

# Theology Matters

## “My Lord and My God:” The Uniqueness of Jesus in John’s Gospel

by Terry McGonigal

One word. Often it only takes one word to get my attention. When I hear “Help!” from my wife or children, I drop everything and run to provide aid. When I hear “Sing!” in a worship service I stand and express my love and devotion to God with my voice.

In the prologue to his gospel (Jn 1:1-18) John uses a word that has caught the attention of the Christian church. This one word captures the essence of John’s description of Jesus. In the Greek language the word is *monogenes*. We translate this word with the English equivalent “only,” “unique.” “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only (*monogenes*) son, full of grace and truth.” (Jn 1:14 NRSV) The dictionary expresses the importance of this one word: “being the only one of its kind; being without an equal or equivalent; unparalleled.”<sup>1</sup> That is John’s perspective as he writes his gospel. “There is one without equal or equivalent. He is unparalleled. Through personal experience of being with him for three years I am absolutely certain that he is one-of-a-kind.” John’s entire case rests on this one claim: there is one who is unique because he is fully God and fully human! There has been no one equivalent to him before. There will be no equal to him in the future. He is unparalleled. He is one-of-a-kind. His name is Jesus.

How does John make the case? This article will trace some of the contours of John’s thinking. First, John asserts the full divinity (1:1-5) and full humanity (9-18) of this unique one in the prologue. Second, John provides some initial testimony regarding the uniqueness of Jesus from those first witnesses who met him at the beginning of his public ministry (1:19-51). Third, in chapters 2-11 John provides seven “sign” stories to illustrate the uniqueness of grace as it is mediated by Jesus. Fourth, interspersed between these sign stories are numerous dialogues that explicate the unique truth regarding the person and work of Jesus. Fifth, in chapter 14 Jesus makes some unique claims about the exclusive role he plays in reconciling the world to God. And finally, John concludes his gospel with the testimony of the eyewitnesses who encountered Jesus after his resurrection. Together these six points seal the case for the uniqueness of Jesus, verifying John’s claim that he is indeed *monogenes*, “one of a kind.”

### The Uniqueness of Jesus in the Prologue (1:1-18)

In dialogue with an audience influenced by the dominant worldviews of Greek language and culture, John uses a

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familiar word at the beginning of his gospel to build a communication bridge. He uses the term *logos*, “word.” Most of the people John addresses hold to a perspective called Platonic dualism, a philosophy that separates the ideal, perfect, spiritual world of God the Creator from the realm of the imperfect material world of creation. By definition, God cannot have contact or be involved in the created order or God would cease to be God. The bridge between the two worlds, according to this view, is *logos*, “the word,” or as some call it, “wisdom.” John uses the term *logos* throughout his prologue to make two major assertions.

John’s first claim is that “the Word” is divine, an idea that would resonate with his audience. In vs. 1-5 we find these four claims regarding the deity of the Word:

1. The Word is eternal, pre-existent, and divine: “In the beginning was the Word (*logos*), and the Word (*logos*) was with God, the Word (*logos*) was God. He was in the beginning with God” (1:1-2, NRSV).
2. The Word is the agent of creation: “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (1:3, NIV).
3. The Word is the source of light and life for all humanity: “In him was life, and life was the light of all people” (1:4, NRSV).
4. The Word as the source of life and light has never been extinguished: “The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness, the darkness couldn’t put it out” (1:5, The Message).

These are lofty claims which John’s audience would expect to be attributed to God. They assert what John’s audience believes. God as Creator is the fountainhead from which all aspects of life flow. Clearly, according to the worldview of John’s day, these statements cannot be attributed to any part of creation. God is perfect, and therefore is distinct and separate from the material, imperfect created order. In a word, God is unique.

However, John’s second major assertion in the prologue regarding “the Word” challenges the dominant worldview of separation between God and the creation. Eugene Peterson captures this challenge, contained in John’s use of *monogenes*, in his paraphrase:

The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind (*monogenes*) glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish. (1:14, TM)<sup>2</sup>

John’s statement challenges the philosophy that asserts that God and the created order must remain separate and distinct in order for God to be and to remain God, the infinite being. John says that the pre-existent, eternal Creator, source of life for all humanity, has taken on human form. The infinite has invaded the finite. The perfect has come into contact with the imperfect. The

spiritual and the material have connected. This connection has taken place in Jesus.

John says that “the Word became flesh and lived among us.” Drawing upon the image of God’s presence in the wilderness for forty years as the people lived in tents during the wilderness wandering, John literally says “In Jesus, God camped (*skenao*) with us.” For several years John and his companions traveled with Jesus, eating food with him around evening fires, sleeping on the ground with him through the cold nights, looking for water with him under the harsh sun. Based upon his own eyewitness experience, John says that heaven and earth touched in the person of Jesus. The Christian church has called that connection the incarnation—Jesus is fully God and Jesus is fully human. This is what makes Jesus unique.

The results of that connection are profound for John. Because of the incarnation, John claims to have experienced the glory, grace and truth of God as these divine qualities are revealed in Jesus (1:14-17). John will use these qualities to structure his portrait as he tells the story of Jesus. The grace of God and the truth of God are in the forefront in chapters 2-11, while the glory of God influences the development of chapters 12-21 (see 12:23; 17:1-5, 20-24; 21:19). There is only one word that can capture the totality of God’s revelation in Jesus, and John uses it twice in the conclusion to the prologue.

We have seen God’s glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind (*monogenes*) glory, like Father, like Son. (1:14 TM)

No one has ever seen God, not so much as a glimpse. This one-of-a kind (*monogenes*) God-Son-Word, who exists at the very heart of the Father, has made God plain as day. (1:18 TM)

John’s thesis, declared in the prologue, is now complete. Jesus is the very incarnation of God, fully God and fully human. Therefore Jesus is unique! Now it is up to John to make his case. What John experienced in Jesus, the fullness of God’s grace and God’s truth, will be explained in chapters 2-11. But before we hear his witness in those chapters, John wants his audience to listen to the testimony of others who also met Jesus at the beginning of his public ministry.

## **The Uniqueness of Jesus According to the First Witnesses (1:19-51)**

In the prologue John the writer has already introduced a second witness, someone besides himself. That witness is identified as John (the Baptist), who “came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe in him” (1:6). After the prologue, that John explains himself with a citation from the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 40:3), “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the LORD’” (1:23).

Although there are many who think this Baptist might be the Messiah, John is quick to dismiss such misconceptions (1:21, 26-27, cf. 1:8). John the Baptist has come to be a forerunner for the true Messiah. His proclamation clearly points away from himself to someone else, who is the sin-removing Lamb (“Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” 1:29), the Spirit-receiving and Spirit-distributing Servant of God (1:32-33), and ultimately, the very Son of God (“And I myself have seen and testified that this is the Son of God” 1:34).

The Baptist then sends two of his followers, Andrew and apparently John, the author of this gospel, to Jesus with the repeated affirmation, “Look, here is the Lamb of God” (1:34). There follows a series of encounters in which these affirmations are made about Jesus:

- By Andrew: “We have found the Messiah” (1:41).
- By Phillip: “We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote” (1:45).
- By Nathanael: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” (1:49).

These seven assertions about the person and mission of Jesus, three from the Baptist and four from these first followers, reiterate John’s emphasis in the prologue. Their corporate voice speaks in unison regarding the uniqueness of Jesus. Now it is John’s task to present the evidence to support the claims of chapter 1. Let us now focus on the grace of God present in Jesus, as shown by the sign stories in chapters 2-11.

## **The Uniqueness of Jesus: God’s Incarnation of Grace**

John concludes his gospel narrative by declaring that Jesus did many other things not recorded in his account, and if they were all recorded, “I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (21:25). But John does include seven “sign” stories, each of which is meant to be a pointer to the uniqueness of Jesus. These stories serve as John’s primary illustration of the prologue’s claim regarding Jesus that “from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (1:17) or as Peterson paraphrases it, “We all live off his generous bounty, gift after gift after gift” (TM).

These gifts of grace, each given by Jesus in response to human need, are recorded in the sign stories, each one a marvelous illustration of God’s initiative to intervene in the created order in order to set things right.

