

# Theology Matters

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## Confessing Jesus Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life in a Pluralistic Culture

### Part II

## Jesus Christ is the Way

by James Edwards

In my previous article in *Theology Matters* I considered Jesus' declaration, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). This is the only instance in the Gospels of Jesus using "the way" as a self-reference. The Gospels speak of preparing the way for Jesus (Matt. 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:27) or of Jesus teaching the way (Matt. 22:16; Mark 12:14; Luke 20:21), but not of Jesus *as* the way. Other terminology that Jesus used of himself was similarly guarded and even elusive. He refused to claim for himself leading Old Testament titles such as king (Mark 15:2; John 6:15) or Messiah (Matt. 26:63–64), although he welcomed the title "teacher" and occasionally "prophet" (Luke 4:24; 11:32). His most preferred self-designation was the Son of Man, an Old Testament title that was uncommon and poorly understood. In the sense he often used it of himself—as a divine figure who would come on the clouds of heaven to receive dominion over the earth—Son of Man occurs only once in the Old Testament (Dan. 7:13–14). When crowds pressed Jesus if he was the promised Messiah of Israel, he employed the Son of Man title in response: "The Son of Man must be lifted up." But this obscured rather than clarified his identity, for the crowds inquired, "Who is this Son of Man?" (John 12:34). Throughout the Gospels, people are undecided and even mystified about Jesus' identity, and this is largely the result of

Jesus' reserve in self-disclosure. The most common conjecture about his identity was that he was a figure returned from the past, either John the Baptist or Elijah or one of the prophets. These opinions were shared equally by non-disciples, indeed by Herod Antipas, an arch-opponent of Jesus,<sup>1</sup> as well as by his own disciples.<sup>2</sup> That opponents and advocates were united in this judgment indicates, surprisingly perhaps, that being a follower of Jesus did not necessarily give one an inside track in understanding his identity.

Professor Eduard Schweizer, with whom I studied at the University of Zürich, believed that Jesus' avoidance and even subversion of messianic imagery and titles was an all-important first step in understanding his person and mission. Schweizer called Jesus "The Man Who Fits No Formula."<sup>3</sup> By avoiding stereotypical titles, suggested Schweizer, Jesus skirted the preconceptions that such titles and imagery sparked in peoples' imaginations,

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requiring them to decide for themselves who he might be.

What was true of the master in this respect was also true of his disciples, for the first generation of Jesus-followers developed its distinctive communal life and missionary program without reference to a “brand name.” The earliest name for Jesus-followers was probably *mathetes*, which we translate as “disciples,” although the word itself means “students,” “learners,” or “apprentices,” and thus stands in correlation to the common designation of Jesus as “teacher.” As other names developed, “disciples” was retained, although it was often altered to “the twelve (disciples)” in deference to the original disciples of Jesus. “Nazarenes” and “Galileans” were early names associated with geographical locations of Jesus’ followers. Similes and analogies also appear as early designations of believers: “God’s people,” “Israel in the Spirit,” “Seed of Abraham,” “Chosen People,” “the Elect,” “Twelve Tribes,” and “Servants of God.” Many of these names did not survive, but they are informative, for all of them recall Old Testament images and designations, attesting that the early church rooted its self-understanding in, and sought names and analogies from, God’s covenant with Israel. The first Christians, in other words, did not think of themselves as a novelty but rather as a continuation, indeed a consummation, of God’s redemptive work in Israel that had begun with the call of Abraham.

In addition to “disciples,” three other designations emerge with increasing frequency in the New Testament: “believers” (Gk. *pisteuontes*), “brothers” (Gk. *adelphoi*), and “saints” (Gk. *hagioi*). Both disciples and believers occur with reference to followers during Jesus’ earthly ministry, the latter being especially prominent in the Gospel and First Epistle of John. The Greek noun *pistis* (“faith,” “belief”) never occurs in the Gospel of John, but the verb *pisteuein* (“to believe”) occurs nearly a hundred times, accentuating the importance of active commitment to the person and proclamation of Jesus. “Brothers” and “saints” appear in the New Testament with reference to the post-resurrection community of Jesus-followers. Brothers identifies believers in terms of family members. The family was the most important social unit of Jewish life, and it defines connectivity in Christian communities in terms of genetic bonds and sibling relationships. “Saints,” on the other hand, is a cultic term, deriving from Israelite worship communities centered in tabernacle, temple, and synagogue. The holy God sanctified his dwelling place in tabernacle and temple, and, by extension, in the people called by his name. “I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy” (Lev. 11:44). The early church appropriated this commandment (1 Pet. 1:16) and

applied it to believers in Jesus Christ, “who loved the church and gave himself up for it, to make it holy, cleansing it by the washing of the water in the word” (Eph. 5:25–26).

## The Way

The first name for the post-resurrection Christian movement to gain widespread currency was “the way” (Gk. *he hodos*). The way was a self-designation of early Christians that was recognized by both believers and non-believers in Palestine and beyond. The Acts of the Apostles is the only book of the New Testament to refer to the church as “the way.” Acts employs it with reference to Christians in Damascus and Ephesus (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23), and in the mouth of the Apostle Paul, “the way” designates believers in speeches before hostile Jewish crowds (Acts 22:4), in trials before the Sanhedrin (Acts 24:14, 22), and before Roman officials, including Felix, Festus, and Agrippa II (Acts 24:22; 26:13). These uses attest to the scope and versatility of the way as a designation for Jesus-followers by mid-first century.

What Acts does not tell us, and what scholars are at a loss to explain, is why early Christians chose to identify their public persona as “the way.” For my part, I believe the way of God in the Old Covenant and the way of Jesus in the New set the stage for the use of “the way” as a self-designation of the early church. As we have noted, the way does not occur as a title of Jesus or of Jesus-followers in the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament, and neither does it appear as a name for the people or tribes of Israel in the Old Testament. The way does, however, appear as a characteristic of God’s people in the prophetic tradition, in which God promises to make of his people “one heart and one way” (Jer. 32:38–39).<sup>4</sup> More importantly, the Hebrew verb *halak* (“to walk”) appears in the Old Testament as a summary metaphor of faithfulness to God.<sup>5</sup> The early Hebrews were semi-nomadic, a people “on the move,” an exodus-people *en route* from Egypt to the Promised Land. Their life and faith in God were a pilgrimage from slaves to Chosen People, from no-people to Holy People. They experienced God in the journey to the Promised Land, and ever after they interpreted faith as a journey. *Halak* captures his sense. The Greek translators of the Hebrew Bible rendered *halak* regularly in the Septuagint by *poreuesthai* (“to travel,” “to make a journey”) rather than simply by *erchesthai* (“to go”). For Israel, the experience of God was a journey of faith. God was both the destination of the journey and the companion on the journey. The earliest exemplars of the journey of faith were Enoch and Noah, both of whom “walked with God” (Gen. 5:22, 24; 6:9). For the Israelites, God was not an idea or object, but a commanding Presence who required a mental, volitional, and behavioral response, a “walk” of the whole life.

The early Christians understood their relationship with Jesus similarly. They characterize his kingdom variously as “the way of peace” (Luke 1:79), “the way of truth” (2 Pet. 2:2), “the way of righteousness” (2 Pet. 2:21; Matt. 21:32), “the way of salvation” (Acts 16:17), or all-inclusively, “the way(s) of the Lord” (Acts 13:10; 18:25). The early Christians also experienced the ministry of Jesus “on the move.” Jesus called disciples to follow him as he walked the shore of the Sea of Galilee and passed through Galilean villages. He was the Son of Man who had no place to lay his head (Matt. 8:20; Luke 9:58). “On the way” to Caesarea-Philippi he revealed his messianic call to the disciples (Mark 8:27–30; Matt. 16:13–20). “On the way” to Jerusalem he revealed his impending passion to the disciples (Mark 10:32–34; Matt. 20:17–19; Luke 18:31–34). The long mid-section of the Gospel of Luke (chs. 9–18) portrays Jesus not simply “on the way” to Jerusalem, but *as* the way of life. On the walk to Emmaus, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets Jesus explained to the disciples the things concerning himself in all the scriptures” (Luke 24:27). I believe that Jesus’ climactic self-reference in John 14:6, “I am *the way*, the truth, and the life,” is an all-encompassing metaphor of both himself and the gospel.

