

How to Move Mountains & Influence People

**The Gospel of Matthew as Handbook
for Jesus' Mission and Ours
Part One**

Participant's Guide



THE ANÁSTASIS CENTER
FOR CHRISTIAN EDUCATION & MINISTRY

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*How to Move Mountains and Influence People:
The Gospel of Matthew as Handbook for Jesus' Mission and Ours
Part One: Matthew 3 – 7
Participant's Guide*

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Introduction: Moving Mountains

I don't know how many times I've heard some enthusiastic preacher say, 'If you have faith, you can move mountains!' If you 'grew up in church,' chances are you've heard it, too.

For most modern, non-Jewish readers, 'mountain' equals 'obstacle.' After all, we use that metaphor in various ways. For example, the Motown song croons, 'Baby, there ain't no mountain high enough...to keep me from getting to you, babe.' It means, 'No *obstacle* is going to hold me back from you.' The phrase, 'Make a mountain out of a molehill,' means to make a big *problem* out of something that is not. And Jesus said to his disciples, 'If you have faith the size of this mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you' (Mt.17:20). He said something similar to them when he was entering Jerusalem for the last time (Mt.21:21).

So if you have faith in God, you can move 'mountains,' right? You can tell *obstacles* to skip away?

Unfortunately not.

For a Jewish reader, and especially to the Jewish disciples, 'mountain' did not mean 'obstacle.' Instead, 'mountain' meant 'presence of God.' Maybe the top of a mountain represented a space closer to heaven, or a place that was set apart. Whatever the exact reason, there was this pattern in the Bible: God began His relationship with key people, and gave them a mission, from a mountain.

1. Adam and Eve met God on a mountain, Eden. How do we know that? Notice that in Genesis 2:10, four rivers diverged from Eden, nourishing life. That most likely means that the source of water was on a mountain, because rivers normally do not diverge in nature; they converge. Lest we have any doubt, Ezekiel says Eden was a mountain (Ezk.28:13 – 14).
2. After humanity went its own way, Abraham and Sarah also met God on a mountain. When God called them, they promptly pitched their tent on a mountain and built an altar to worship God (Gen.12:8).
3. Israel met with God on a mountain, Sinai. After He delivered Israel from Egypt, God called Israel up onto Mount Sinai to meet Him face to face (Ex.19:13).¹ They refused, so God met with Moses on the mountain instead. But God's Plan A had been for to meet all Israel on the mountain. God's Plan B was to meet with Israel in a very limited way, through representative priests and one high priest who represented Moses.
4. That arrangement carried over to Mount Zion, to the Temple in Jerusalem built by King David and his son, King Solomon. From that point, God invested His presence on Mount Zion, in the Temple. He called the entire world, really, to meet with Him there, albeit in a limited, Plan B type of way. But for centuries, devout Jews looked to Mount Zion as the place to encounter God.

Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised,
In the city of our God, *His holy mountain*.
Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth,
Is *Mount Zion* in the far north, the city of the great King.' (Ps.48:1 – 2)

¹ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), p.51 – 59

Jesus was replacing the Temple as the new dwelling place of God (Mt.11:25 – 27; 12:6). He said he was greater than the Temple on Mount Zion, in effect, moving back to God's Plan A. Even when Jesus made reference to faith moving '*this* mountain,' the mountain he was referring to was the mountain upon which he was just transfigured with glory (Mt.17:1 – 13). Jesus was showing how he was bringing the presence of God the way God always wanted: *within* human beings. God was starting *in Jesus*. He would continue with Jesus' followers. That's why Peter's request to stay on the mountain was inappropriate. His mission was to make the presence of God available to everyone who believes, no matter where they are! God never wanted His presence to be limited to any mountain, whether it was Eden, Sinai, Zion, or the mountain of Jesus' transfiguration. But what the disciples experienced on '*this* mountain,' they would be able to move *anywhere*. They would be able to take the presence of God *wherever they went*. So you can expect to influence people by offering them a chance to respond to the living God.

Then when Jesus was confronting the Temple for the last time, he said, 'If you say to *this* mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' it will happen' (Mt.21:21, emphasis mine). What did Jesus mean? From the imagery of creation (Gen.1:1 – 2:3), 'the sea' was the opposite place as 'the land' on which God's true humanity dwelled. The prophet Daniel used 'the sea' as a metaphor to mean 'the Gentiles' in contrast to Israel (Dan.7:2 – 3). Jesus had the book of Daniel on his mind as he approached his death and resurrection (Mt.24:15; 26:64; plus the countless times Jesus took to himself Daniel's 'Son of Man' title for the Messiah). Daniel wasn't the only one to connect 'the sea' with 'the Gentiles'; Isaiah had called the Sea of Galilee 'Galilee of the Gentiles' (Isa.9:1 – 2). Matthew quotes that Isaiah passage about 'Galilee of the Gentiles' to explain Jesus' ministry there (Mt.4:15 – 16). Jesus himself probably taught from Isaiah during his ministry, and of course, his ministry in Galilee involved Gentiles (Mt.8:8 – 13; 8:28 – 34; 12:17 – 21; 12:38 – 42; 15:21 – 28; 15:29 – 39) because Gentiles lived there along with Jews. And finally, Jesus stood on a mountain overlooking the Sea of Galilee when he gave his disciples his 'great commission' (Mt.28:16 – 20). His location underscored his point about moving the 'mountaintop presence of God' from Zion to among the 'sea' of the Gentiles (Mt.21:21). The disciples could cast the presence of God ('this mountain') to be among the Gentiles.