### ***Sign #1- The Wine (2:1-12)***

After a brief conversation with his mother Mary, Jesus intervenes and turns more than 100 gallons of water into the best wine served at this wedding feast. In so doing, Jesus enacts his first miracle and thus stands in the tradition of the prophets Elijah (1 Kings 17:7-16) and

Elisha (2 Kings 4:1-7). More importantly, this miracle points to the anticipated time of God’s restoration, celebrated in a feast (Isa. 55:1-5) with an abundance of wine (Isa. 25:6, Jer. 31:12). The disciples see in this act the presence of the incarnate God. “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him” (2:11). In that last phrase John reveals the purpose for his recording of these miracles stories. These events are not meant to portray Jesus as a wonder worker. They are meant to draw people into the understanding that in Jesus God is present, and this Jesus is to be trusted.

### ***Sign #2- Restoration at a Distance (4:46-51)***

In Cana once again, Jesus encounters a “royal official” from Capernaum who is probably a Gentile government officer.<sup>3</sup> The man’s son lies ill back at home and he has made the journey to find the only one who can keep his son alive. He asks Jesus to return with him to his hometown in order to heal the boy. Jesus simply speaks a word, “Go, your son will live” (4:50). When the father arrives home the next day he is told that his precious son has recovered, and through the conversation realizes that the boy’s healing took place at precisely the moment Jesus spoke his word of affirmation. John calls this event the “second sign” (4:51). Who is this whose word can provide such restoration, even at a distance? Each sign story is an invitation to read further. Each sign story also raises the question, “Are you seeing and appreciating the uniqueness of Jesus?”

### ***Sign #3- A Sabbath Healing (5:1-18)***

In Jerusalem Jesus visits the pool by the Sheep Gate, a well-known place because the bubbling waters of the springs that feed the pool have traditionally brought healing to the first person able to get into the water when it bubbles. John says that “many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed” (5:4) sat waiting for the moment that the water stirs. This is a place of hope. It is also a place of deep frustration for those not quick enough to make the move into the pool. Jesus encounters there a man who has been ill for 38 years. Jesus tells the man, “Stand up, take your mat and walk!” (5:8). The healing causes a great commotion, in part because it took place on the Sabbath, the day of rest when no work was to be done according to Jewish tradition. When Jesus is interrogated about the nature of the miracle and why it was done on the Sabbath, he replies, “My Father is still working, and I also am working” (5:17). In response to this statement, John records that Jesus’ opponents wanted to kill him, “because he was not only breaking the Sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal with God” (5:18). Each sign story drives John’s audience into the mystery of the incarnation and verifies the uniqueness of Jesus.

#### ***Sign # 4- A Multitude Fed (6:1-15)***

This passage created an expectation for the “Messianic banquet,” the celebration when the Messiah would arise and provide for the people a feast beyond their imagination. According to this expectation, this celebration would be the signal that the Messiah was about to become the “leader and commander of the peoples” (Isa. 55:4). Jesus provides a qualitative solution to the quantitative problem of thousands of hungry people in the Galilean wilderness. Jesus prays over five barley loaves and two fish. The people are fed, and there are even twelve baskets of leftovers (6:11-13). The crowd rightly interprets the sign when they identify Jesus as “the prophet who is to come into the world” (6:14). The fact that they intend to seize Jesus and make him king “by force” (6:15) indicates their militaristic interpretation of Jesus’ mission. Once again there is a failure to understand the uniqueness of Jesus.

#### ***Sign # 5- Jesus on the Water (6:16-21)***

While the disciples proceeded across the lake, a storm arose “because a strong wind was blowing” (6:18). After a time of solitude, Jesus returns to be with the disciples, “walking on the sea,” and as he approached their hearts were struck with terror (6:20). Jesus comforts them with two short statements: “It’s me,”<sup>4</sup> “Don’t be afraid”<sup>5</sup> The disciples’ fright is explained because Jesus walking on the sea raises images of God’s control over waters, exhibited by the divine ability to “trample the waves of the sea” (Job 9:8, cf. Ps. 107:23, 29-31). Jesus now controls the forces of nature and supercedes them. Who alone can do that except the Creator? Through their growing array of experiences, the disciples’ understanding of Jesus’ uniqueness continues to grow.

#### ***Sign # 6- Light in the Darkness (9:1-41)***

John asserted in the prologue that “the word” is the source of inextinguishable light (1:5). That claim finds its verification, as Jesus restores sight to the eyes of a man born blind. God’s gracious restoration of broken creation is evidenced in part through the “eyes of the blind being opened” (Isa. 35:5). Four times in this extended narrative the man is questioned, showing that something highly unusual has happened and cannot be explained by the categories of this world. “Here is an astonishing thing!... Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing” (9:30, 32-33). The man’s response to his interrogators regarding the identity of his healer reveals his understanding of Jesus’ uniqueness, even while others either cannot or will not recognize what seems quite obvious.

#### ***Sign # 7- Life over Death (11:1-44)***

The last sign story carries with it a drama that exceeds the previous six miracles. The sisters Martha and Mary ask

Jesus to come quickly to the aid of their brother, and Jesus’ friend, Lazarus. Jesus tells his disciples that this “is for God’s glory,” (11:4) once again indicating that a unique revelation of the character and nature of God is about to take place. By the time Jesus arrives in Bethany Lazarus has been dead for four days. When Jesus sees the grief that has overwhelmed Mary and Martha, he empathizes with them deeply, even to the point of tears (11:35), and the crowd recognizes in Jesus’ tears a sign of his deep love for Lazarus (11:36). But Jesus does more than express compassion. He tells Martha, “Your brother will rise again” (11:23). When he orders the stone to be rolled away from entrance to the tomb, Martha protests that the stench of death will be overwhelming (11:39). But nothing will stop the Creator of the universe from overcoming death by the power of life resident in him. Jesus reminds Martha that she will “see the glory of God” (11:40). He then prays to his Father, turns to the open tomb, and gives the command, “Lazarus, come out!” (11:43).

This final miracle brings to a culmination the narratives of God’s grace at work through the person of Jesus. It serves as a fitting conclusion to John’s demonstration of Jesus’ uniqueness through the work of divine power renewing a broken creation and a fallen humanity. John claimed in the prologue that in “the word” was life, life for all humanity (1:4). Through the resurrection of Lazarus, John affirms that in Jesus this life overcomes all the enemies of humanity, especially that final enemy, even death itself. Is it any wonder then, that when John describes Jesus he uses the term *monogenes*, for Jesus, and Jesus alone, is the vehicle of God’s unique and restoring grace!

### **The Uniqueness of Jesus: God’s Incarnation of Truth**

Interspersed throughout the sign stories are several conversations that Jesus has with various persons. John is sensitive to the dynamic of human relationships, and in these dialogues he presents Jesus as someone engaged in discussion with a variety of people from very different backgrounds, perspectives, and worldviews. Jesus is interested to hear what others think about God. In these dialogues he is also clear to reveal the truth about God being revealed in himself, and the implications of that revelation for his hearers. In these conversations the uniqueness of Jesus as God’s incarnation of truth emerges.

#### ***Dialogue with Nicodemus (3:1-21)***

The Pharisee Nicodemus is intrigued by the signs that Jesus is doing, and he recognizes in those acts the unique presence of God. “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher that has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God” (3:2). There follows an extended conversation about physical and spiritual birth. Jesus is clear that this spiritual birth is the result of God’s Spirit at work in the human heart. Much

like the wind, which is invisible but leaves its mark, so it is with the work of God's Spirit. The Bible teacher Nicodemus struggles to understand Jesus' statements (3:3-10). In order to clarify the confusion, a clear statement is made regarding the person and work of Jesus:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only (*monogenes*) Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe in him are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only (*monogenes*) Son of God. (3:16-18)

Just as in the prologue where Jesus is the unique God who takes on human form and reveals God (1:14, 18), so John uses the term *monogenes* here in this conversation to emphasize the uniqueness of Jesus' role in salvation. Jesus is the ultimate expression of God's love. Jesus is the sole giver of eternal life. Jesus is the one-of-a-kind cosmic redeemer. And because Jesus is the unique bridge between God and the world, the cosmos, reconciliation with God is accomplished and experienced exclusively through him. There is no other option, because Jesus is *monogenes*.