The early church thus had strong precedents from both Israel’s self-understanding and Jesus’ self-portrayal to adopt “the way” as its earliest and most comprehensive self-designation. The early church never employs “the way” as a self-reference in the plural, as though the church were an amalgamation of ways, one way among equally valid ways, perhaps, or one truth among others. With reference to the early church, the way always appears in the singular, not with reference to the way of something beyond itself—“the way of the gospel,” perhaps, or “the way of life”—but absolutely as “*the way*.” Its governing antecedent is the way of God set forth in the First Covenant, which was incarnated in the Word of God in the Second Covenant, to which the early church as “the way” bears witness in its proclamation and life.

The way includes the gospel, of course, its faithful witness in the *kerygma* of church proclamation, and the proper identification of its message with the content and character of divine revelation in Jesus of Nazareth. Additionally, the way includes the ethical form of the Christian life, both personal and corporate, as a truth that is *lived* as well as articulated. One might even say that the way is best articulated in *life*. And further still, the way entails a deep transformation with regard to things unseen and unspoken. We refer to such a transformation as a perception of reality or a “world view.” This way, too, was learned and embraced rather than a natural response. It included identifying with the way of God in this world as demonstrated in the way of Jesus of

Nazareth, living in trust of God’s promises in spite of all to the contrary, embracing of suffering as a means of disarming powers of evil, and the hope of eternal bliss in which God’s sovereign purpose is finally and forever fulfilled. The way was thus a composite of the cardinal virtues—faith, love, and hope—and the *effect* of these virtues in the lives, both personal and corporate, of those who hold them. “The way” was a way of seeing, believing, and living that reflects the Kingdom of God as introduced by Jesus, of which the church is here and now the first-fruits, the final fulfillment of which is awaited in faith and hope.

“The way” was thus the earliest public name of the Jesus-movement. As we know, however, the way was not the most important or most enduring name. It was rightly superseded by the name that continues to designate Jesus-followers to this day—“Christian.” Christian is the most proper and deserving name, because unlike “way,” which describes a composite of characteristics, “Christian” identifies believers by the Lord of the church, “our savior Jesus Christ who gave himself in our behalf, in order that he might ransom us from all evil and cleanse for himself a people chosen and zealous for good works” (Tit. 2:13–14).

### The Way Today

I wish to note two things about “the way” that I think relevant for the church today, and conclude with an illustration. The first point of relevance is that the growth and development of Christianity was not impeded by lack of a formal name. The marketing industry has drilled into our modern minds that a product cannot be successful and profitable without a “brand name,” distinctive logo, or cipher that triggers a desired response in the minds of consumers. Marketing was of course not the powerhouse in the ancient world that it is today, but it was not unimportant. The leading institutions and images of Judaism were consciously symbolic, including temple architecture, elaborate priestly vestments, worship rituals, Torah scrolls, tefillin, and tassels on garments. These and other symbols promoted and publicized Judaism. The leading institutions and images of the Roman Empire symbolized and promoted it on a grander scale, including the ubiquity of theaters and arenas that showcased the empire’s power and prestige in parades and pageantry, athletic competitions and blood sports, seats of honor, military standards, and insignia. The Roman logo *SPQR* (*senatus populusque romanus*, “the senate and people of Rome”) was omnipresent, and Roman citizenship was the single greatest passport to privilege in the empire. How utterly exceptional was “the way,” by contrast. Without any visual identification whatsoever, and with only its itinerant preachers and primitive churches that met in private homes and in

remote caves, early Christians set roots that extended deeply and widely in the ancient world.

The early roots of the way constituted a broad range of essential tenets—including identification with the name and person of Jesus, bearing witness to Jesus in a summary proclamation known as the *kerygma*, weekly gatherings (increasingly on Sunday), sharing common meals, acts of mercy, and missionary preaching and teaching. One of the earliest badges—a genuinely red badge of courage—was the willingness of early Christians to suffer persecution. Arthur Darby Nock, the great 20<sup>th</sup> century American historian of early Christianity, makes the remarkable observation that in the first two centuries Jesus-followers largely multiplied beneath the radar of the ancient world. Christians did not wear distinctive clothing, they did not identify with official ceremonies, they visited no temples, they had no priestly class, they did not showcase themselves in any particular way to the ancient world. One of the first and most lasting ways the ancient world become aware of Christians, maintains Nock, was as *martyrs*. Nock employed *martyrs* primarily with reference to physical martyrdom, but the word includes the full significance of the Greek root *martyrein*, meaning a genuine *witness* to Jesus Christ in both life and death. It was not in the quest for power and influence, but rather in distinctive acts of Christian witness that the profile of Christians first emerged in the ancient world. May we be reminded that martyrs are once again dying in our world in unprecedented numbers, and Nock’s observation is equally true today: the world that otherwise feigns disinterest, perhaps even dislike, for Christianity is today, as in the ancient world, profoundly influenced when believers in Christ bear genuine and even costly witness to their faith in Jesus Christ. Despite what marketing analysts say, brand names, logos, and ciphers are not the most important thing in the success of a product. The most important factor in the success of the product is its *value*. The greatest “market factor” of Christianity has always been the witness of the transformed human life.

My second point is that the relationship of Christian churches to modern Western culture, including American culture, more closely approximates the relationship of the early church to the ancient world, both Jewish and Roman, than at any point in modern history. The tires of “mainline Christianity” that gained famous traction in 1950s America have grown smooth in American society today. In attempts to be more accessible, mainline churches are dropping denominational references from their names; they are relaxing ecclesial practices that have long characterized and governed them, such as rites related to weddings, celebration of sacraments, ordination, church discipline, and confirmation classes. While mainline churches have

declined, independent and non-traditional churches have grown, churches that are not determined by, and are often consciously divorced from, the traditions and authorities of mainline ecclesiologies. This newer church phenomenon often reaches people unreached by mainline churches, but its reliance on charismatic pastoral personalities who, typically, are sparsely theologically trained and not accountable to larger pastoral networks often results in spectacular but short-lived seasons of bloom. The American ecclesiastical scene has become increasingly eclectic and individualistic; like the period of the Judges, each does what seems right in its own eyes.

The church in both Western and American culture looks more like “the way” of the early church in the Book of Acts than most churches of memorable past have looked. How can churches that are increasingly unfettered from historic and ecclesiastical traditions, and untutored in theological resources, connect with the deep, rich, and lasting traditions of historic Christianity? How can churches that no longer enjoy prestige with the dominant culture affirm this reality by reclaiming and proclaiming the gospel without both the privileges and compromises of cultural entitlement? How can the church learn from the disastrous consequences of accommodating with ruling powers, and trust instead in the saving sufficiency of the gospel of *Jesus Christ*, who is the one Lord of the one Church, and whose life, death, and resurrection are Good News for rich and poor, privileged and dispossessed, and people of all colors and cultures, languages and locations, tribes and traditions. How can the church repent of ecclesiastical grandstanding and devote itself to faithful and humble proclamation of the Word and actions characterized by charity and sacrifice. The way of the church is not the way of the world. It is the way of Jesus Christ *in the world*, who is the Word Made Flesh, the one Word of God attested to us in Scriptures whom we are to love, trust, fear, and obey in life and in death.

How can the church be “the way” today? Perhaps this illustration can point to some first steps. In 2003 my son Mark joined me in fulfilling a lifelong dream of mine to climb the Mittellegi Ridge of the Eiger in Switzerland. Mark and I took the Jungfrauoch train from Kleine Scheidegg as far as the Eismeer station, where got out, met our guides, and climbed to a hut at 11,000 feet on the Mittellegi Ridge. We spent the night there. At 3:30 A.M. next morning we were on the ridge climbing toward the summit. The mountain was largely snow-free, weather was superb, and at 8:30 A.M. we ate lunch on the summit. With a whole day before us, our guides suggested we forego the normal descent down the West Face and make a more adventurous traverse behind the Monch to the summit of the Jungfrauoch, from which we could take the train down to the base of the Eiger.