In essence, you can move mountains in the sense that you can take the presence of God with you wherever you go: your family and friendships; your dorm; your dining hall; the classes and study groups you're part of; the clubs and extracurricular interests you have. Be connected to Jesus by his Spirit. Be shaped by Jesus. Yes, he will help you deal with obstacles in your life. But he may not make them magically go away. Instead, you can be so transformed by Jesus and so saturated with God's presence that *you* and your Christian community can be the place where other people meet with God.

Do you want to read – and live in – God's story? Deeply, intelligently, whole heartedly? This study guide is designed to help you grasp not only Jesus' training of his disciples in his mission, but also the most important themes of the whole biblical story.

Do you want to be so saturated with the presence of God that you and your community can help others meet the true and living God in your midst? Read on.

As you do, expect that Jesus will ask you to do something, to act on your growing convictions, to share your life and faith, and make concrete choices to let him express his life and love through you. This curriculum is not for passive receiving, or even just memorization! Jesus means for us to live it out.

Glad you can join in on this journey!

Chapter 1: Starting to Read Matthew's Gospel: Devotional Reflections

These short reflections are meant to accompany your study of the Gospel of Matthew. The reason I start from the end of Matthew is because Jesus' goal was to train his disciples for the 'Great Commission,' Jesus' mission to bring God's healing and transforming love to the world. Jesus goes with us to call and develop followers of his everywhere. Jesus will repeat certain basic patterns with us as he did with his original disciples. Therefore, we have to read the Gospel of Matthew with the *ending* in mind.

Please make time to finish these ten reflections early on. They will help you get to know Matthew as the author. They will help you understand a little bit about how important the Gospel of Matthew has been in church history. They will *really* help you as you study and teach the rest of the Gospel of Matthew.

To illustrate how Jesus has shaped his people by his word, these reflections also intentionally draw from many different church traditions. May they nourish, inspire, and sustain you as you get to know Jesus better, and participate in his mission more and more! And may Jesus-honoring stories one day be told of you.

More devotional reflections on all parts of Matthew's Gospel can be found on my website here: www.anastasiscenter.org/bible-messiah-matthew

The Kingdom of Heaven: The Centerpiece of Matthew's Gospel: Mt.28:18

28:18 All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth.

Most corporations and organizations have a mission statement. The mission of Amazon.com is, 'To be the most customer-centric company in the world, where people can find and discover anything they want to buy online.' Goldman Sachs says, 'Our goal is to provide superior returns to our shareholders.' When people sign up to work, they sign up for a mission.

Jesus, too, had a mission: To inaugurate the 'kingdom of heaven' on earth. He sought to establish the very reign of God upon the earth. From his very first public announcement, he proclaimed this 'kingdom' and called subjects into it (4:17 – 25). He defined the kingdom in terms of a sphere where God's transforming power would be released among His subjects, especially on the heart level (5:1 – 7:29). He taught his disciples to pray, 'Your kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven' (6:10). Jesus speaks of the 'kingdom of heaven' thirty two times in Matthew, using the shorthand 'the kingdom' almost twenty more times; clearly Jesus felt it was important! Jesus' mission was a revolution that would ripple outward from the hearts of people, into social relationships, to challenge the realms of human evil and the demonic. The kingdom of God would be manifested by His loyal subjects, Jesus' followers, to a hurting and rebellious world.

Jesus tells of his decisive victory in this unfolding drama by his statement at the end of Matthew's Gospel, 'All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth' (28:18). He said that after he had entered sin and death in his crucifixion and came through on the other side in

his resurrection. The authority over the nations that once belonged to the devil (4:8 – 9) now belonged to Jesus. And whereas at that precise moment, the devil had taken Jesus to a high mountain to show him all the nations of the world, now Jesus stood on a high mountain overlooking those same nations. Maybe it was the very same high mountain, and now Jesus is standing on it as the rightful king of all humanity? Who knows? One thing we do know: The poetry of the situation is unmistakable. God had planted Jesus' throne exactly where the devil's throne was, and a huge battle was about to ensue for the transformation of all humanity.

What would that look like? Here's one way it looked: William was born in England to a wealthy and influential family. Soon after graduating from Cambridge University in 1780, the rather spoiled and high-society William was elected to Parliament. At that time, he bowed to the authority of fashion, whim, popular opinion, and wealth. Soon afterwards, however, he read a book that led him to ask some soul-searching questions. He then studied the New Testament voraciously. This led to his acceptance of Jesus Christ's authority as final and ultimate. John and Charles Wesley, leaders of the Methodist movement, and John Newton, the former slave trader turned hymn writer who wrote *Amazing Grace* encouraged him to use his office, not for himself, but to express Christ's love and Christ's reign over him. So William first started improving working conditions in factories. Millions of men, women and children had no choice but to work sixteen hours, six days a week in grim factories. People had come to the cities to find work but had been exploited and crowded together in filthy apartments where they caught cholera, typhoid, and tuberculosis.