#### ***Dialogue with a Samaritan Woman (4:1-42)***

John intentionally sets this next conversation with a Samaritan woman immediately following the dialogue with Nicodemus. In so doing, John illustrates Jesus' commitment to reach the totality of all creation with the good news of God's love. Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman are at polar extremes in their understanding of God and in their lifestyle. Jesus doesn't care. He will speak with both, no matter what others think about his association with either one.

Worn out by a long journey, Jesus arrives at Jacob's well at noonday looking for a cool drink. At the well he encounters a solitary woman. He asks for a drink of water, a request that astounds the woman because, on the basis of pent-up ethnic and religious animosity, Jews will have no dealing with Samaritans (4:8-9). The woman's amazement that this Jewish man would speak to her leads into a conversation about living water that satisfies thirst forever, an offer that surely piques the woman's interest (4:10-15).

But Jesus doesn't want to just talk about water. He also wants to speak about the condition of the woman's life. And so he raises the issue of her wayward lifestyle, a tragic trail of five husbands, and a current partner who isn't her husband. The woman has been searching for love in all the wrong places, and now the incarnation of God's love, Jesus, is sitting and talking with her (4:16-18). When she hears the truth about herself, she also

recognizes the uniqueness of Jesus. "I see that you are a prophet" (4:19). Her query about the right place to worship God, whether it is in Samaria or in Jerusalem, cuts to the heart of the matter. Jesus replies that those who are in right relationship with God can worship God anywhere, because real worship is a matter of "Spirit and truth" (4:24). This declaration leads to the conclusion of the conversation, as the woman now raises the expectation of the coming Messiah. Jesus replies, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you" (4:26).

The woman, amazed at the one who has met her at the well, returns to Sychar with the declaration, "Come and see someone who has told me everything I have ever done" (4:39). Hearing the truth about both herself and about God is a liberating experience. One without the other is inadequate to give this woman the freedom that Jesus seeks to give her as a gift. And once she starts to tell her story, then over the next two days the entire village experiences this same reality. "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is the Savior of the world" (4:42).

Jesus' first two dialogues lead to the same conclusion. In both conversations Jesus is recognized for his uniqueness, for he alone is the one who bridges the chasm between God and the world. In both discussions salvation comes through Jesus as he speaks the truth about God and the condition of humanity. Finally, it is also clear that the salvation Jesus brings is offered as a gift for everyone, free for the receiving by simply believing in him.

#### ***Divine Truth in Other Dialogues: The "I Am" Statements***

Interspersed between the seven sign stories are other dialogues that reinforce the uniqueness of Jesus. In these conversations Jesus uses the backdrop of his restoring miracles to explain his identity and mission. His explanation comes in the form of "I am" (*Ego eimi*) statements. In each case, Jesus employs the formula "*Ego eimi*" to describe himself. Jesus says the following:

- "I am the bread of life" (6:35, 48, 51).
- "I am the light of the world" (8:12, 9:5).
- "I am the gate" (10:7, 9).
- "I am the good shepherd" (10:11, 14).
- "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25).
- "I am the true vine" (15:1).

Each statement, set in its context, takes his audience into a deeper awareness of Jesus' identity. These declarations expand the horizon of understanding regarding Jesus. Taken together, they continue the confirmation process to verify John's claim regarding the uniqueness of Jesus. And there is one more "I am" statement that must be considered, for in it we hear the most direct statement regarding Jesus' self-understanding of his identity.

## ***THE Revelation through THE Confrontation (8:12-59)***

The most confrontational, indeed hostile, dialogue is found in John 8. It immediately follows the showdown between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees regarding a woman caught in adultery (7:53-8:12). That conflict, which reveals universal sinfulness and divine mercy, leads into this dialogue. His opponents raise, more than in any other place in John's entire gospel, a series of ultimate questions about Jesus, such as:

- Where is your Father? (8:19)
- What does he mean when he says, 'Where I am going you cannot come?' (8:22)
- Who are you? (8:25)
- What do you mean when you say, 'You will be made free' (8:33)
- Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon? (8:48)
- Are you greater than our Father Abraham, who died? The prophets also died. Who do you claim to be? (8:53)

Clearly there is one central issue revealed in this series of incredibly hostile questions. The issue is: What is the identity of Jesus? Who is he?

The climax of this confrontation takes place through one final question that the antagonists aim at Jesus. Jesus says that Abraham anticipated the day of his ministry coming, "he saw it and was glad" (8:56). Then the question is asked, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" The answer to this question is the anchor for Jesus' self-understanding: "Very truly I tell you, before Abraham was, I am" (*Ego eimi*: 8:58).

In this case, there is no qualifier for the *ego eimi* formula, as we saw in the previous list. There is simply the reference to the divine name, YHWH, "I am." "If any of Jesus' *ego eimi* sayings in John alludes to Exodus 3:14 and the revelation of the divine name to Moses in the burning bush, surely this one does."<sup>6</sup> The proof that his audience heard this as a reference to Jesus' divinity is shown in their response. Having heard what they considered blasphemy, the sin of any human claiming to be God, "they picked up stones to throw at him," (8:58) the punishment prescribed by the Jewish tradition for blasphemers.

With this climactic statement, Jesus' self-understanding is now perfectly clear. "He is not simply a human being who has achieved enlightenment and now has come to share what he has learned. His point of origin is not this world. He is a human being just as we are, but there is more to him than that. This claim, in the light of Jesus' use of "I am" (8:12, 24, 58) reveals the two natures of Christ, as the church later came to express it—fully God, as well as, fully human."<sup>7</sup>

## **The Uniqueness of Jesus: THE Guide for the Journey Home**

On the last night of his life Jesus gives an extended set of instructions to his disciples (chaps. 13-16). He is preparing them for his imminent departure, and he recognizes their fear. He encourages them, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me" (14:1). Then he promises his friends, his closest companions during his long ministry journey, that he is going to prepare a place for them. He will subsequently return in order to bring them to this prepared place where they will be together. He also tells them that they already know this place (14:2-4). The prediction of separation from Jesus and the vague reference to some undesignated place is quite baffling to Jesus' followers. Thomas expresses what all the rest must have been thinking, "Lord, we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?" (14:5). In response to Thomas' question, Jesus replies, "I am (*Ego eimi*) the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him" (14:6-7). To the affirmations in the prologue that Jesus is the source of all life (1:4) and that he is also source of all truth (1:4) the claim is now added that he is the exclusive way to God. "I am the road, the way, the path that leads to God."

From this claim in v. 6 Dale Bruner develops a theology of "Christoexclusivity."<sup>9</sup> He makes two major points about Jesus' statement, "I am the way." First, Bruner recognizes in this claim a boundary line that defines the Christian community. "Christ is not only the center—he is the *circumference*. He is the only way to the responsible knowledge of, or participation in, saving truth. Christ is *exclusive*."

Second, Bruner observes the behavior of Jesus in terms of the remarkable openness of his relationships with all kinds of different people. "...[W]e are in for some surprises, because this Christ, to whom we are to hold *exclusively*, is himself very *inclusive*."

The great missionary theologian, Lesslie Newbigin, who spent most of his ministry living as a follower of Jesus in the dominant Hindu culture of India, reinforces this exclusivity/inclusivity relationship in a powerful and extended comment on Jn 14:6 that bears repeating:

To follow this way is, in fact, the only way to the Father. This is not to say that God has left no witness to himself in the rest of the life of the world. We have in fact been told that Jesus is the light that enlightens *every* man. What is being said here as in the whole of the gospel, is that Jesus is in fact the presence of God's truth and God's life in the world, and that to know the Father means to follow the way which Jesus is, and which he has opened through the curtain by his living, his dying, and his rising from the dead. The word

‘God’ has had and still has an almost infinite variety of meanings. Here we are invited to accept the affirmation that there is but one way to come to the living God and to know him as Father, and that is by being made one with this meek and humble man who goes to the cross carrying the sin of the world. To know Jesus in this sense is to know the Father. We do not come to the true knowledge of God by any induction from human experience, even human religious experience. In face of the fact of death that enterprise is doomed in advance. We come to the true knowledge of God by knowing Jesus, and following him along the way which he goes and which he is.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Conclusion and the Invitation: Thomas’ Faith and Our Faith**

John brings his portrait of Jesus’ uniqueness to a fitting conclusion in the encounter between Jesus and Thomas. (20:24-29) For some unexplained reason, Thomas is not present with the other disciples on the night of Jesus’ resurrection, and so he misses the Master’s first post-resurrection appearance to the apostolic band in the upper room. When he hears his friends’ claims that they have seen the risen Jesus, Thomas reverts to the appeal we have seen all the way through John’s gospel; namely, “Show me the evidence.” He boldly asserts, “I must place my hand into his pierced side and my finger into his nail-imprinted hands” (20:25). In other words, “I must experience the reality of the risen Jesus for myself. I will believe nothing else.”