The new route was long and arduous. We had not eaten since the morning and had exhausted our supply of water. By mid-afternoon we had only to cross a long ice ridge, at the far end of which the Jungfrauoch train terminal was in sight. The ice ridge was as narrow as the roof ridge of a house, and it fell away precipitously on both sides. There was no way to protect ourselves with ice pitons, and any use of an ice ax would throw one off balance. The only way across was a sheer act of balance—for a hundred yards.

I was exhausted and thirsty, and this final obstacle—greater than anything we had faced on the climb—sapped my strength and confidence. I could not summon the courage to cross the ridge. My guide, Jürg Anderegg, sensed my crisis, and since I was roped to him, my crisis

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 6:1–15; Luke 9:7–8

<sup>2</sup> Matt 6:14; Mark 8:28; Luke 9:19.

<sup>3</sup> Eduard Schweizer, *Jesus*, trans. David Green (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1971), ch. 2; also *Jesus Christ: The Man from Nazareth and the Exalted Lord*. The 1984 Sizemore Lectures in

was his as well. He could have reasoned with me, lectured me, even commanded or shamed me, but he seemed to know those would not work. He chose a different option, and it got me across the ridge. “We’re going to do this together,” he said. “I will walk in front of you on the ridge. Don’t look to either side. Follow me, watch my feet, I’ll take you across.” Jürg’s plan, his presence, his pace ... they brought me across.

Jürg did not *show* me the way, he *was* the way! May the church be such a *way* today.

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Biblical Studies at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, ed. Hulitt Gloer (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1987), 86.

<sup>4</sup> The LXX (Jer 39:38–39) reads “another heart and another way.”

<sup>5</sup> On *halak*, see F. J. Helfmeyer, *halakh*, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 3.388–403.

# Jesus Christ is the Truth

by Richard Burnett

“Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.”

*The Theological Declaration of Barmen, Article 1*

Last time I talked about how certain “events and powers, figures and truths” were vying for recognition and acknowledgement in 1934 as sources of revelation, “apart from and besides this one Word of God.” I talked about how certain understandings of nature, history, and experience were proclaimed as decisive, definitive, and incontrovertible truths of our being “apart from and besides this one Word of God,” and why the Confessing Church in Germany rejected them as such. It rejected them as such, i.e., “apart from and besides this one Word of God,” because they constituted competing standards of authority. The point of Barmen’s first article is that Jesus Christ, as he attested for us in Holy Scripture, is not just one truth among others. He is *the truth*, the standard by which all others are measured.

Of course, this raises many questions, not least of which is: If “Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture” is *the truth*, what *is* the relationship between him and other truths? It’s a big question and I cannot

begin to answer it here with the degree of academic precision some of you may expect. But let me begin by responding to a concern I suspect some of you may have.

So long as we define truth simply as that which corresponds to reality, talking about truth is fairly easy. It’s easy until we’re asked, “What do you mean by *reality*?” “What do you mean by *correspond*?” Some of you may have noticed yesterday that I did not elaborate a general theory of truth, a coherence or correspondence theory, or any abstract, philosophical theory of truth. Some may have been disappointed. I suspect most were relieved. Yet some of you may wonder, “How will people ever believe Jesus Christ is the truth if they don’t even believe there is such a thing as truth?” I recognize this concern and think the Bible does as well. But the Bible doesn’t address this question abstractly.

Few scenes in the Bible are full of richer irony than when Pontius Pilate stands before Jesus and asks, “What is truth?” It’s rich because John’s Gospel repeatedly refers to Jesus as “the truth.” But it’s also rich because of who is asking question. It’s a Roman! Since when have Romans been interested in truth? Oh they’re famous for being great warriors, architects, and builders, but not for

thinking about the truth. For them, truth tended to be a nice idea, but not really necessary to get things done. Yet Pilate asks about truth. But he can't recognize the truth even when it is standing in front of him, talking to him.

When it comes to truth, the Bible knows our preference for abstraction. Like the woman at the well, who, instead of answering Jesus' question, preferred to discuss a general religious question, "Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship" (John 4:20).

I'm not at all so sure people have really changed so much in this regard. It has been said that if given the choice between having *the truth* or having *the quest for the truth*, modern people tend to prefer the quest. The reason, it is said, is because modern people are more skeptical about *having* the truth. They don't think truth is so *hidable*. But another reason is that claiming to know the truth places demands on us. Once you claim there is such a thing as truth, you're accountable to it. You've admitted there's a standard. That's why talking about truth is so dangerous.

I'm not at all so sure modern people are more skeptical about truth. Many before Pilate asked, "What is truth?" And many ask it today. I don't know what you tell them. But I suspect some of you have discovered that adding adjectives like *absolute* or *objective* doesn't usually help much. I know many of you have encountered those in our culture who are quite agnostic about truth. I know some of you have encountered others who are definitely *not* agnostic. You've encountered nihilists who say, "We can't know the truth," and when you ask, "Is that true?" or when relativists say, "There are no absolutes," and you ask: "Hmm. Isn't that a pretty absolute claim?" it's easy to point out the inconsistency and futility of thinking of those who, Paul says, "suppress the truth" (Rom. 1:18). Yet such suppression is real, deep, and profound, such that, as Scripture teaches, they really *do not know* the truth—or even sometimes their right hand from their left (Jonah 4:11).

Nihilists and relativists certainly exist among us. But most in our culture today *do not deny* there is such a thing as truth. Even on most university campuses today, most do not deny there is such a thing as truth. Contrary to what you may have heard, most affirm it. There may be little consensus about what it is, but there is no shortage of those who claim to *know* the truth, especially those who claim to know the truth about Western civilization, namely, that it's bad! Indeed, in affirming this and many other claims, most do not deny divine transcendence. On the contrary, many see themselves as upholding transcendent values. Few are thoroughgoing materialists. Many consider themselves spiritual. Most are not *against* spirituality. Rather than being irreligious, most American

universities today are more religious than ever before. They are certainly not godless. There are many gods!

Yet even among those who don't think Western civilization is all bad and who are more traditionally religious, truth has little if anything to do with Jesus Christ. This isn't new, of course. I suspect many of you know it's not just the way of many in our universities. It's the way of many in our churches. So, it raises the question: When it comes to confessing Jesus Christ as the way, the truth, and the life, what are we saying?

To be sure, I certainly don't know all that's at stake in confessing Jesus Christ as the truth. I've got so much more to learn. But here are three things I'm learning.

### 1. How We Come to Know the Truth

Yesterday I acknowledged that maybe you have learned more about God standing on a seashore, or watching a sunset, or sitting in a deer stand than you have in church or reading the Bible. But the question is not where we learn *more or less* about God, but where we learn the one thing necessary, *the truth*.

You and I may learn all sorts of things about God by all sorts of means, but how would we know they are true—and what difference would it make—unless we know the truth about God, namely, that he loves us and sent his Son to die for us in order that we might live with him forever? And, to be sure, you and I did not learn this—and we would never have learned this—merely sitting on a deer stand, standing on a seashore, or watching a sunset, as inspiring as these experiences may be.

The point I tried to make last time is that confessing Jesus Christ as the way, the truth, and the life means he is not merely one truth among others. He is *the truth* by which all others are measured. Now I want to go further and say that not only is he not one truth among others, but, also according Scripture and our confessions, we do not come to know him as *the truth* like we come to know other *truths*.<sup>1</sup> How we come to know him is different. Jesus said to Peter: "Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 16:17). Paul said: "The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). What does this mean? It means apart from Jesus Christ making himself known through his Holy Spirit we do not know who he is. No teaching is more basic in Reformed theology than it takes *God* to reveal *God*. "For God alone is a fit witness of himself," Calvin says (*Institutes* 1.7.4). This is the way of *faith seeking understanding*, and faith, Calvin defines, as "a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in

Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (*Institutes* 3.2.7).