William was convinced, however, that there was no greater moral issue for England's conscience than slavery. Although slave labor wasn't permitted in England itself, trafficking in African slaves and the exploitation of their labor formed the backbone of the Imperial economy. William decided he would not rest until his country recognized the cruelty and injustice of this system. He started delivering speeches everywhere, circulated petitions, and introduced bills in Parliament calling for the immediate abolition of slavery. In the privileged circles that he was from, he became very unpopular. The rich claimed that slavery was indispensable to the plantation economy of the colonies, arguing that money was the final authority. But William wouldn't stop. Even when his first bill, in 1791, was defeated by a landslide of 163 votes to 88, he didn't give up. Discouragement and great odds were not his final authority. Finally in 1806, after twenty years of long, hard campaigning, William Wilberforce won the argument. A bill in Parliament was passed outlawing slave trading in all British colonies from the year 1807. Still the struggle continued for another 25 years to win the complete emancipation of all slaves in the British Empire. That second bill was eventually passed in 1833, just weeks before William's death on July 29, 1833. Seven hundred thousand slaves were then freed. Upon his death, William Wilberforce was acclaimed a national hero and he was buried with full honors in Westminster Abbey. Walden Media released the movie *Amazing Grace* about Wilberforce in March 2007.² Here was a man who acknowledged Jesus' authority – and no other authority – over himself. And what a transformation occurred!

A mentor once asked me, 'Can Jesus be Savior but not Lord?' I thought about that question for a long time and decided no. In reality, Jesus saves us by being our Lord. He saves us from our own sin and evil by challenging every other form of authority to which we bow down. He even saves us from ourselves – that is, the corruption in our human nature. That is why the angel Gabriel announces in the beginning, 'He will save his people from their sins' (Mt.1:21). Jesus does not save us 'from' the wrath of God, but 'by' the wrath of God. Jesus

² distilled from Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), p.326 – 327

guides the wrath of God with surgical precision by rooting out sinfulness from human nature, first in himself, and then in us by his Spirit. He saves us by expressing his good and gracious Lordship over us, and by empowering us as his subjects. ‘All authority has been given to me.’ So there can be no false dichotomy here. Jesus is Savior by being Lord. His mission is to bring people under his Lordship.

The Movement: Extending the Reign of Jesus, Part One: Mt.28:19 – 20

28:19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations...²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I commanded you...

When Jesus says this, who is he asking to teach others what Jesus taught? Your pastor? I believe he is asking *you* to do it.

After my sophomore year in college, I went home for the summer. I was living in Los Angeles. I got a phone call from a young woman who had just finished her freshman year in UCLA. She was the younger sister of a friend and classmate of mine. She said, ‘During the school year, I became a Christian. I’m the only Christian in the family. My parents are completely against it. They won’t let me go to church or anything called Christian. I called you because you’re the only Christian I know. What should I do?’ I felt very stuck. I asked, ‘Well, I guess I could meet with you, and I can call a few other people to see if they could, too. Is there a time that you usually go out of the house? So that you won’t have to lie to your parents but you don’t have to tell them either?’ She said, ‘I go rollerblading at 8am every Saturday morning in the park outside my house.’ Inwardly, I groaned, ‘Yikes, Saturdays at 8am? This is my summer!!’ But I said, ‘I’ll make some phone calls.’ I called every Christian I knew from my high school, explaining the situation. They said, ‘Saturday at 8am?! That’s crazy!’ But one girl who was still in high school (we had all gone to the same high school) eagerly said yes. So the three of us met every Saturday at 8am that summer. We studied Ephesians because that’s what I had studied during the school year in my college fellowship. We had a great time. We talked about and prayed about her family, and helped her navigate the tough situation a little bit. The next summer, I got another phone call. The same situation. The three of us met again in the park every Saturday at 8am. We studied Matthew 5 – 7, the Sermon on the Mount. And then, some Korean-American guys at the high school we all went to heard about this, and they asked me if I could come meet with them and teach them about studying the Bible. So I went to my old high school. My teachers said, ‘Mako, it’s great to see you! What are you doing here?’ I said, ‘There’s a group of guys here who wanted some help reading and studying the Bible. I’m a Christian now and enjoy that.’ So I got a chance to share my faith a bit with my old high school teachers!

That early experience burned a conviction in me that Jesus’ kingdom movement is outward-oriented. I’m convinced that the way to keep that outward orientation strong was to invest deeply in people, especially in their knowledge of Jesus through Scripture. That means that you and I need to be prepared to disciple someone with Scripture. By comparison, what I see often in my work now as a campus minister is that Christian college students extract a seeker/new Christian from their non-Christian friends by inviting them to all kinds of church meetings. The older Christians miss the fact that non-Christians perceive that as ‘stealing their friend away.’ What if you were able to actually hang out more with the seeker/new Christian

(call him Pat) in his own context? Then you would see how Pat relates to his non-Christian friends. You would hear the questions that the friends ask Pat as they observe the changes in Pat's life. You could help Pat respond with the love of Jesus. You could help Pat deal with whatever character issues are going on inside him. Pat would become a partner in ministry. And the outward movement of Jesus would continue outward.

This series of reflections is designed to help you be prepared and equipped for just such a thing. Are you interested in making a commitment to reading Matthew's Gospel, and these reflections?

The Movement: Extending the Reign of Jesus, Part Two: Mt.28:19

28:19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations...

