is the source of life flowing through every living thing, but coming to self-consciousness only in human beings, then the only way we can worship God is by living—by living fully, and the more fully we live, the more we make the God of life visible. That is what I call the Holy Spirit.



We experience God as the source of love. If God is the source of love, the only way we can worship God is by loving — by loving wastefully, and the more wastefully we love, the more we can give our love away without stopping to count the cost, without worrying

about whether the recipient of our love deserves our love or not, then we enter into a new dimension of what it means to be human. That is what I call the Son.

It is this revelation of the love of God that I see in the person of Jesus. If I could take the Jesus story and dissolve into one sentence, it would be that there is nothing you or I can ever do and nothing you or I can ever be that will separate us from the love of God. Once you process that, then you can live in a very different way. God becomes not the external supernatural being, but what Paul Tillich called the ground of all being in which everything is rooted, but it only comes to self-consciousness in your life and mine. If God is the ground of all being, then the only way to worship God is by having the courage to be every-

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thing that you and I can be in the fullness of our humanity. The more deeply and fully we can be ourselves, the more we make God, the ground of all being, visible. That is what I call the Father.

To be our deepest, fullest self is the goal of Christianity, to be called and empowered to become deeply and fully human. The more deeply and fully human you and I become, the more we enter into the oneness of God, into the mystical oneness, and the more that we see that life is one whole and that we are simply a part of it — individuated, but still a part of the whole — then we pass from self-consciousness into participating in what I call universal consciousness. It is this experience of the mystical oneness of life and the relationship of all things in God to one another, and Jesus as the revelation of this God who empowers us to venture beyond our limits, then becomes my new understanding of the heart of the Christian faith.

The explanations of the past are dying — not because they were wrong, but they are inadequate. They were fine for their day.

They are not fine for our day. We do not spit upon them, we honor them. But we do not limit ourselves to them; we transcend them. Our task is not to respiration artificially the theological formulations of yesterday. Our task is to grasp the Christ experience and then relate that experience to our current understanding of life. Then we can build what I call “A new Christianity for a New World.” It must be in touch with our past, but not bound by it, a Christianity that is in transition, a Christianity that is escaping and transcending all of its authority claims, a Christianity willing to sacrifice the Christ explanations of the past, but not the power of the Christ experience, which is eternal. Truth, I remind you, is never found in explanations. Truth is always an experience that cannot be reduced to words.

This is, I believe, the doorway through which the Christian faith must walk into a realistic and living future.

Check out Bishop Spong's weekly question and answer at www.johnselbyspong.com.



John Shelby Spong, bestselling author and popular proponent of a modern, scholarly and authentic Christianity, argues that this last gospel to be written was misinterpreted by the framers of the fourth-century creeds to be a literal account of the life of Jesus when in fact it is a literary, interpretive retelling of the events in Jesus' life through the medium of fictional characters, from Nicodemus and Lazarus to the "Beloved Disciple." The Fourth Gospel was designed first to place Jesus into the context of the Jewish scriptures, then to place him into the worship patterns of the synagogue and finally to allow him to be viewed through the lens of a popular form of first-century Jewish mysticism.

The result of this intriguing study is not only to recapture the original message of this gospel, but also to provide us today with a radical new dimension to the claim that in the humanity of Jesus the reality of God has been met and engaged.