By now the writer John is used to such demands, for he has been bringing forth the evidence regarding the uniqueness of Jesus from the very beginning of his gospel. In the face of the most unbelievable claim of all, that the crucified and buried Jesus is actually risen from the dead, nothing short of real, tangible, material, historical, empirical evidence will satisfy Thomas. His cry echoes down through the ages, “Jesus, show me, show us, the evidence for who you really are!”

Eight days later, Jesus responds to Thomas’ demand. He appears to the disciples and stands in front of the skeptic disciple, the most dramatic showdown in all of John’s gospel, because everything depends on the reality of Jesus’ physical resurrection from the dead. Nothing else and nothing less will convince Thomas. “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe” (20:27). John hints at the power of the material evidence presented to Thomas. The disciple is so overwhelmed by what he sees, by what he experiences in the reality of the risen Jesus standing before him, that he forgets all about his previous demands. Instead, he utters a confession that summarizes the uniqueness of Jesus in three parts.

1. Thomas’ confession recognizes Jesus’ identity: “My Lord and My GOD.”
2. Thomas’ confession recognizes Jesus’ sovereignty: “My LORD and my God.”
3. Thomas’ confession expresses his personal commitment: “MY Lord and MY God.”

Thomas’ insistence that he have a personal experience of the resurrected Jesus leads him to the greatest confession in John’s gospel, and perhaps, in the history of the Christian church. John uses Thomas’ trust in Jesus as a bridge to extend one last invitation to his audience to recognize Jesus’ identity, and in that recognition to place ultimate trust in the risen Lord. John’s invitation is a fitting conclusion to this survey of the uniqueness of Jesus, as it is an appropriate challenge as well:

Jesus provided far more God-revealing signs than are written down in this book. These are written down so you will believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and in the act of believing, have real and eternal life in the way he personally revealed it. (20:30-31 TM)

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<sup>1</sup> *The American Heritage Dictionary*, p. 1322 (Houghton Mifflin, 1991).  
<sup>2</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Message: New Testament with Psalms and Proverbs [TM]* (NavPress, 1995).  
<sup>3</sup> Andreas K. Kostenberger, *Encountering John*, p. 90 (Baker, 1999).  
<sup>4</sup> In John’s gospel the introductory formula in Greek “*Ego eimi*” carries with it a reference to the divine name *YHWH* in the Old Testament, which is always translated into the Greek language as “*Ego eimi*.” Jesus’ reference thus implies a sense of reference to deity, as Raymond Brown recognizes. “The majesty of Jesus is that he can bear the divine name.” See Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Vol. 1 p. 252, 254-55, 533-38 (Anchor, 1966).  
<sup>5</sup> “Don’t be afraid” is the most common command in the whole Bible, appearing over 350 times. Jesus often speaks this phrase when the terror of the situation might prevent people from seeing Jesus as he really is, fully human and fully divine.  
<sup>6</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel*, p. 149 (InterVarsity, 2001).  
<sup>7</sup> Rodney A. Whitacre, *John*, p. 215 (InterVarsity, 1999).  
<sup>9</sup> Dale Bruner, “Is Jesus Inclusive or Exclusive?: John 14:1-14,” *Theology, News, and Notes*, pp. 3-5 (Fuller Theological Seminary, Vol. 46, No. 3, October, 1999).  
<sup>10</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come: An Exposition of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 181f (Eerdmans, 1982).

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# Battle for the Mind: Tolerance in the Church at Pergamum

By Darrell W. Johnson

In Revelation 2:12-17 we have the message Jesus spoke to the disciples living in the first-century city of Pergamum, a city located on the landmass that is modern-day Turkey.

Let me review the life situation from which the text emerges. The date is 96 A.D., the last year of the reign of Emperor Domitian. The apostle John, now in his mid-80s, is in exile, having been shipped off to the prison island of Patmos, some 40 miles off the mainland in the Aegean Sea. He is there because, out of his allegiance to Jesus as Lord, John could not abide by the emperor's edict that all Roman subjects were to worship Caesar as god.

On a Sunday morning in 96 A.D., while "in the Spirit," as he says, John was given a fresh revelation of Jesus by Jesus. On a Lord's Day the risen and living Jesus pulled back the curtain, which ordinarily surrounds Him, and manifested Himself in all His glory. Oh, to see as John sees!

John says he heard a voice behind him. When he turned to see the voice, he saw seven golden lampstands. And "in the middle of the lampstands one like a son of man." What a wonderful prepositional phrase: "in the middle." What a wonderful preposition: in! The seven lampstands represent the churches on the mainland 40 miles away. John is being let in on the great unseen reality of the present moment—that the risen, reigning, majestic, merciful Savior stands "in the middle" of His churches. He stands in the middle of this church. Glory!

John tries to describe for us what he saw. John says Jesus was clothed in a robe that reached to His feet. Across His chest He wore a golden girdle. His head and hair were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like bronze made to flow in a furnace. His face was like the sun shining at noonday. In his right hand were seven stars. And out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword.

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From the middle of the lampstands, Jesus dictates seven messages, seven "prophetic oracles," seven "royal edicts." In His message to the church in Pergamum He speaks an amazingly relevant word to us and to other disciples who seek to be faithful in a post-modern, pluralistic culture.

Why does Jesus present Himself to the Pergamum church the way He does? "The One who has the sharp two-edged sword" (2: 12). "I will come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth" (2:16). Why does Jesus use this imagery and language here? Well, for one thing the symbol for the city of Pergamum was the sword, for Pergamum was "one of the few cities to which Rome had given 'the right of the sword,' the power to inflict capital punishment" (G. Krodel, *Revelation*, p. 116).

Yet, I want to ask, why does the One we call "the Prince of Peace" employ this language of war? Why does He speak as though He were a soldier ready for combat?

Answer: because the church in Pergamum was living in the midst of a fierce battle. Although it may have been intensified in that city, it is the same battle waged in every city of the world, then and now.

John R. W. Stott, the British pastor-scholar, captures the situation in Pergamum when he writes, "Here a pitched battle was being fought, in which the soldiers were not men but ideas" (*What Christ Thinks of the Church*, p. 52). The church in Pergamum, like the church in Rome and Stockholm, Washington and Manila, New Delhi and Los Angeles, was engaged in a battle for the mind. The outcome of every other kind of battle hinges on the outcome of this battle. For as the writer of Proverbs puts it, "As people think within themselves so are they." Clinical psychologist Arch Hart says we are "the sum total of our thoughts." "I will make war with the sword of my mouth" (2:16).

The battle for the mind in Pergamum was being waged on two fronts. First, ideas that conflict with God's Revelation in Jesus Christ were bombarding the church from the outside; and second, ideas that conflict with God's revelation in Jesus Christ were pressuring the church from the inside. The church was under overt attack from the outside and under covert pressure from the inside.



Because He stands “in the middle” of the churches, the risen Lord knows the situation with pinpoint accuracy. “I know where you dwell,” He says (2:13). And He knows that they were holding fast on the first front but were losing ground on the second. They were standing firm against the overt pressure of the pagan city, but they were either unaware of, or carelessly tolerant of, the covert pressure coming from within the Christian fellowship.

This is the way it has been throughout Christian history. Most growing Christians are relatively able to spot and resist ideas that are blatantly contrary to God’s will and way. It is the ideas that come to us wrapped in religious language which are more difficult to spot and resist. Which is why it is actually harder in some ways to be a faithful disciple in a country with a “Christian veneer” than it is in a country that militantly opposes Jesus and His way. In the latter case the lines between truth and error are very clearly drawn. There clearly is no middle ground.