Inigo (Ignatius) Lopez de Loyola was born to a noble family in the kingdom of Castile, in Spain. The youngest of thirteen children, he spent his youth in court and later as a soldier in the service of the Spanish king. He was trained in the code of honor and chivalry, always ready with his sword to avenge any disrespect to himself or to his master. But in 1521, he was struck in the leg by a cannonball while defending Pamplona unsuccessfully against the French. Back in his family castle, he went through some excruciating operations, including having his leg re-broken, with a stub sawn-off, his leg reset and stretched by weights (Yikes!!). During his long recovery, to take his mind off the pain, he asked for something to read. He loved chivalrous romances but instead, he was given a collection of biographies of Christian saints, many of whom dared to leave home and safety to tell enemies about Jesus. At first, he only read these books because he was *that* bored. But gradually, he started to find them...strangely fascinating! When he was fully recovered, he made a resolution to live his life for Jesus, allowed Jesus to change his life, and began to imitate the example of the saints he had read about. Earlier in his life, he would have gone abroad for war, as a soldier for his king. What an even greater honor to go abroad for peace, as a soldier for a different King. When he was well enough to walk, he set off on a pilgrimage to a church. After a night of prayer, he exchanged his rich clothes with a beggar and laid his sword and dagger on the church's altar. Then he walked to the town of Manresa, where he spent several months in solitary reflection. This eventually led to his famous book *Spiritual Exercises*, a series of guided meditations basically designed for 'busy people' to pray reflectively. He went to France to study at the University of Paris. While there, he persuaded a small group of six to join him in forming a new spiritual order. They became the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits. They expanded and set out immediately for foreign lands to do missionary evangelism. Many died as martyrs. Their commitment to social justice and their tendency to put the gospel cause ahead of national interests provoked the suspicion of many secular rulers. But Ignatius was the dynamic leader of the order. Despite all the obstacles, he saw the Jesuits increase from ten members to a thousand.

Jesus inspires these kinds of noble biographies; he certainly has one (in a sense, four). But he also inspired those we now call 'saints' to continue his mission to the world. St. Ignatius was inspired by them, and beyond them, by Jesus himself to care for the world. As a result, Ignatius defined a new way to pray (now called the *examen* and used very widely) and founded a new evangelistic and intellectually rigorous 'society' in the late medieval Catholic Church, whose members, in turn, led many others to Christ around the world. That illustrates Jesus'

process of discipleship. Jesus' teachings are meant to be embodied, so they can be passed on, from person to person. And they are to be constantly directed outward, to the world which does not yet know him. 'Go, make disciples of all peoples.'

Jesus' mission is to bring people under his Lordship. But how does he do that today? Primarily through his disciples: Jesus trained his disciples to manifest his kingdom – his reign over them – to the world and continue his mission. From the beginning to the end of his earthly interactions with his disciples, everything he did was for the sake of imparting his mission to them. Thus, all four Gospels conclude with Jesus commissioning the disciples to reach the world. The Christian community calls the one recorded in Matthew 28:16 – 20 the 'Great Commission.' Jesus said, 'Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations' (28:19).

How did Jesus impart his mission? From the time he first called his disciples, he set their expectation that they would be 'fishers of people' (4:19). He promised to renovate their hearts, first with regards to anger (5:21 – 26) particularly towards their enemies, whom Jesus instructed to love (5:38 – 48)! The hated Romans were the Jewish disciples' closest real enemies, though the Samaritans and other factions in Israel might have come in for a close second or third place. Jesus taught them to reach the world. When Jesus had them do evangelism in Israel, he would follow that up quickly with evangelism in the Gentile lands across the Sea of Galilee (8:27 – 34 and 15:21 – 39). He called them to forgive radically, especially enemies (6:14 – 15 and 18:21 – 35). Then Jesus modeled for them the sacrificial life he was calling them to lead when he went to his death on behalf of others, even his own enemies (26:47 – 27:54). By the time Jesus finally met with the disciples on the mountain and gave them the 'Great Commission,' they could have probably guessed that he would say, 'Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations.'

The Great Commission is the climax of Jesus' training of the disciples, and his baton-passing to them. We have to pass this heart for global evangelism onto others, as well. We must not take new Christians and simply acculturate them to the Christian culture of our little group, which is sometimes implicitly characterized by the statements, 'we don't drink,' 'we use this weird Christian language,' and 'we attend these meetings.' That leads to a self-satisfied Christian arrogance, as well as a shallow, stale spirituality; if our Christian community is characterized this way, it's probably because we don't have Jesus' heart for the world at all. Not to mention that the Christians often get bored, and become rather boring people as well.

Instead, we are to point people beyond ourselves to Jesus and his love for the world, hopefully because we, too, are seeking to grow into Jesus' heart for the world. World evangelism is the sharp edge of the love of God. He is constantly transforming us in himself and into his mission. If our mission field for now is the whole campus, because the world is represented by students from many different countries, then we must continue on in the love of Christ to engage others with Jesus. That is what keeps us always praying for, hoping for, and reaching beyond what our little group looks like now.