Yes, Jesus Christ is a fact like other facts, but we do not come to know the truth of Jesus Christ like we come to know other facts and truths. True knowledge of God is not abstract knowledge as one might deduce from a syllogism or mathematical equation. Nor is it like a nickel you pick up off the sidewalk. It is knowledge that is *revealed*. What is otherwise hidden to human perception is disclosed by God’s free decision. It is not so much something as *Someone* (and not just anyone, but God!). It’s more like personal knowledge, yet requires a *participation* made possible only by the Holy Spirit.

I realize that talk about the Holy Spirit makes some Presbyterians nervous. But nothing is clearer in Scripture than that true knowledge of God comes by faith and faith is a gift, a miracle, a work of the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit does not merely *aid* our intellect or *confirm* or *authenticate* what the mind would otherwise recognize as true if functioning properly and if presented with sufficient evidence. No, the Holy Spirit does more than give a final boost or synapse at the end of a long intellectual struggle for faith. The Holy Spirit does more than merely provide a supplement to enhance our mental acuity or natural brain functioning (sort of like fish oil!). No, the Holy Spirit implants a new capacity. We are made a new creation! He does not destroy reason but redirects it. He does not suspend normal cognitive functioning, but he establishes, as Jonathan Edwards says, “a new faculty of understanding,” “a new foundation [is] laid in the nature of the soul.”<sup>2</sup>

I emphasize this because this work of the Holy Spirit has been often neglected or misunderstood by many, not least by many Presbyterians in America over the last 200 years.<sup>3</sup> Confessing Jesus Christ as the truth has thus been understood more or less as a matter of common sense. As a result, many Christians have talked as if they had “the truth” by the tail or in their pocket. Some think it is so handy, so much at their disposal, that they can whoop it out at their pleasure and use it as a club. But when that happens the truth of Jesus Christ is misrepresented.

So, yes, by all means, “be ready to give a reason for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (1 Pet. 3:15). And if some don’t recognize him as the truth it may not be because they are irrational. They may be more rational than you can imagine. The miracle—for which there is no substitute and is always beyond our control—has simply yet to occur.

## 2. An Order of Truth

Jesus Christ is not one truth among others, and we do not come to know Him as *the truth* like we come to know other *truths*. Yet there are many truths in the Bible and in

this world that are worth knowing and acknowledging. So how do they relate, the truth and truths? It’s a huge question. It’s a question the church has been wrestling with long before the founding of the first university a thousand years or so ago. The early church fathers wrestled with it. And I can’t begin to do justice to it now. But let me describe the basic challenge.

Ever since Christians have confessed Jesus Christ as the truth they have been met by many others who also claim to know the truth. Christians have not denied but have by and large affirmed all sorts of truths found elsewhere. I say “by and large” because there have been among Christian *obscurantists* (known today as “fundamentalists”) who have denied truth found elsewhere. But the mainstream of the Christian tradition has affirmed with great energy and enthusiasm all sorts of truths found elsewhere, indeed, anywhere.<sup>4</sup> That’s why universities were founded in Europe. That’s why Jesus’ words are engraved in stone on colleges throughout this country, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free” (John 8:32). That’s why Christians have been so committed to liberal arts education. Jesus not only claimed to be *the truth* but he said his Spirit would lead us into “all truth” (John 16:13). The truth of Jesus Christ, the church has recognized, is infinitely rich and manifold. He is the Alpha and Omega, the One in whom, through whom, for whom all things were created (Col. 1:15ff). Abraham Kuyper expresses this beautifully in a statement many of you know: “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!”<sup>5</sup>

This is a beautiful statement and I don’t want to quibble with it. But it has often been misunderstood because it has often been interpreted in light of a far more popular claim, which has often functioned as its paraphrase, namely, “*All truth is God’s truth.*” If there was a more popular claim among American evangelicals in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I do not know what it would be. It has often been used by evangelicals to disabuse the charge that they are the narrow-minded, obscurantist, ghettoizing fundamentalists that critics claim.<sup>6</sup>

But, you ask, Isn’t it so? Isn’t “*all truth God’s truth*”? Sure, it is. But let me mention a common misunderstanding of this statement that I’m not the first to point out. In his book, *Contending for the Faith*, Ralph Wood, writes:

“All truth is from God” remains, among Protestants, the favorite unguent to grease a multitude of academic sins. This single bromide has poisoned our ability to ask whether there are greater and lesser truths, whether there is a single incarnate Truth ordering all other truths, and thus whether there are counterfeits to be identified and opposed.<sup>7</sup>

Do you see what's at stake here? 1) Yes, all truth is God's truth! But Jesus Christ is not just one truth among others! 2) Yes, the truth, Jesus Christ, is infinitely manifold, multifaceted, and is reflected throughout the entire created order, every square inch of it! But Jesus Christ is not just any kind of truth and where we come to know him as such is not arbitrary. 3) Yes, he will lead us by his Spirit into all truth (John 16:13). And we should not hesitate to follow wherever he leads. But there are many kinds of truths in this world and knowing all sorts of them may not necessarily lead one back to Jesus Christ. Knowing them may raise all sorts of important questions. And even questions about him. But there is no guarantee they will necessarily lead us all back to him, to the truth. Not here and now. The Bible gives us no such promise.

Here and now, as Wood says, there is an order of truth. This is what it means to confess Jesus Christ is the truth. It means "there is a single incarnate Truth ordering all other truths." It means we are to "take every thought captive" (2 Cor. 10:5) to this truth, as Paul says. And when we don't, we risk not our own confusion, but risk distorting the truth about God. We risk diminishing and domesticating Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life of God in this world.

When Christians have confessed Jesus Christ to be *the truth* we have insisted he is a special, unique truth, divine truth, truth of completely different class, species, and order. Thus, it should come as no surprise that confessing Jesus Christ to be the truth is considered provocative today. It's always been provocative and always will be. And if it's not, then people do not understand, and we ourselves do not understand, what we are talking about.

Let me give you another reason why it is and always has been considered provocative. When the church has confessed Jesus Christ as the truth and been faithful to Scripture, it has always done so in continuity with Israel, in complete and unequivocal agreement with the Shema: "Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is One" (Deut. 6:4). Certainly, this has profound implications for who *we* are, but also for who *God* is. To say, "The LORD is One" and "Jesus is Lord," forced the church to reckon early on with the Trinity, yes, and also something called 'the simplicity' of God, namely, that there is an integrity, wholeness, indivisibility, unity, and oneness of God and the truth, Jesus Christ, who God *is*.

What does it mean to say, *The LORD is One*? It means divine truth cannot be divided up, parceled out, tacked on, or distributed. It cannot be used. It is whole, complete-in-itself, self-revealing, self-determining, self-authenticating, or it is something else altogether. I wish we had time to discuss this, but it is what the church's greatest theologians have known. Suffice it to say: divine truth is like no other truth in or of this world.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, I wonder if you think any of this really matters or if you think it has any practical significance or if it is just a vain intellectual exercise, some sort of head trip that has no bearing on 'real life.' If so, I wonder how much you have thought about some of the young people I know. Or I wonder how much you have thought about the only conversation the Bible records Jesus ever having with a young person. Do you remember Jesus' conversation with the rich young man? He asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus cited the Law. And the young man responded, "All these things I have kept from my youth." And do you remember what Jesus said? He said: "You lack one thing" (Matt. 19:16–22).

What a highly impressive, conscientious, dedicated, responsible individual this young man was! Who wouldn't want him on your team, as an employee, a co-worker, a public official, or perhaps even as a family member? Yet Jesus said to him, "You lack one thing."

Yes, Jesus added, "Go and sell all you have and give it to the poor," which might suggest his basic problem was that he was materialistic and the lesson for us is not to be. But that's too easy. It doesn't go deep enough. The Bible doesn't have anything against people having things and records no other instance of Jesus telling anyone to sell all they have and give it to the poor. Yes, this young man had many things and perhaps many things had him. But the text does not portray him as obsessed with things or suggest that he was simply a materialist, living on four feet, licking the earth, seeking to suck as much juice out of it as possible before dying. No, not at all. What does he want? He wants "eternal life." He asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" And here's the thing: He thinks there's something he can do to get it.