Let me tell you about the situation in Pergamum. I do so not to give a history lesson, but to equip us to more accurately assess the situation in which we live. Looking at the dynamics of the battle for the mind in other cities helps us understand the nature of the battle in our city.

Jesus straightforwardly lays out His assessment of the city of Pergamum. He would not have been popular with the chamber of commerce or city council or board of supervisors. “I know where you dwell,” He says, “where Satan has his throne” (2:13). What? Why did Jesus say that? The evil one has henchmen in every city. Why say that Pergamum is the city where “Satan sits enthroned”?

Pergamum was built on a high rock. It was, if you will, perched on a rock throne. It was famous for its magnificent library, which at the time Jesus dictated His message held 200,000 parchment scrolls. The word “parchment” is derived from the name Pergamum. The city was enamored with words and ideas. But why say the city was the throne of Satan?

Being the capitol city (of the Roman province of Asia) Pergamum was the center of Caesar worship. As early as 29 B.C. the city sought and won permission to build the first temple in honor of Caesar Augustus. This meant that in Pergamum the emperor cult held powerful sway over peoples’ minds. Is that why Jesus speaks the way He does about the city?

Behind the city, rising some one thousand feet above it, was a huge conical hill. On the hill stood a whole host of temples and altars. Two temples were most dominant. One was dedicated to the worship of Asklepios, who was thought to be the god of healing. The symbol for Asklepios was the serpent. Ring a bell? The temple priests even used snakes in their healing services. William Barclay tells us that “sufferers were allowed to spend the night in the darkness of the temple. In the temple were

tame snakes. In the night the sufferers might be touched by one of these tame and harmless snakes as it slid over the ground on which he lay. The touch of the snake was held to be the touch of the god himself. and the touch was held to bring health and healing” (*Letters to the Seven Churches*, p. 49-50). Pergamum was the “Lourdes of Asia Minor” (Ernest Lohmeyer); people flocked from all over the world to receive the touch of the serpent. In Scripture the serpent represents the evil one who seeks to seduce people away from the living God, away from the One who alone in history heals. Was the presence of the Temple of Asklepios the reason for Jesus’ strong word about Pergamum?

The other dominant temple on the hill was the one in honor of Zeus, the greatest of the Greek gods: “Zeus, the savior.” The altar of Zeus was built on a ledge jutting out from the hillside 800 feet above the street. The platform on the ledge was 20 feet high and 90 feet square. “It dominated the city” (Barclay). Every person in Pergamum lived in the shadow of that altar. Is that why Jesus speaks the way He does—to a people constantly in the shadow of superstition?

In every way Pergamum was a center for ideas that blinded people to the truth—to the truth about God, about the world, about themselves. While the average tourist was blissfully taking pictures of all of the expressions of idolatry, Jesus grieved. In His message He is saying that in that particular place the evil one had some major victories. The one Jesus called “the Deceiver” had the mind of a whole city: from politics to medicine to religion.

Jesus commends the church for standing firm against the constant bombardment of ideas contrary to the Gospel. “You remain true to My name,” He says (2: 13). Wow!

That there even was a church in that city is a testimony to the power of the Gospel. A clear and passionate presentation of the person and work of Jesus Christ broke through the superstition and idolatry and won the hearts and minds of many people. And even when forces tried to stamp out the church by killing one of its leaders (2:13) the church stood and grew! The church in Pergamum confirms the old saying: “Trying to stamp out the Gospel is like hammering a nail—the harder you hit it, the deeper it goes!”

But Jesus had a serious complaint against that church. While the Christians of Pergamum were resisting the influence from without, they were carelessly indifferent to the influence from within. Jesus says: “I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam. You also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans” (2:14,15). Although the church was being vigilant on the front lines it was tolerating a Trojan horse in its midst.

And Jesus exhorts them to deal with it. “Repent,” He says, “or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war

against them [the people with the false ideas] with the sword of My mouth” (2:16). “Repent...or else.”

Why does Jesus speak this way? Why is Jesus so intolerant? In our day tolerance is exalted as a great virtue, especially on moral and religious matters. Here Jesus presents Himself as passionately intolerant. Why? Because He loves the truth, He speaks the truth, He is the truth. And because, as He claims elsewhere, falsehood and deception of any kind enslaves people. Jesus is passionately intolerant because He is passionately intolerant of people being enslaved. Yes, He is deeply grieved when people are imprisoned by illness or poverty or political oppression. But what grieves Him the most is people who are imprisoned by false ideas, false pre-suppositions about the world, ourselves and God. He is especially intolerant of false ideas being taught and perpetuated in His name.

So Jesus calls the church in Pergamum to repent of its careless tolerance. For as He says elsewhere, only the truth can set us free. We live fully human lives to the degree that we see ourselves as we really are, to the degree that we see the world as it really is and to the degree that we see God as God really is.

We learn from this message (and in the message to the church in Thyatira) that tolerance is not a biblical virtue. Patience is. Understanding is. Civility is. Graciousness is. Mercy is. Humility is. But not tolerance. For what is the first word of the Gospel? What was the first word out of Jesus’ mouth as He begins His public ministry? It is the word “repent.” The word simply means “to stop, turn around—you are heading in the wrong direction.” The word is *metanoia*, “think again.” “Change your mind.”

The Church is to be an “inclusive” community in the sense that all are welcome: Jew and Gentile free and slave, male and female—all are welcome! But the Church is not to be inclusive of all ideas, of all pre-suppositions, of all social and spiritual persuasions. All of us are welcome, but all of us are then called by the Head of the Church to repent, to change our minds, to submit our thinking to the thinking of Jesus Christ. As the apostle Paul says in his letter to the Romans: “Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (12:2). Or as J. B. Phillips renders it: “Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its mold, but let God remold your minds from within.”

Jesus is so intolerant of the false ideas influencing the Church because any form of falsehood makes for bondage. And thankfully He will not tolerate people being in bondage!

He labels the false ideas infiltrating the Pergamum church “the teaching of Balaam” and “the teaching of the Nicolaitans.” The two groups were probably spreading the same ideas. Nicolaitans is a Greek word, Balaam a Hebrew word—and they mean the same thing. “Nicolas”

is made up of two words: “nikan,” meaning “conqueror” or “lord;” and “laos,” meaning “the people.” “Balaam” is made up of two words: “Baal,” meaning “conqueror” or “lord;” and “am,” meaning “the people” (Barclay, p. 26). Both groups are appropriately named because both sought to conquer the minds of the people.

What were they teaching? Among other things, that it was okay for Christians to eat meat sacrificed to idols and to have sexual intercourse outside the bonds of the one man, one woman life covenant we call marriage. As we know from the rest of the New Testament, both problems—eating meat sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality—were major issues for first-century Christians.

People in that day would bring an animal to the temple of their favorite god. Part of the animal would be offered to that god and part was given back to the worshippers so that they could hold a sacred feast in honor of that god. When people became Christians, when they said yes to Jesus Christ as God, they faced a major dilemma. Friends and members of their families who had not yet come to Jesus would invite them to join them in the feasts. “Should a disciple go? And should she or he eat?” became major social-spiritual issues.

And sexuality became a major issue. The sexually super-charged atmosphere of our modern cities is nothing compared to that of the first century! Someone has said that chastity was one of the completely new virtues that the Gospel introduced into the ancient world. One ancient writer said: “We have prostitutes for the sake of pleasure; we have concubines for the sake of daily cohabitation; we have wives for the purpose of having children legitimately, and for having a faithful guardian of our household affairs” (Demosthenes, quoted by Barclay, p. 60). Goodness! How was a disciple of Jesus, who was formerly used to all of that, now supposed to live in such an atmosphere? What was the will of the Lord Jesus Christ on this issue?

Both issues figured in the first Ecumenical Council the Church held, the so-called Jerusalem Council, described in Acts 15. The Council laid down what it considered to be the minimum expressions of loyalty to Jesus. Here is the decree: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols, from blood, and from things strangled and from sexual immorality; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well” (Acts 15:28-29). The Balaamite-Nicolaitans were teaching the exact opposite! They were arguing that it was okay to eat meat sacrificed to idols and to give oneself to any sexual practice as long as it did not hurt anyone else.