Notice what happens when we see the Great Commission this way? Everything else Jesus did prior to this makes sense. Why love your enemies? Not just because of some individual moral code, but because of Jesus' mission. Why pray for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven? Because of Jesus' mission. Why 'cross the Sea of Galilee' to reach the Gentiles? Because of Jesus' mission. Why remember Jesus' death and resurrection? Because of Jesus' mission. It's not that everything we do is evangelism, evangelism, evangelism. But everything we do ought to be for the sake of evangelism, in other words, for the sake of the world. Far from losing everything else, we find new meaning for all we do.

The Movement: Extending the Reign of Jesus, Part Three: Mt.28:19

^{28:19} Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations...

The noun form of the word ‘disciple’ means ‘a learner,’ so the verb form ‘disciple’ basically means ‘to teach.’ When Jesus called his first followers, they were called his ‘disciples’ because he was teaching them, or discipling them. Here’s some of my story involving one of the four major disciplers in my life. I committed my life to Jesus towards the end of my junior year of high school. My parents had just started arguing about divorce, so that really made me feel unstable. I also began to ask fairly deep questions about my purpose in life and what values I really believed in. I really wanted to understand the Bible. By the time I started my freshman year at Stanford, I was really confused. Not only that, but life was getting hard for me emotionally. I prayed that God would send someone to mentor me. When I got back to campus after Christmas break, a guy named David Miyahara knocked at my door. He was a grad student in the Asian American fellowship that I had visited (this fellowship had undergrad and grads together). He was doing his doctorate in sociology. But his real passion, he said, was developing and discipling others. My ears perked up. ‘Hey, could you disciple me? I want to learn more about the Bible,’ I asked. He and I began meeting once a week, and I loved it. He also came from a broken home, and he walked me through how he dealt with things. I learned more about being Asian American, and he helped me put words to experiences that I had that I hadn’t been able to talk about before. I enjoyed his sense of humor, and how he related to people. He gave great advice, not just to me, but to a lot of others. He helped me through my leadership roles in the fellowship. And he answered or tried to answer all these burning bible questions I had. We would sit and talk for 3 or 4 hours at a time; I was so hungry for an older spiritual brother to disciple me. During our first five months together, David walked me through Matthew 5 – 7. During my sophomore year, we studied Romans. During my junior year, we studied Daniel. During my senior year, we brought three other guys together and read a book on inner healing and Christian counseling.

Sometime during our second year together, David said to me that he hoped I was being prepared to disciple others in the future. He was clear about that on several occasions, because he recognized that Christian discipleship is meant to be reproduced. Since then, I’ve had the privilege of discipling younger men and women in the very same material I was taught, and it’s been a great experience. I learn at least as much as they do.

I think it is very important to have mentors and mentees, in essence, to have discipleship happening all around you. Just to set your minds on fire: Suppose there are 40 of you in a fellowship or church. Suppose each of you were to help 1 person come to faith in Christ this year. Suppose each of you were equipped to and meet with him or her for 2 years, teaching, mentoring, and discipling them. Then, there would be 80 of you. Suppose the 80 of you each help 1 person come to faith, and then for 2 years, disciple them. Then there would be 160 of you. Ten years from now, there would be 1,280 of you. Twenty years from now, there would be 40,960. Thirty years from now, there would be 1,310,720! Now, mentoring younger believers doesn’t have to happen in a one-on-one setting. It can and should be more communal, since we are all *Jesus*’ disciples, not Joe’s disciples, or Jane’s. But a basic tool for helping people meet Jesus and for discipling younger believers could be really handy. Matthew provides that, and we’ll explore that next.

For now, think through what has been invested in you through sermons, bible studies, godly wisdom, advice, ministry skills, mentors, role models, etc. How else would you like to grow? How can you take that knowledge, package it so it's reproducible, and invest it into other people? Which people?

The Transformation Jesus Brings, Part One: Mt.28:19

28:19 ...baptizing them...

Something happens to us when we enter the reign of Jesus. Jesus wanted us to understand it, so he left us with a peculiar symbol: baptism.

Apparently Jesus continued the practice of baptism from his cousin and predecessor, John the Baptist. That wild-looking fellow, John, used to stand in the Jordan River decrying the corruption and injustice around him and calling people to be symbolically 'cleansed' of all that filth by being dunked in the water. That's a pretty effective symbolic gesture, isn't it?

It's even more effective considering the story that the Jewish people understood. God called forth life from water. Three epochal examples form the framework. In creation, God's Spirit hovered over the primordial waters and brought forth land, life, and humanity. But Adam and Eve failed. In Noah's time, God's Spirit hovered over the floodwaters and brought Noah and his family from out of the bloodshed of their time to emerge as a 'new humanity.' But Noah failed. In Moses' time, God led Israel out of their old life of Egyptian slavery through the waters of the Red Sea and into a garden land to be another 'new humanity.' But they, too, failed. Finally, one man was baptized in the waters of the Jordan River: Jesus of Nazareth. He was the one man who did not fail.

Time after time, God pushed back mighty waters to bring forth new human life. So what more fitting symbol than baptism? It's all about being God's fresh, new humanity. You make an individual choice to submerge yourself under the waters. Then you rise up, breaking through the waters as if God were calling you up out of primordial waters of old. That's what baptism means. It symbolizes a 'dying' and a 'rising.'