The most disturbing feature of this passage to me is how moral and virtuous this young man was. His life was *about many good things*. He was *doing many good things*. He was keeping the Law, the Ten Commandments, which—if you are determined simply not to *break* them, but actually to *keep* them or *fulfill* them—takes an enormous amount of time, energy, and discipline. And this is what this young man claims to have done. And the text gives us no reason to doubt his sincerity. Yet Jesus said to him, "*You lack one thing*." What was it?

Before answering, should we not pause a moment and consider that it was *one* thing, not many things, a set of things, a laundry list of things, or even what some of our dear friends and fellow believers may call "*first things*"?

His life was certainly active and full of doing many *good things*. He must have been very disciplined. But fulfilling so many righteous demands and obligations, how could he not have felt divided, fragmented by the force of being pulled so in many directions?



This is the great burden of living under the Law. And you may say, “I’m glad I don’t live under the Law.” But isn’t that how many of you feel here today? You feel you’re being pulled in so many directions by so many demands and obligations. Is this not a problem for you? It is for me. It’s not so much having to choose between doing so many bad things. It’s having to choose between doing so many good and righteous things! There are so many competing goods vying for our time, attention, energy, and resources, so many righteous demands and obligations. Most pastors I know often feel overwhelmed because people are continually saying to them, “We need to do this.” “We need to do that.” “This is important.” “That’s important.” And it all usually *is*! But how does one decide between doing so many good and important things? Pastors, of course, are by no means the only ones forced to decide between so many competing goods.

So how *do* we decide? Augustine, the church’s greatest theologian of the first millennium, said we must order our loves.<sup>9</sup> Why must we order our loves? Because we *cannot* love all things equally. And we *do not* love all things equally. We love some things more than others. The problem is: we are often not aware of it. We get confused. Sometimes we think we are loving one thing when we are really loving something else. I am not talking here about inordinate love. I am talking about loving people, purposes, and things that are worth loving. And let’s not kid ourselves by saying: “O I love everybody.” Really? I don’t think so. Or at least that’s likely news to many we claim to love.

Ordering our loves is easier said than done. Most of us say we love or want to love what is good. Yet there are so many good things to love and it is impossible to love all things equally. So, we must choose among a multiplicity of goods, which means we must decide not simply what is good, but what is the highest good. And do you remember the first thing Jesus said to this rich young man, after he addressed him as “Good Teacher”? Jesus asked, “Why do you call me good?”

Jesus was inviting this young man from the get-go to think more deeply about the good. He invited him to know and to love not simply the highest good, but the Source of all good, God himself. This young man was about many *good* and *righteous things*, but Jesus said to him, “You lack one thing.” And it was not simply one more thing on his to-do list. Nor was it a sense of meaning or purpose or larger organizing principle of life.

No, it was the one thing necessary: the truth, apart from which we will never be able rightly to order our loves. He lacked the way, the truth, and the life of God living in him. He lacked the life-giving, life-transforming Spirit of the living God who comes to us through Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone. *He* is our life, our salvation, our

wisdom, righteousness, strength, peace, joy, and hope.

Notice: Jesus didn’t ask this young man simply to acknowledge this as a fact. Jesus called him to follow him. He didn’t ask merely for his intellectual assent. He asked for more. He asked for his life. True knowledge of God, you see, is always *active knowledge* and never merely passive, which is why Calvin says, “all right knowledge of God is born of obedience” (*Institutes* 1.6.2)

In other words, if we truly know God, we *will* follow him. But not in order to earn our salvation or make ourselves worthy. No, our salvation is in him alone. *He is the One in whom the Law has already been fulfilled* and who has done *everything* for us and for our salvation. Thus, for us it is no longer a matter of striving to earn our salvation by fulfilling the law, but a matter of joyful obedience to him in whom our salvation has been fulfilled and is complete. Christ alone is our salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, as told to us through Scripture alone. This is what the Protestant Reformation was about. It was about this *one thing*. It was about acknowledging this *one truth*. Each of the “*solas*”—Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone—were never meant to be understood separately, but always together, mutually reinforcing, clarifying, and underscoring this one truth, Jesus Christ. And confessing this one truth has always been a challenge. It has always been subject to misunderstanding both within and without the church.

In November of 1962, on the eve of the Second Vatican Council, a reporter from Paris traveled to Basel, Switzerland, to interview Karl Barth, whom Pope Pious XII had called, “the greatest theologian since Thomas Aquinas.” The reporter asked, “In your opinion, what is the greatest obstacle to rapprochement between the Evangelical Church and the Catholic Church?” Barth answered,

It is one tiny word that the Roman Church adds on after each of our propositions. It is the word “and.” When we say “Jesus,” the Catholics say, “Jesus *and* Mary.” We seek to obey only our Lord the Christ; Catholics obey Christ *and* his vicar on earth, the pope. We believe that the Christian is saved by the merits of Jesus Christ; the Catholics add “*and* by one’s own merits”. . . . We think that the only source of revelation is Scripture; the Catholics add, “*and* Tradition.” We say that the knowledge of God is obtained by faith in his Word as it expresses itself in Scripture, the Catholics add, “*and* by reason.” In fact, here, one hits upon the fundamental problem of the relation between grace and freedom in the salvation of humans.<sup>10</sup>

The Protestant Reformation, to be sure, was not the discovery but the rediscovery that we are saved by Jesus

Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone, as told to us through Scripture alone. It was the rediscovery that Jesus Christ is not one truth among others, and we do not come to know him as *the truth* like we come to know other *truths*. And though there are many truths in this world that are worth knowing and acknowledging, there is an order of truth. And the rediscovery of this order of truth, this singular focus and commitment to Jesus Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone, through Scripture alone, changed the world.

Please don't misunderstand my point here: I am not saying we Protestants are the only ones who have kept this straight. We have not! We have sometimes done far worse than others in keeping this focus. And, to be sure, there is a lot we can learn from Roman Catholics, the Eastern Orthodox, and others. But, friends, we have a wonderful heritage, a powerful intellectual tradition, and remarkably rich theological resources, that can be of enormous help to us in keeping focus on this one thing, this one truth, Jesus Christ, as he attested for us in Holy Scripture. And I wonder what would happen if we were to rediscover these resources. I wonder what would happen if we were to learn again to confess this one truth and order our loves according to it. I wonder what would emerge from all the ecclesial rubble that surrounds us, all the spiritual confusion in this world. I wonder.

### 3. The Truth About God Is ...

Yet may I mention one more thing I'm learning about this one truth? In my junior year in college, I began reading the Danish philosopher, Kierkegaard. He made a deep impression on me. One book was entitled, *Purify Your Hearts*. It's a commentary on one verse from *The Book of James*, chapter 4: "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded." The whole book is an exposition of the infinite number of ways one can be double-minded in doing or seeking to do the will of God.

I remember learning more about myself than I ever wanted to learn. One line stands out to this day: "Purity of heart is to will one thing." In page after page, Kierkegaard exposed layer after layer of double-mindedness in me. It was not what you call "a pleasurable read." But it made the point, on the one hand, of what a great challenge it is to live a life of single-minded obedience to the truth and, on the other hand, how empty, vain, frivolous, and superficial life would be not to try. Kierkegaard showed to me more clearly than ever that living in single-minded obedience to the truth requires duty, determination, and discipline. There is no way around it. And I will always be grateful for Kierkegaard.

But there is one thing I did not learn from him. Maybe I should have, but I didn't. And maybe this is what this rich young man didn't get either. It's this: The life to which

Jesus calls us is not simply about duty, determination, and discipline. Yes, living in single-minded obedience to the truth, requires duty, determination, and discipline. It requires living according to an order of truth, ordering our loves, etc. But there is more to it than that. There is something else about the truth, the truth about God, we should know. Do you know what it is? It is that the truth about God is *beautiful*.