Each of these issues involves more fundamental issues that we must come to terms with in our day. Consider the first: “eating food sacrificed to idols.” The problem here is that the Balaamite-Nicolaitans misunderstood the nature of reality. What do I mean?

Let me take you through their argument. (I know the argument because the apostle Paul quotes it and refutes it in his first letter to the church in Corinth). It goes like this: “Look, the idols made of wood and stone have no inherent reality. They are just wood and stone. So what harm is there in participating in a feast before an idol?” Sounds logical enough, doesn’t it?

The New Testament response is that participating in such a meal is not a neutral act. In both the Jewish and Gentile mind of that century, eating a meal carried SO much more meaning than it does in our day. For the Jew, “to eat and drink at someone’s table created a bond of mutual loyalty, and could be the culminating token of a covenant” (Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, p. 112). The Gentiles held a similar view. When a meal was held in honor of a god it was believed that the god itself was a guest. “Just as an unbreakable bond was forged between two people if they ate each other’s bread and salt, so a sacrificial meal forged a real communion between the god and its worshippers” (Barclay, *1 Corinthians*, p. 91). To eat meat sacrificed to idols meant forming a bond with the god represented by the idol.

“Ah,” say the Balaamite-Nicolaitans and most of us modern-day Christians, “idols are nothing” (1 Corinthians 10:19). There is no god in the wood or stone. So how could anyone be forming a bond with another god? Good question.

The New Testament answer? You are right: The wood is wood, the stone is stone. And you are right: The meat sacrificed at the feast and later sold in the market is just meat. But what you fail to understand is that when you eat at the table in an idolatrous banquet something spiritual is happening. Yes, the idol is nothing. But behind the idol, associated with the idol, lurks the presence and authority of unseen spiritual forces (Paul calls them “demons,” 1 Cor. 10:20). What the New Testament is arguing is that idolatry is never a neutral act. On the surface it appears to be so. But reality is never exhausted by surface appearances. Idol worship opens the worshipper up to the unseen realm. Idols, of course, are not made only of wood and stone. They are made of cultural values, political agendas, lifestyles, corporate ethos, even religious movements.

Idolatry of any sort is never a neutral act. Indeed, it is always a positive evil. New Testament scholar C. K. Barrett writes: “It was evil primarily because it robbed the true God of the glory due Him alone, but it was also evil because it meant that the person, engaged in a spiritual act and directing his worship toward something other than the one true God, was brought into intimate, relation with the lower, the evil, spiritual powers” (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 237).

And that is why Jesus Christ is passionately intolerant of the teachings of the Balaamite-Nicolaitans. That is why He says He hates their ideas (Rev. 2:6). They

misunderstood the nature of reality. We are physical creatures living in a physical universe. But we are also spiritual creatures living in a spiritual universe. And in this spiritual universe there is a battle going on. Every inch is a battlefield. There is no neutral territory.

Consider the other issue Jesus addresses in His message to the church in Pergamum. The Balaamite-Nicolaitans had developed a theology that justified sexual immorality. Why does Jesus hate this theology? Because He is down on sex? No. He created us as sexual beings. He hates their theology because the teaching buys into a basic misunderstanding of the human body. What do I mean?

Let me take you through their argument. Again, I know it because the apostle Paul quotes and refutes it in his first letter to the Corinthians. It goes like this: “Look, the body is not all that sacred. After all, it is only a collection of biological material. Ultimately you will be liberated from bodily existence. So what you do with your body now really does not matter. It is the soul that matters. You can do anything you please with your body.” Very contemporary, isn’t it?

Now, that line of reasoning, and its 21st century equivalent, tragically misunderstands the true nature of the body. The word the New Testament uses is “soma.” The “soma” is “not only the material form, it is also the imperishable form of the personality” (Weis, quoted by R. P. Martin, *1 Corinthians - Galatians*, p. 17). The “soma” is the real self: the whole person (Ralph Martin). The fact is, human beings do not have a soma, we are a soma (R. Bultmann). I do not have a body. I am a body. My body is not a house or prison for my real self. My body is my real self.

Therefore, what I *do with* my body I *do with* me. What I do to my *body* I do to *me*. My body may be my outer self and my soul my inner self, but both are the same self (Lewis Smedes, *Sex for Christians*, p. 131). Which means that more than biology is involved in any sex act. The act involves the “soma,” the real self: the very essence of a person’s being. Which is why two people seldom feel the same way toward each other afterward. They have shared more than biology; they have shared their “somas,” their very persons. And that is what the Balaamite-Nicolaitans failed to understand.

Dr. Lewis Smedes, Christian ethicist, puts it so well. “The prostitute” writes Smedes, “sells her body with an unwritten understanding that nothing personal will be involved in the deal. The buyer gets his sexual needs satisfied without having anything personally difficult to deal with afterwards. He pays his dues and they are done with each other.” Both, however, fail to grasp the fundamental nature of the act. “The reality of the act, unfelt and unnoticed by them is this: it unites them—body and soul—to each other.” So Smedes writes: “There is no such thing as casual sex, no matter how casual people are about it. The Christian assaults reality in his night out at

the brothel....” “Nobody can go to bed with someone and leave his soul parked outside.” Then Smedes writes this: “The demand for self-restraint is not a kill-joy rule plastered on the abundant life by anti-sexual saints. It is respect for reality. The moral law fits the inner reality of sex” (p. 128-133).

And that is why Jesus is passionately intolerant with the teachings of the Balaamite-Nicolaitans. That is why He hates their teaching. They failed to appreciate the nature of the human body. It is more than flesh and blood. It is my real self. And I violate my real self when I use my body contrary to the revealed will of God.

How the Lord of life grieves over the cities of our world. Not simply because we disobey God’s good law, but because in disobeying we break with reality. And He grieves. Do we? Do we grieve? Or have we been seduced into careless indifference? Have we become so callous that we carelessly tolerate the violation of personhood? It happens before our eyes night after night in television programs after 8:00 p.m. As one observer of culture has put it, “Two unmarried people approach the bed. The lighting and the music change, seducing us into feeling that this is going to be a wonderful moment. But it is not going to be a wonderful moment. It is a tragic moment.” It is “an assault on reality” with deep psychosomatic consequences. Which is why Jesus’ strong warning in this message is grace. He says: “I will come and fight against them with the sword of my mouth.” “I will fight.” Good news! He does not stand by carelessly.

How did the Balaamite-Nicolaitans’ position even get through the door of the church in Pergamum? The same way it gets through the door today. It was wrapped in the language of the Gospel. The Balaamite-Nicolaitans had not denied Jesus outright. They were likely saying something like this: “Look, you belong to Jesus. How can anything hurt you? You have been baptized! You have eaten from the Lord’s Table! Nothing can affect your relationship with Him.” Such a position reflects a misunderstanding of God’s grace. Grace does not protect us when we willfully choose to disobey. We can get hurt.

The Balaamite-Nicolaitans also probably argued that since Christians have been set free from law, they are free to do whatever they please. After all, did not Paul say, “Where sin increased, grace super abounded” (Romans 5:21). Let us then sin that grace may abound! That position also misunderstands God’s grace. Yes, grace welcomes us with open arms. Yes, grace forgives us when we repent again and again and again. But grace also transforms us. Grace metamorphoses us. Grace begins the process of repentance, of turning around and becoming like the Holy One.

Again, let me stress why Jesus is so passionately intolerant: falsehood enslaves. And to the degree that I see the world as it really is, to the degree that I see myself as I really am, to the degree that I see God’s grace as it really

is—to that degree I live a whole life. Jesus says: “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

The Lord with the sword in His mouth makes two wonderful promises to those who repent and join Him in His passion. First, “To the one who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna” (2: 17). Just as Israel was fed manna from heaven as she made her way toward the promised land, so the Church will be fed as she makes her way toward the City of God. “I am the Bread of Life” Jesus says, “which comes down out of heaven and gives life to the world” (John 6:38,51). He is saying to us, why are you fooling around eating at the tables of lesser gods, when you can come to me and eat food that truly satisfies? I am the manna. Feed on Me.