When we get baptized, what does it symbolize? The dying and rising of *Jesus*. I notice two main reasons in the New Testament for this. First, we become spiritually linked to Jesus' own death and resurrection, the most pivotal transformation any human being has ever experienced (Rom.6:1 – 11; Col.2:12). For example, in his water baptism witnessed by John the Baptist (Mt.3:13 – 17), Jesus confessed the sin present in his own humanity, not because he sinned, but for us, to lead us into confession. He drowned its resistance to the love of God, for us. Throughout his life, Jesus poured out the wrath of God onto his own humanity, within his own divine-human person, by preventing his human nature from sinning. He finally killed it on the cross, his baptism into death. He completed God's judgment on the flesh and came out the other side, into the new life of his resurrection, in a God-soaked human body that would never play host to sin or death again. So a spiritual connection with Jesus is what allows us to participate in this new life he has. Jesus died the death we were already dying, to give us the life we could never live on our own. We die and rise with him when we believe in him.

Second, something very core and fundamental to us dies when we bow before Jesus: our self-centeredness above all. When I came to Jesus, it was a bit painful. I had to admit that I was wrong, that I couldn't live my life by myself any more, and that I had hurt people and I had to

stop denying it. It felt like I was dying, a little bit. Jesus himself said that it would feel that way (Mt.16:24 – 26; Mk.8:34 – 36; Lk.9:23 – 25). But I also experienced fresh, new life, something Jesus also spoke of. I felt like a new person with Jesus.

Notice that Jesus did not die *instead* of us, where we watch from a distance. And it's not that God just changed His mind about us while leaving us the same old people we always were. Rather, Jesus died *ahead* of us, to rise ahead of us, and then he pulled us through that dying and rising, so that we become new with him and in him. The more I get to know Jesus, the more I understand what in fact happened to me when I first believed in him, the more I live as a new person.

No wonder baptism symbolizes *our* 'dying and rising' experience *with Jesus*. It reminds us and others who watch that Jesus has changed us. He is still changing us, true, and he is certainly not done! But something in us has so profoundly changed that our core identity is now washed clean, and made new, by Jesus. We could hardly have a better symbol; we have only to understand and explain it: 'You, too, can be made new!'

The Transformation Jesus Brings, Part Two: Mt.28:19

28:19 ...baptizing them...

I enjoy the *Bourne Identity*, *Supremacy*, *Ultimatum* movie trilogy. The overall story deals with the issue of identity. Fittingly, the story begins and ends with baptism scenes. I don't think Robert Ludlum, the author of the original books, was a Christian. Nor do I think the director of the movies is. From what I can tell, it's a pure coincidence that this parallel exists. But I'm going to use the storyline of Jason Bourne to illustrate something about the Christian life.

We get to know Jason Bourne at his first 'baptism.' He is unconscious, adrift in the ocean off the coast of Marseilles, France, with two gunshot wounds in his back. Rescued by a fishing boat, he struggles to recover his memory from the fog of amnesia that cuts off memories of his life prior to being pulled out of the water. By tracing small clues, he learns that he was a highly trained CIA assassin with the name Jason Bourne. He decides that he will start a new life and leave his old life behind. Bourne had been tasked with killing an African dictator, but had given up on his mission because of the man's children. When he aborted his mission, he was shot twice and fell overboard into the ocean. Jason Bourne's attempt at starting a new life ended with a 'death' of sorts.

But the CIA won't let Bourne go so easily. They pursue him, eventually pushing him to expose the whole façade of lies and intrigue that hides the assassin program from the public. In the middle of the third movie, Bourne explains why he is so reluctant to kill others: He wants to undo all the wrongs he had done before. By the end of the third movie, Bourne acquires classified files, discovers that his past name was David Webb, gets the files into the right hands to expose the CIA, and escapes by jumping off a building into the Hudson River. For a moment, we're uncertain if CIA villain Noah Vosen succeeded in shooting him. But then we see Bourne swimming away. It's another 'baptism' scene that reminds us that we first met this man when he was almost dead in the ocean. This time, his attempt at starting his new life has finally succeeded. He knows who he really is – and it is David Webb, the man he was before he became the lethal assassin Jason Bourne, the man he now knows he should have always remained.

These ‘baptism’ scenes illustrate a man’s central struggle: to shake himself free of the corrupt identity that he had willingly chosen, and to return to the man he was. Curiously enough, they are a decent analogy for each human being’s central struggle: to shake free of the corrupt, false identity that each of us willingly chose, and to return to the person God always meant for us to be. That is why Jesus wanted to mark us with a baptism. Baptism represents the change in our identity. If we have joined ourselves to Jesus by faith in him, we have become and are becoming the person God always meant for us to be.

Knowing God’s Name Transforms Us, and Why: Mt.28:19

28:19 ...baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

God had used various names for Himself before. In the long history of Israel, the God of Israel allowed Himself to be called ‘LORD of this’ and ‘LORD of that.’ To be a ‘lord,’ after all, is a relational designation: he had to be ‘lord’ of someone or something. Usually, some characteristic or activity was appended to the word ‘LORD’ or YHWH/Jehovah. These were ‘pet names’ or ‘nicknames’ for God.

Mystery surrounded one particular Old Testament name for God. In the Ancient Near East, ‘El’ was already being used as name for a mighty god. But the Jews called their God ‘Elohim’ – a strange name or nickname because it already contained the plural form; anything that ends in ‘im’ is a plural form in Hebrew. It might have been heard as, ‘The mighty God who is more than One’ or something like that. This Elohim created the heavens and the earth (Gen.1:1 – 2:3). Already in the Jewish understanding of God, there is a mysterious complexity.