The truth about God is not merely a brute fact that we will all sooner or later be forced to acknowledge. It is not simply a superior power to which we will all sooner or later be forced to yield or bend our knees. The truth about God is more than this. The truth about God is *beautiful*. It is *pleasant*. It is *desirable*. It *attracts* us. It gives us *pleasure*. It brings us *joy*!

Did you know that our 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Protestant forebears did not talk much about this? They didn't write much about God's beauty. They had their reasons. They were suspicious that the truth of God might be confused with aestheticism. It happens a lot: "O Preacher, that was a beautiful service." "Well, I didn't mean it to be. I meant to tell you the truth." Our forebears were right to be cautious. Truth and beauty are not the same and are often confused. And surely the truth about God may not be beautiful like beauty defined elsewhere. But that does not mean the truth about God is not beautiful.<sup>11</sup>

The truth is: God *is* beautiful and that's biblical: "One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple" (Ps. 27:4).

How beautiful is the beauty of the Lord? Jesus put it like this: It's "like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. [It's] like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it" (Matt. 13:44-46). This is what the rich young man did not know or could even imagine. And who among us here does not need to understand this better?

But let me add that in Mark's account, Jesus doesn't just say to the rich young man, "You lack one thing." Mark adds, "Jesus, looking at him, *loved him ...*"

Brothers and sisters, there is no question that following Jesus requires us to re-valuate many things, many *good* things, and to order our loves. But it is all for the sake of One who brings us joy and whose beauty is true and never fades and whose love never ends.

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<sup>1</sup> “God is not only himself and alone the truth; God himself and God alone reveals that he is the truth.” Karl Barth, “The Substance and Task of Reformed Doctrine,” *The Word of God and Theology*, 218. If there is anything more basic to being a Calvinist I do not know what it would be.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 206–207.

<sup>3</sup> Richard E. Burnett, “The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit” in *Oxford Handbook of Presbyterianism*, eds. G.S. Smith and P.C. Kemeny (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 349–364.

<sup>4</sup> “Every good and true Christian should understand that wherever he may find truth, it is his Lord’s” Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson (Indianapolis: Bobs-Merrill, 1958), 2.18 (54).

<sup>5</sup> *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

<sup>6</sup> Many, however, lack interest in truth, according to several books written in the 1990s by top evangelical scholars such as Mark Noll, Nathan Hatch, George Marsden, et al. Their critiques of modern evangelicalism are devastating. But the book that probably hit closest to the bone was *No Place for Truth, or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* by David Wells. Echoing Francis Schaeffer’s *The Great Evangelical Disaster*, Wells said that he thought he heard the “death rattle” of evangelicalism. He said: “We now have less biblical fidelity, less interest in truth, less seriousness, less depth, and less capacity to speak the Word of God to our own generation in a way that offers an alternative to what it already thinks.” Evangelicals, he said, have “come to terms

psychologically with our society’s structural pluralism and its lack of interest in matters of truth.” (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 12, 131, 134. Maybe so. But perhaps the deeper problem among evangelicals is not so much that “there is no place for truth,” but that they make room for it and see it as all too easily placeable.

<sup>7</sup> Ralph C. Wood, *Contending for the Faith: The Church’s Engagement with Culture* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2003), 89. My only problem with Wood’s statement is that it applies better to many Thomists and American evangelicals than to “Protestants” instructed by the theology of the sixteenth century Reformers.

<sup>8</sup> “The divine is something complete in itself, self-contained, new in kind, different from that of the world. It does not allow itself to be divided and distributed precisely because it is more than religion. It does not allow itself to be used. It wants to tear down and build up. It is complete in itself or it is nothing at all!” Karl Barth, “The Christian in Society” (1919) in *The Word of God and Theology*, trans. Amy Marga (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2011), 38.

<sup>9</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, I.27ff (23ff).

<sup>10</sup> *Barth in Conversation, I, 1959–1962*, Translation Fellows of the Center for Barth Studies, Princeton Theological Seminary (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 280.

<sup>11</sup> For many remarkable insights on God’s beauty, see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1:640–677. God is beautiful, but we should take heed to what Scripture teaches: “He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not” Isa. 53:2b–3.

# Jesus Christ is the Life

by John Burgess

We spoke yesterday of humans’ deep longing for life, real life, life abundant. Humans want to flourish and thrive. And in the face of suffering and death, we often make desperate efforts to come back to life, to feel alive again. Some seek to break free of bonds of habit and convention that they believe hold them down, some strive to create something new, something that transcends and perhaps cancels the pain of the past, even if just momentarily and even if our creative transgressions turn out to hurt others and perhaps us ourselves. It is a tragic irony of the time in which we live that so many Americans are healthy and prosperous yet nevertheless feel as though they are not yet really living. And it is not accidental that issues of sexuality are so much at the fore of our society, because sexual experience seems to so many to make them fully alive. But it has been the experience of Christians that life ultimately comes to us as a gift from beyond us. We are most fully alive when God opens our eyes to his creative, sustaining power in us and around us: in the face of a new-born baby, in the play of color along a strip of dark clouds on the horizon at sunset, or in the sudden

movement of a red fox or a grey squirrel against the snow on a wintry morning. For 99 verses, God declares to Job that there is life all around him, if he will just open his eyes. Job is justified in his lament and complaint, but they are now reframed by God’s word of life. Job is righteous, but God too is righteous. God allows us to question him, but God also questions us. “Where were you? When did you? Can you?” The Book of Job teaches us that life, real life, emerges out of this dialogue, out of this cross examination between the human heart that suffers and cries out, “I don’t want to die” and the God who declares, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”

Just how, as Christians, do we receive this life? In traditional Reformation language, we speak of means of grace. Especially in prayer, in reading and hearing Scripture, and in participating in the sacraments we become aware, in an especially focused way, that Christ is offering us his life all of the time and, moreover, that Christ is feeding our hearts in this very moment, as we pray, take in Scripture, or receive the sacrament. In John Calvin’s understanding, the means of grace do not simply

remind us of God's faithfulness, they also convey it to us here and now. The traditional Eastern Orthodox formula of deification may make Calvinists squeamish: that God has become man, so that man may become God. But if we emphasize the Christological center to this assertion, even the Calvinist can agree that God became incarnate in Christ, so that we might now live in Christ.

### **Feeling Christ's Life**

In my first presentation, I emphasized that people today want to *feel* alive. The little boy whose grandfather has just died. The middle-aged man who has emergency surgery for a brain tumor. The young man who wants to defy the powers of death that took his mother. That is why I have spoken so much about the heart. The heart aches, the heart longs, the heart soars, the heart grieves. How does the heart stay alive, when so much weighs upon it? How does it remain a heart of flesh and not harden into a heart of stone? How can the human heart feel the beat of God's heart within it?

Reformation Protestants—and perhaps Calvinists, in particular—have been suspicious of basing faith on feelings. Feelings place too much attention on us. They direct us inward, in on ourselves, rather than outward to what God has done and is doing for us in Jesus Christ. Karl Barth rejected Friedrich Schleiermacher's "feeling of absolute dependence" as a starting point for theology. Dietrich Bonhoeffer insisted that "we are bound together by faith," not by uplifting or blissful experiences. What matters is trusting in God, whether we feel God at work in us or not.

To be sure, the great Puritan, Jonathan Edwards, could write eloquently of "gracious and holy affections." And in recent years Protestants have rediscovered the value of practices and disciplines that cultivate what the Apostle Paul calls fruit of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23). But if it is a matter of feelings, the holiest of persons have felt the least holy. None of us has a spiritual thermometer that can accurately measure our growth in grace.

So, I want to be clear: I do not think that feelings of ecstasy or transcendence are reliable guides to the Christian life. Being a Christian is not like the powerful high that some people get by going to a rock concert or a mass sporting event. What we have learned from the Book of Job is far more profound. The integrity of the Jewish or Christian heart lies in its capacity to hold together highs and lows, comfort and distress, God's presence and God's absence. Nevertheless, I want to raise a question and explore a point that we Presbyterians have too often neglected. Do we *feel* something when we receive Christ, and if we do, what is it that we feel, and what do we make of this feeling?