Second, “To the one who overcomes I will give a white stone, and a new name written on the stone, which no one knows but he who receives it” (2: 17). What is this gift? I know of at least nine different interpretations, each one having great merit. Perhaps the gift is so rich it involves all nine! The interpretation that makes the best sense to me is the so called “tessara hospitalis.” When two friends were about to part they would divide a white stone in half. Each friend would inscribe his or her name on one of the halves and give it to the other (G. Campbell-Morgan). It became the symbol of their friendship and the symbol of their promise to maintain that friendship as long as the stone lasted. Jesus is promising intimate friendship to those who overcome. His name is on my half and My name—my new name that He gives me—is written on His half. The promise is that I will know the fullness of His name even as He knows the fullness of mine. I shall know Him even as He knows me.

How do we make it in this battle for the mind? By humbly acknowledging that we do not have the corner on the truth, and by then constantly exposing ourselves to the sharp two-edged sword that comes from Jesus’ mouth. By humbling ourselves and constantly opening our minds to the living and active Word of God that is able to penetrate our distorted ideas and lead us to the truth that sets us free.

Brothers and sisters, here is the good news: Jesus Christ will not let us be captive to false ideas. He is fighting for our minds.

**Note: Our mailer experienced problems in mailing the Jul/Aug issue of *Theology Matters*. If you did not receive your copy, call or email us to receive one. We apologize for any inconvenience this has caused.**

# Repent, Reform, Overcome: Vote “NO” on Christian Educator Amendments 02-A, 02-C

by Carol Shanholtzer

## Problems with Certified Christian Educator Amendments

While the place of Certified Christian Educators in the life of our denomination is not a front-burner topic for most Presbyterians, we would do well to carefully scrutinize the ten proposed amendments to the *Book of Order* on which presbyteries will vote this year that are related to Christian educators. If approved, the amendments will establish a specialty of “educational ministry” within the office of Minister of the Word and Sacrament and will enable Certified Christian Educators to be ordained as Ministers of the Word and Sacrament, marking a very significant change in our understanding of the office of Minister. Other amendments will result in all Certified Christian Educators (whether they are ordained Ministers or not) relating to presbyteries in a manner very similar to that of Ministers of the Word and Sacrament, blurring the distinction between the two.

Persons holding Certified Christian Educator credentials are poised to play an increasing role in our denomination. Currently there are 414 Certified Christian Educators. An additional 279 persons are working toward certification. There have reportedly been another 300 inquiries into the program during the past five years<sup>1</sup>. The report sent to the General Assembly indicated a “terrible scarcity” of persons with gifts and training to lead educational ministries and stated that churches telephoned Churchwide Personnel Services daily seeking names of experienced Christian educators, but only 20 educators were registered with the Church Leadership Connection<sup>2</sup>. Certified Christian Educators have an increasingly active presence at meetings of General Assembly and currently are granted voice without vote at presbytery meetings by the *Book of Order* (G-14.0705c).

Before briefly addressing the specifics of the amendments, it is important to focus on the shift in foundational understandings that would occur if these amendments were to be enacted. Although Christian educators play a vital role in the life of many congregations, so do directors of music, youth ministry leaders, children’s ministry specialists, administrators, and a variety of other staff. Among church staff, many are persons of deep faith and

exemplary commitment. A number of church staff are highly educated and hold advanced degrees. All of them perform work that is crucial in the life of the church and worthy of our respect and recognition. But none of those persons functions as a Minister of the Word and Sacrament.

The calling of a pastor is central to our understanding of the office of Minister. The *Book of Order* describes the work of pastors in this way: “The pastor is responsible for studying, teaching, and preaching the Word, for administering Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, for praying with and for the congregation. With the elders, the pastor is to encourage the people in the worship and service of God; to equip and enable them for their tasks within the church and their mission in the world; to exercise pastoral care, devoting special attention to the poor, the sick, the troubled, and the dying; to participate in governing responsibilities . . . .” (G-6.0202b).

The *Book of Order* also recognizes specialized validated ministries, distinct from that of pastor, to which Ministers of the Word and Sacrament may be called: “When ministers are designated as educators, chaplains, pastoral counselors, campus ministers, missionaries, partners in mission, evangelists, administrators, social workers, consultants, or in other specific tasks appropriate to the ministry of the church . . . .” (G-6.0203).

The *Book of Order* therefore already contains provisions for Ministers of the Word and Sacrament who perform special work as “educators,” just as it does for Ministers of the Word and Sacrament who serve in specialized ministries as “chaplains” or “pastoral counselors.” Why formalize a ministry specialty in Christian education, but not in theology, or New Testament, or pastoral counseling? The proposed amendments even remove the current ordination requirement that a sermon be preached to the ordaining presbytery or its committee. The amendment would allow teaching of a lesson to be substituted. It seems quite odd to ordain someone to the Ministry of the Word and Sacrament when it is anticipated that the person’s work will involve neither preaching the Word nor administration of the Sacraments.

The constitutional amendments related to Certified Christian Educators on which presbyteries will vote this year are presented in two groups on the Office of the

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General Assembly's web site<sup>3</sup>. Group "02-A" creates a specialty of "educational ministry" within the office of Minister of the Word and Sacrament and authorizes ordination of Certified Christian Educators as Ministers of the Word and Sacrament. Group "02-C" deals primarily with the relationships of Christian educators to presbyteries. A summary of the specifics of each proposed amendment is presented below, followed by a brief critique.

Five amendments are presented in the "02-A" section. The Advisory Committee on the Constitution (ACC) recommended that the General Assembly "disapprove" of all of these amendments.

**--02-A.1: Add "or teacher" to the historical paragraph derived from the original 1789 Form of Government which was added to the *Book of Order* last year as G-6.0202a.**

The paragraph describes a number of "names expressive of the duties" of a Minister of the Word and Sacrament. The amended version would read, "As he or she feeds them with spiritual food, he or she is termed pastor OR TEACHER." The ACC recommended against this amendment since it "would violate the primary motive of adding this section to the *Book of Order*, namely to recapture the historic definition of a minister as pastor."<sup>3</sup> While the change is meaningless, it exemplifies an unnecessary tinkering with the *Book of Order* which accomplishes nothing.

**--02-A.2: Add a "demonstrated competencies" requirement (for persons seeking ordination as Minister of the Word and Sacrament to "educational ministry") to section G-14.0310b(3).**

This is the section that contains the educational requirements for being certified ready for examination, such as presenting a transcript showing satisfactory grades from an accredited theological institution and plans to complete a theological degree, including Hebrew and Greek biblical exegesis. Specific wording is: "those persons seeking a call to educational ministry shall provide evidence of (1) educational skills attested in the supervised practice of ministry and (2) demonstrated competency in (a) teaching and learning, (b) human and faith development, (c) religious education history, theory and practice, (d) educational leadership, e.g. group dynamics, conflict management, and administration, (e) program and curriculum design and evaluation, (f) congregational studies."

While the current requirements in this section of the *Book of Order* are objectively described, the educational ministry "demonstrated competencies" that would be required are vague. More problematic still is the fact that these additional requirements apply to "those seeking a call to educational ministry," but what constitutes an "educational ministry" is not defined. The ministry of most pastors contains a significant "educational ministry" component. To whom would these requirements really

apply? The ACC pointed out that since "educator" is just one of the validated ministries listed in G-6.0203, it is inappropriate to specify in the *Book of Order* particular skills needed by one specialized ministry without adding comparable skill sets for the other validated ministries. The ACC emphasized that the *Book of Order* already allows presbyteries the necessary latitude for measuring the qualifications and suitability of persons for the office of Minister of the Word and Sacrament and for the particular ministries to which they are called. This amendment adds unnecessary and inappropriate detail to the *Book of Order* and raises questions about which calls would involve the special requirements. The other very significant ambiguity is that the additional wording printed above (which would become paragraph "b.") does not specify that this "educational ministry" requirement really is "in addition to" (rather than a substitute for) the diploma from a theological institution plus the specified Hebrew and Greek biblical exegesis requirements found in the current paragraph (which would become paragraph "a."). Although there is another reference to a diploma from a theological institution in G-14.0402a ("Examination for ordination"), that reference does not specify that competencies in Hebrew and Greek are required.