Then, in one of the most important creeds of Israel, the Shema, comes the statement, ‘Hear O Israel, the LORD your God is one’ (Dt.4:5 – 6). The word for ‘one’ actually means ‘unified,’ as if there were more than one, but they are one in action, or one in purpose. It’s the same thought as when husband and wife are said to be ‘one.’ Again, there is a mysterious complexity behind the text of the Old Testament. It’s as if something was yet to be revealed.

Now, Jesus comes along and says that the one name of God to be used by his people is the name, ‘Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.’ This is God’s name. And the symbol of baptism – symbolizing the transforming, death to life experience that Jesus calls us into – is one of our responses to this one true God who has one name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But doesn’t that sound like three names? Grammatically, shouldn’t Jesus have said, ‘...in the *names* of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit’? What kind of name is that?

On the other hand, how can they truly be separate names? How can the Father be called *Father* unless he is the Father of someone, namely his Son? And how can the Son be called *Son* unless he is the Son of someone, namely his Father? To be *Father* is to be *Father of*. To be *Son* is to be *Son of*. These are relational designations. Even the Spirit is a relational designation. The Spirit is the *Spirit of* someone, in this case, the Spirit of the Father and the Son.

Why are we to understand the one God this way? If we perceive God like this, then we are perceiving relationships of a sort we can just barely understand. Whoever the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit truly are, they are inseparable, and cannot be understood without each other. When we say that the one name of God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we are attesting to that.

But how can we perceive the inner relation between the Son and the Father – as Jesus knows it – by standing *outside God*? We cannot. Among *people*, we can perceive father-son

relationships as being between two *distinct and separate* individuals with two distinct and separate names. But for reasons that strain the human mind, we cannot say that about God: God is not two or three distinct individuals. He is one being. Huh???

If we perceive this relation between Son and Father in God, then something has happened to us, too. If we can call God our *Father*, then we must somehow be in the same place as Jesus the *Son*, the only one who can naturally call God *Father*. The Spirit has drawn us inside Jesus and sustains us there. We know God from the vantage point of being *in Jesus* and *by the Spirit*. We are caught up into the very relations within God, the very love of God.

Needless to say, something profound has happened. We have been immersed and transformed into God Himself, in a spiritual baptism that goes far beyond the outward physical symbol. We've died to our independent, self-centered selves, and risen new in the being of another: an interdependent, other-centered God who is that way *in His very being*. We have come to life inside God, suspended in the loving relations of the Trinity.

The closest analogy I can think of comes from an experience I had one summer when I was 19 years old. I was having dinner with the family of a friend of mine. This family was very warm, and it was a refreshing contrast with my family, which at the time was troubled: My parents had been arguing about getting a divorce for three years, as they struggled with alcohol, money, and other things that had become tied into their relationship; a coldness had set into our daily routine and conversations. But in my friend's family, the dad and mom held hands while they invited me into conversation that made me feel known and cared for, and laughed with their three children. A part of me ached with longing. Could I become a part of a family like that?

If we knew about the love that exists within God, between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we would certainly feel the same. Praise God that He does not leave us as outsiders. He has made a way for us to actually participate in His very life. His name – a name of holy relationship – reminds us of that.

The Charter: Matthew's Literary Structure, Part One: Mt.28:20

28:20 ...teaching them to observe all that I commanded you...

Each year, when my kids start a new grade in September at their elementary school, their teachers meet with us as parents. They tell us what they will cover during the school year. They have a goal of covering a certain amount of topics. They already know to what they will give our children exposure. And by the end of the year, our children should have become competent in those things. This is how all good teachers plan the curriculum they expect to cover. Similarly, Matthew is a good teacher who has planned his curriculum around Jesus' identity and mission. He designed it for us as students, and eventually for us as teachers, too.

Matthew finishes his Gospel with Jesus' command to his disciples that they teach others: 'teaching them to observe all that I commanded you' (Mt.28:20). They are not to produce merely *converts*, in a simplistic sense of that word. They are to produce *disciples*, full fledged followers of Jesus who abide by ALL Jesus' teaching. But what is ALL of that teaching? Matthew is surely not excluding what is included in Mark, Luke, and John, but at a minimum, we should look at how Matthew structures his Gospel around Jesus' teaching.

Matthew groups Jesus' teaching in five major blocks. Each section ends with a similar phrase:

Mt.7:28 When Jesus had finished **these words**.
Mt.11:1 When Jesus had finished giving **instructions**.
Mt.13:53 When Jesus had finished **these parables**.
Mt.19:1 When Jesus had finished **these words**.
Mt.26:1 When Jesus had finished **all these words**.

Matthew structures Jesus' actions and teaching in a pattern of five, in a structural allusion to the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy), the original constitution-like document of Mosaic Israel. 'Torah' means 'teaching.' It's not that each 'section' of Matthew matches each 'book' of Moses; the structural allusion doesn't work quite that way.