When I was a young man, I spent a summer backpacking in different parts of the state of Colorado. I would go into the mountains for four or five days and then hitchhike into town to replenish my supplies. One of my forays into the wilderness took me to the Western Slope of the Rockies, an area of dry foothills. The first day, I hiked along a pleasant stream. The second day, the trail climbed steeply away from the stream. Foolishly, I failed to fill my water bottle. I assumed that I would encounter other streams. But the higher I climbed, the drier the hills became. By midday, the sun was blazing, and I was hot and sweaty. I was thirsty. By midafternoon, I was feeling dangerously dehydrated, and still there was no prospect of finding water. In desperation, I took off my backpack, threw myself to the ground, and looked up at the clear blue sky.

As I lay there, I slowly became conscious of a buzzing sound. I got curious. What in the world was going on? Where was that sound coming from? I stood up and looked around. Nearby I saw ten or twenty bees hugging the ground. I slowly came closer and saw that they were actually sitting on a little pool of water, perhaps the last remnants of a late spring snowstorm. I cupped my hands and took a sip of water. Body and spirit immediately responded. The water seemed to course through my veins. I felt myself being revived. That's my point: I *felt* myself coming back to life. So, if we believe that Christ gives us his life, do we feel his life flowing into ours, like water into a thirsty traveler?

In recent years, I have spent a good deal of time in Russia, getting to know the Eastern Orthodox tradition. During Lent, what Orthodox call the Great Fast, faithful Orthodox believers remove meat, dairy products, and fish from their diet. Now, I have tried to keep this fast, and I must confess that I don't find it easy, nor do I entirely understand why it is so important to the Orthodox. But I was struck by the comment that one Orthodox woman made to me; she said, "I can't imagine going through the fast without receiving the eucharist at least once a week." I asked her if she felt something when she received communion, and she answered, "I don't know if I would call it a feeling, and yet I do feel that something is happening to me." So, again, I ask: Do we feel something when we receive Christ, and if we do, what is it that we feel, and what do we make of this feeling?

### **Feeling Christ's Life in Communion**

John Calvin's personal seal was a hand holding a flaming heart, with the inscription, "*Cor meum tibi offero, Domine, prompte et sincere*" ("My heart I offer to you, O Lord, promptly and sincerely"). As our friend Professor Charles Partee has emphasized, Calvin insisted that the gospel "is a doctrine not of the tongue but of life. It is not apprehended by the understanding and memory

alone, as other disciplines are, but it is received only when it possesses the whole soul, and finds a seat and resting place in the inmost affection of the heart” (*Institutes*, 3.6.4). It is noteworthy that Calvin retained in his eucharistic prayers the *sursum corda* of the medieval mass, “Lift up your hearts.” Just prior to the communion of the people, Calvin would declare, “Lift up your hearts on high, seeking the heavenly things in heaven. . . . In joy of heart . . . come . . . to partake of our Lord’s Table. . . . Have the death of this good Savior graven on your hearts . . . so that you are set afire.”<sup>1</sup> In the eucharist, Calvin feels something; his heart blazes; he experiences Christ’s life entering into him.

Calvin’s statements about the Lord’s Supper are all the more striking given his general reluctance to talk about himself. We know that as a young man he experienced a conversion to the new Protestant teachings that were sweeping across France, but only years later in his preface to his *Commentary on the Psalms* does he speak of what happened, and then in scarce detail. He simply says, “[God] subdued and made teachable a heart which . . . was far too hardened. . . . Having thus received some foretaste and knowledge of true piety, I was straightaway inflamed with such great desire to profit by it.” Bare as the description is, do note again his wording: his heart was inflamed. It had come back to life—to the real life, the abundant, eternal life, that the Gospel of John so emphasizes.

So, let us for a moment trace what Calvin tells us about the Lord’s Supper as a source of life. What immediately strikes us is Calvin’s profound sense of awe and humility; what he experiences at the Lord’s Table goes beyond words. As he declares in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, “I urge my readers not to confine their mental interest within these too narrow limits, but to strive to rise much higher than I can lead them. . . . When I have tried to say all, I feel that I have as yet said little in proportion to its worth. And although my mind can think beyond what the tongue can utter, yet even my mind is conquered and overwhelmed by the greatness of the thing. Therefore, nothing remains but to break forth in wonder at this mystery” (4.17.7). In the Lord’s Supper Calvin encounters the same glorious, transcendent God whom Job meets in the whirlwind, although for Calvin we now know this God in the face of Jesus Christ. Job recants and relents before this God: “I spoke but did not understand, wonders beyond me that I did not know” (42:3, Alter, JPS). As for himself, Calvin confesses, “I do not . . . sufficiently comprehend [the Supper] with the mind. I therefore freely admit that no man should measure its sublimity by the little measure of my childishness” (4.17.7).

Then, the *Institutes* offer us a series of remarkable passages in which Calvin speaks of just what he believes

he receives from the sacrament. The words that he uses—life, food, power, vigor, efficacy, immortality—repeat themselves and come to a crescendo. The Supper is “a spiritual banquet, wherein Christ attests himself to be the life-giving bread, upon which our souls feed unto true and blessed immortality” (4.17.1). *Life-giving* bread unto *immortality*. When we partake of the sacrament, “we may assuredly conclude that the power of [Christ’s] life-giving death will be efficacious in us” (4.17.1). The *power* of [Christ’s] *life-giving* death will be *efficacious* in us. We are made “partakers of his substance, [so] that we may also feel his power in partaking of all his benefits” (4.17.11). *We feel* his *power*. “As bread nourishes, sustains, and keeps the life of our body, so Christ’s body is the only food to invigorate and enliven our soul” (4.17.3). It *invigorates* and *enlivens*.

And so on. “His life passes into us and is made ours” (4.17.5). “Christ pours his life into us, as if it penetrated into our bones and marrow” (4.17.10). One is “now quickened by his immortal flesh, and in a sense partakes of his immortality” (4.17.32). “We see that this sacred bread of the Lord’s Supper is spiritual food, as sweet and delicate as it is healthful for pious worshipers of God, who, in tasting it, feel that Christ is their life, whom it moves to thanksgiving, for whom it is an exhortation to mutual love among themselves” (4.17.40).

Calvin’s eucharistic liturgy offers equally vivid imagery. Christ imparts his body and blood to us to be “our nourishment unto everlasting life.” In the sacrament, we receive “Christ Himself entire,” “that he may live in us and we in Him.” He is the “bread of heaven which gives us life . . . eternal life.” “May He live in us and lead us to the life that is holy, blessed and everlasting.” “Our souls . . . [are] nourished and vivified . . . [as] they are lifted up to heaven, and [enter] the Kingdom of God.”<sup>2</sup>

Calvin’s image of “flesh of flesh, bone of bone” harkens back, of course, to Genesis and the creation of Eve from Adam’s rib. “This at last,” declares Adam, “is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh” (Gen. 2:23). And we remember that the Apostle Paul in his Letter to the Ephesians calls this intimate union of man and woman a “great mystery” that also refers to Christ and his church (Gen. 5:32). The “mystery” of the union of two lives is what Calvin believes also occurs in the Lord’s Supper between Christ and the believer.

Subsequent Reformed confessions pick up this imagery of mysterious union. So, the Heidelberg Catechism says:

Through the Holy Spirit, who lives both in Christ and in us, we are united more and more to Christ’s blessed body. And so, although he is in heaven and we are on earth, we are flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone. And we forever live on and are governed by one Spirit,

as the members of our body are by one soul.  
*Heidelberg Catechism, A.76.*

The Scots Confession also uses Calvin's vivid language. Believers "do so eat the body and drink the blood of the Lord Jesus that he remains in them and they in him; they are so made flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone that as the eternal Godhood has given to the flesh of Christ Jesus, which by nature was corruptible and mortal, life and immortality, so the eating and drinking of the flesh and blood of Christ Jesus does the like for us."<sup>3</sup>

We will return to the Scots Confession in a moment. But first I would like to ask what, if anything, *we* feel at the Lord's Table. Many of us experience the Supper as a solemn, reverent occasion, a time to remember Jesus' Last Supper and his death on the cross—a theme that is prominent in the Westminster Confession of Faith (6.161). The 1993 Presbyterian Book of Common Worship emphasizes, instead, that the Supper is the "joyful feast" of the Kingdom of God, to which people come from east and west, north and south, a theme that is especially strong in the Confession of 1967: "The Lord's Supper is a celebration" in which we "joyfully eat and drink together." We "rejoice in the foretaste of the kingdom" (9.52). Interestingly, the Westminster Confession of Faith does not say "joy" or "celebration" even once in relation to the sacrament!