**--02-A.3: Allow presentation of a lesson plan as a substitute for preaching of a sermon as part of the ordination requirements.**

This amendment includes changes to both G-14.0305j(6) "Candidacy process" and G-14.0402a "Examination for ordination." ACC's comment was: "This would not only dramatically change the requirements for ordination to ministry of Word and Sacrament, but also alter profoundly the theological bedrock of the office of minister. The Reformed tradition and emphasis upon the centrality of the Word would be eroded and blemished. Simply, this amendment is not needed. Presbyteries already can prescribe to a candidate the need for additional information or demonstration of ability for a specialized ministry." Do we really want to begin to ordain as Ministers of the Word and Sacrament persons who have never been required to demonstrate to their presbytery their competence in preaching?

**--02-A.4: Provide a special paragraph in the "Extraordinary circumstances" section allowing certain persons already qualified as Certified Christian Educators and meeting specified time requirements to be "grandfathered in" and ordained as Ministers of the Word and Sacrament.**

The ACC estimated that 100 Certified Christian Educators would be eligible for ordination as Ministers of the Word and Sacrament through this proposed process. It allows for waiving the requirements for a college diploma, a diploma from an accredited theological institution including the required courses in Hebrew and Greek biblical exegesis, and passing the five ordination exams. The ACC found this provision to be unnecessary because of the power presbyteries already have to waive particular

ordination requirements by a 3/4 vote of presbytery. If persons currently working as educators feel called to the Ministry of the Word and Sacrament, they are free to pursue such ordination under the current provisions of the *Book of Order*. It is neither appropriate nor wise to allow a special exemption from particular ordination requirements for Certified Christian Educators seeking ordination as Ministers which we would not allow for others.

**--02-A.5: Allow a Christian educator already employed by a church to be called as Associate Pastor at that same church.**

While the first sentence of the amendment applies only to Certified Christian Educators who are ordained as Ministers under the “grandfather clause” in amendment 02-A.4, the second sentence, with no ending date, allows any Christian educator who is ordained as a Minister of Word and Sacrament after serving in a congregation for at least one year as a Christian educator to be called as an Associate Pastor to that congregation. The ACC notes that this would mark a significant exception to our practice of requiring a full, open search for a minister for an installed position. Such educators would be Ministers, but without the restriction placed on all other Ministers regarding eligibility for a call to an installed position at a church they are currently serving in another capacity.

The first four of the five amendments in the “02-C” group were recommended by the Christian Educator Certification Council. The amendments in this section would make Certified Christian Educators (whether they are ordained as Ministers or not) very similar to Ministers in the way they relate to presbytery.

**--02-C.1: Create two certification levels of Christian Educators: “Certified Christian Educator” (requiring an M.A. degree or equivalent and completion of the certification process) and “Certified Associate Christian Educator” (requiring a B.A. degree or equivalent and completion of the certification process).** The ACC noted that this amendment would tend to move the *Book of Order* away from being a constitutional document and make it function more as a manual. ACC further suggested that instead of filling the *Book of Order* with these details, it would be more appropriate for the Educator Certification Council to handle the definition and qualifications for different levels of certification and that these criteria belong outside the Constitution.

**--02-C.2: Add knowledge of worship and sacraments as an area of examination for Certified Christian Educators.** The lack of this requirement in the past indicates that worship and the sacraments was not an area of focus for Certified Christian Educators. Indeed, it is absent from the primary duties of Christian educators described in the *Book of Order*: “Christian educators will perform a variety of tasks including teaching the Bible, recommending curriculum materials and resources, training and supporting lay workers, and planning and

administering the educational program of their congregations. Christian educators are accountable to the session and under the supervision of the pastor.” (G-14.0700). This amendment, like several others, increases the similarities between Certified Christian Educators and Ministers of the Word and Sacrament. The fact remains, however, that standards for nonordained staff really don't belong in the *Book of Order*, but rather should be established outside the Constitution by the Educator Certification Council.

**--02-C.3: Add more record-keeping and reporting functions for presbyteries that parallel those for Ministers.**

Specifically, presbyteries would be required to annually report, to both synod and General Assembly, certifications of Christian educators, annually submit a list of Certified Associate Christian Educators (in addition to Certified Christian Educators, as it does now) to the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, and maintain a presbytery roster of Certified Associate Christian Educators (in addition to Certified Christian Educators, as it does now) who are entitled to the privilege of the floor with voice at presbytery meetings. (None of the amendments grant privilege of the floor with voice to Certified Associate Christian Educators, hence that reference in the reporting seems odd.) This amendment establishes a relationship to the presbytery for another category of nonordained staff (Certified Associate Christian Educators) who should more properly be relating to their employing sessions, not to the presbytery.

**--02-C.4: Add establishing guidelines for compensation and benefits for Certified Associate Christian Educators to the Book of Order as well as requiring presbyteries to provide a service of recognition and for access to the Committee on Ministry for Certified Associate Christian Educators.**

(The requirement for presbyteries to establish minimum compensation and benefits requirements for Certified Christian Educators is already included in the *Book of Order*, as is the requirement for presbyteries to provide a service of recognition for Certified Christian Educators and to grant them access to the Committee on Ministry.) This amendment provides parallel requirements for the newly-proposed category of Certified Associate Christian Educators. It is moving in the wrong direction to add to the *Book of Order* requirements for another category of nonordained staff. There is no reason Certified Associate Christian Educators should have special access to the Committee on Ministry which similar staff, such as youth directors, do not have. In fact, it does not seem appropriate for Certified Associate Christian Educators to have access to the Committee on Ministry at all since “Christian educators are accountable to the session and under the supervision of the pastor” (G-14.0700).

**--02-C.5: Add to the committee on ministry's duties the responsibility to serve as pastor and counselor to Certified Christian Educators.**

In recommending disapproval of this amendment, ACC pointed out that currently Chapter XIV leaves each presbytery free to determine the manner in which it will carry out its responsibilities regarding Christian educators (which may not be through the Committee on Ministry which is already overburdened in many presbyteries). The ACC recommended disapproval of this amendment because Certified Christian Educators already have access to the Committee on Ministry (G-11.0503). This amendment, however, goes beyond access in requiring the Committee on Ministry to relate to Certified Christian Educators just as it does to Ministers in serving as a pastor and counselor to them and “facilitating relations between congregations, Ministers, and Certified Christian Educators, and the presbytery, and to settle disputes on behalf of the presbytery where possible and expedient.” The amendment significantly strengthens the parallel of having Certified Christian Educators (whether they are ordained Ministers or not) relate to the presbytery in the same manner as do Ministers, which is not appropriate since “Christian educators are accountable to the session and under the supervision of the pastor” (G-14.0700).

It is vital that churches recognize and appreciate the contributions of all of their staff, but it is also crucial that in our efforts to recognize the valuable contributions of Certified Christian Educators, we do not make changes which are inconsistent with our understanding of the

office of Minister of the Word and Sacrament and its unique role in our polity. Simply stated, Certified Christian Educators should not be ordained as Ministers or relate to presbytery as Ministers because they are not Ministers. The amendments even go beyond allowing ordination of Certified Christian Educators as Ministers of the Word and Sacrament because by adding an “educational ministry” specialty of Minister of the Word and Sacrament, the amendments open the way for the *Book of Order* to specify additional requirements for other specialized ministries. We do not need more detailed requirements in the *Book of Order*. There are many callings in the church. Christian educators should be appreciated and recognized for their unique role, but it is very different from that of Minister of the Word and Sacrament. For these reasons, all of the amendments in the “02-A” and “02-C” sections should be defeated.

References

<sup>1</sup> Trautman, Margaret Campbell, “What is a Certified Christian Educator?” Outlook Guest Viewpoint, The Presbyterian Outlook, 2001. <http://www.presoutlook.com/trautman.html>

<sup>2</sup> Reports to the 214th General Assembly 2002, 05 Assembly Committee on Church Orders and Ministry, 05-05, page 4, Rationale for Full Report.

<sup>3</sup> Alphabetical List of Amendments, Office of the General Assembly [http://www.pcusa.org/oga/list\\_amendments2002.htm#A](http://www.pcusa.org/oga/list_amendments2002.htm#A)  
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