At the Table, we may long for healing and for God finally to make everything right, as when the Eastern Orthodox eucharistic prayers ask "that we may be delivered from all tribulation, wrath, and necessity." And we may come to the meal with deep humility, as in the traditional Roman Catholic Mass, when the priest holds up the consecrated host and declares three times, "Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst enter beneath my roof, but say only the word, and my soul will be healed."<sup>4</sup> Reverence, joy, longing, humility—perhaps the Supper is as polyphonic in meaning as the Book of Job. The sacrament defies reduction to one emotion or another—rather, it is the "great mystery" that exceeds any of our descriptions.

But my question is not whether we experience various emotions as we gather around the Table. My question is, rather, what do we do with Calvin's assertion that he feels Christ's life-giving power? Do we feel this life? Do we feel ourselves coming back to life when we receive the sacrament? Do we sense here, in this bread and cup, a sublime mystery that makes us aware of just how small we really are and that, nevertheless, lifts us above ourselves to taste eternity?

### **Rediscovering Real Life**

For many Americans today, life has become a hard taskmaster. Think of how often we begin the day by

saying to ourselves, "Today I have to ..." Fill in the blank: I have to finish a sermon, or get to the store, or take the kids to their sports practice, or go to a meeting, or take these medications. Like Job, we spend our days focused on ourselves—our needs, our distresses, our hopes, our responsibilities. Like Job we may attend to these tasks faithfully and diligently. Like Job, we may get to the end of the day and declare that we have been good and faithful servants—well, at least we did the best we could. And, like Job, we reward ourselves with material things—for him, seven thousand sheep and three thousand camels; for us, perhaps just a nice dinner, a good drink, or an entertaining evening at the movies. But that becomes the implicit deal that we make with ourselves, isn't it? I "have to" do something, but in return I get something.

But, as Max Weber, the great German sociologist of the early twentieth century, saw so trenchantly, so many people today find themselves trapped in an "iron cage."<sup>5</sup> They no longer work and seek material prosperity in order to serve God. Rather work and material prosperity have become ends in themselves. But the result, says Weber, is that people today have become "sensualists without heart."<sup>6</sup> We still feel, but we feel with what the ancients called our appetites. Our heart does not yet feel really alive—we still long for what the Gospel of John calls eternal life.

Today we can modify Weber's maxim to assess our culture's relentless obsession with identity. A person's fundamental identity is no longer given to him or her by family, tradition, nation, or even God—for example, that in baptism I am a child of the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Rather, society tells us that we have to make or choose an identity. But it is never entirely clear to us, what we should choose or on what grounds we would choose it. We have nothing to orient us other than "that's just who I feel I am." The freedom to choose becomes an iron cage from which we cannot escape. Identity becomes a task, not a gift. We choose, but questions still gnaw at us, "Who am I really? Why have I been born? Why someday will I have to die?"

A couple of years ago, my wife and I visited friends in a village near Dresden, Germany. They lent us two bicycles, and my wife and I went on a week-long trip along the Elbe River. Our last day out was grueling. We had forty miles to cover, the way was uphill, and the weather was sunny and hot. By the time we arrived back at the village, I was ready to take a hot bath, put up my feet, and go to bed. I didn't feel like going anywhere. But our friends announced that their neighbors had invited all of us over for dinner. The neighbors knew that we had spent time in Russia, and they wanted to meet us. It would be impolite, our friends insisted, not to spend at

least a couple of hours with them. “Okay,” I said, but I wasn’t happy.

It turned out that these neighbors were German Russians, that is, Russians of German heritage, who after the fall of communism had emigrated from Kazakhstan to Germany. They had lived in this village now for twenty years, but, as we soon learned, no one, except our two friends, had ever invited them over for a cup of coffee or a meal. Imagine that: Twenty years, and only one other household had ever reached out to them! The villagers still regarded them as oddities, as Russians who were not really Germans.

The family consisted of three generations: the man and woman who had originally emigrated from the former Soviet Union, their children, who had been born in Germany, and the woman’s parents, who had come later. None of them were practicing believers. But the grandmother still remembered going to church as a child and celebrating Christmas and Easter. Even now, she had not lost some vague sense that there is a God and that her life somehow belonged to that God. As we ate dinner—bratwurst and endless servings of different salads, as Russians love to prepare them, with beets and potatoes and olives and carrots—the grandmother acknowledged that she felt lonely in the village. She missed her friends and the life that she had known in Kazakhstan. But, she continued, “You know what? When I get up in the morning, the first thing I do is go to the window and look out at the village and the fields and the sky. And then I stretch out my arms and say, ‘Thank you, Father, thank you, for another day of life!’”

Well, like Job after God had dressed him down in the whirlwind, I suddenly felt a little ashamed of myself and repentant. Here I had been thinking all evening about how tired I was, and about how I really didn’t understand why these people, whom I didn’t even know, wanted us to have us over for dinner, and now I was hearing the gospel from this foreigner, a German Russian: the good news that life is a wondrous gift from God, not a relentless task for myself. Like Job, there was nothing for me to do but to recant and relent. I had been thinking about myself. I had not understood things beyond me. God was teaching me things that I had not known.

Could the Lord’s Supper awaken us to the great mystery that is God? Could it startle us and remind us that this God has given us and each day again gives us life? Could

the eucharist help us recover a sense of wonder at a God who sometimes restores order and, yet, at other times seems wild and chaotic—whose ways are not our ways?” God will be God. The Almighty has his own purposes. But “I don’t want to die, I don’t want to die,” cries out the little boy. And the only answer that God has ever given his despairing children is this: “Look around you and inside of you, and live. Live the life that I give you.” As Carol Newsom says about God’s words to Job from the whirlwind, “Just as the acknowledgment of the tragic structure of existence points to the limits of human self-sufficiency, so conversely does it point to the preciousness of being—but this time in the mode of gift.” Every time that we receive the sacrament, we confess that life—real life, life that truly lasts and endures—comes to us from beyond us, from a loving but mysterious God. And we pledge to share that life with others, so that they too might awaken in the morning and be able to stretch out their arms and exclaim, “Thank you, Father, thank you, for another day of life!”

Our Savior tells us, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” So, we come, we come to the Table. I don’t know what exactly I feel when I eat the bread and drink the cup. Does Christ really enter into me? Does his life come coursing into my veins? Do I feel myself coming back to life? Does my heart become inflamed again with love, praise, and adoration? Before you, my brothers and sisters, I can only recant and relent. I do not know how to speak of these things; they are beyond me. But I take solace in the words of the Scots Confession, and, in conclusion, I offer them to you:

We affirm that the faithful, in the right use of the Lord’s Table, have such union with Christ Jesus as the natural man cannot apprehend. Further we affirm that although the faithful, hindered by negligence and human weakness, do not profit as much as they ought in the actual moment of the supper, yet afterwards it shall bring forth fruit, being living seed sown in good ground; for the Holy Spirit, who can never be separated from the right institution of the Lord Jesus, will not deprive the faithful of the fruit of that mystical action.<sup>7</sup>

*Soli Deo gloria!*

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<sup>1</sup> *Liturgies of the Western Church*, ed. Bard Thompson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961), 223.

<sup>2</sup> *Liturgies of the Western Church*, 204–207

<sup>3</sup> *The Scots Confession*, ch. 21.

<sup>4</sup> *Liturgies of the Western Church*, 85.

<sup>5</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (Winchester, MA: Allen & Unwin, 1930), 181.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>7</sup> *The Scots Confession*, ch. 21.

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