The first section (1:1 – 7:28) deals with Jesus' identity and his teaching which transforms the human heart. The second section (8:1 – 11:1) is about Jesus healing us by his word, which builds the disciples' confidence that his word is powerful, a useful thing since Jesus sends them to do a short-term missions trip to Israel. The third section (11:2 – 13:53) deals with the mixed response to Jesus and how Jesus trains his disciples to interpret rejection; the Old Testament anticipated this, so it's not a failure of prophecy but a fulfillment. The fourth section (14:1 – 19:1) deals mainly with Jesus doing ministry with the disciples among the Gentiles, i.e. cross-cultural, multi-ethnic ministry. This is vital hands-on training for the Great Commission. The fifth section (19:2 – 26:1) deals with Jesus' final confrontation with the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem, his parting of ways with them (ethically and socially), and his preparing the disciples for the fall of Jerusalem, the sign that he was indeed the Messiah.

One thing that we can do with Matthew's Gospel is use it as a kind of diagnostic tool. Some of us need Jesus to work on our hearts. Others of us need to experience the power of his healing word and develop our understanding of it. Others of us need to think more about kingdom expansion, to face our fears of rejection, to sharpen our minds, and get over our discomfort with making spiritual distinctions between true Christians and everyone else. Others might need to expand the range of people to whom we witness. Others may need to understand the key distinctions between Jesus and other figures – religious, literary, philosophical, or political – even if it reproduces the same conflicts Jesus experienced in his final days in Jerusalem. Spend some time thinking and praying about where you have been more or less developed. You might sense the Lord leading you to develop some area of your life.

Then comes a climactic summary epilogue where Jesus dies and rises again, and tells his disciples to 'go therefore and make disciples of all the nations...teaching them to observe all that I commanded you.' That statement summarizes what came before. Look at the structure:

Mt.7:28 When Jesus had finished **these words**.
Mt.11:1 When Jesus had finished giving **instructions**.
Mt.13:53 When Jesus had finished **these parables**.
Mt.19:1 When Jesus had finished **these words**.
Mt.26:1 When Jesus had finished **all these words**.
Mt.28:16 – 20 Make disciples of all the nations...**teaching them to observe all that I commanded you**.

What does this mean about the *function* of Matthew's Gospel? Just as the Torah is Moses' *teaching*, so Matthew's Gospel is Jesus' *teaching*. And just as Moses' teaching was the founding

charter, the constitution, of *Mosaic* Israel, so Jesus' teaching is the founding charter, the constitution, of *Messianic* Israel. That is, the church.

Our founding charter document commissions us to make *disciples*. But, just for the sake of clarity, it would be fair to say that it commissions us to make *disciplers*. That is, a disciple is someone who can do evangelism, help bring someone into Jesus' kingdom, and nurture and mentor that person. We are supposed to be able to develop a person from the threshold of faith in Jesus into maturity and then into someone who can disciple others in the same way. And those disciples of theirs are supposed to make disciples, and so on and so on. It's as if Matthew is saying to us, 'Go therefore and make *disciplers*. Carry this book with you wherever you go, and put it to good use.'

The Charter: Matthew's Literary Structure, Part Two: Mt.28:20

28:20 ...teaching them to observe all that I commanded you...

Christian tradition holds that, after about twelve years in and around Jerusalem, the apostles divided up the world and went out to preach the word about Jesus. The 'Church of the East' held that the Jesus message arrived in India in 52 AD, China in 64 AD, and Japan in 70 AD. In India, the 'Mar Thoma' Christians trace their spiritual lineage back to Thomas (hence their name), and perhaps Bartholomew, who brought with them the *Gospel of Matthew*. In the early third century, Demetrius, bishop of Alexandria, sent a man named Pantaenus to a region of India, who verified that a Christian community was already there. He brought back to Alexandria the *Gospel of Matthew* written in Hebrew characters.³

The *Gospel of Matthew* also found its way to China and Japan. In Japan, archaeologists peeled back some of the paint on one of the wooden beams of the Koryuji Buddhist Temple, the oldest Buddhist Temple in Kyoto, and found two crosses on it. Apparently, the building had been rebuilt on the frame of a building used for Christian worship in 670 AD, after it was seriously damaged by fire. That wooden beam is now preserved in the Tokyo National Museum. In addition, fragments of the *Gospel of Matthew* written in Chinese script were found inside the Buddhist Temple. They are relics testifying to the presence of Christians in Japan *before* Buddhism arrived on Japanese soil.

In China, we have a stone inscription dating from 638 AD testifying to an already large, established church in the ancient Chinese capital of Xian and influential in the upper levels of the Tang Dynasty. This stone describes Christian missionaries from Mesopotamia, lists Christian priests, and indicates that there were millions of Chinese Christians by the year 635 AD. I suspect that the Gospel of Matthew played a role in that church, because someone cared enough to translate it into Chinese script, and then take it to Japan.

In addition, in Vietnam, during the Hau Le period in the 16th century, churches, statues, and monuments of Jesus on the cross were unearthed. They dated back to a governor named Si Nghiep, who died in 226 AD.⁴ Apparently, he was a Christian. This means that Christian faith was present in Vietnam by the 2nd or 3rd century. Could Christian missionaries have arrived in India, China, Japan, and Vietnam at these extraordinarily early dates? Probably.

³ Jerome, *Lives of Illustrious Men*, ch.36

⁴ Pham Van Sohn, in *Viet Su Tan Bien*, published in Saigon by the Dai Nam, 1961, examines the earliest history of Christianity in Vietnam. See http://www.vnbaptist.net/Tai_Lieu/History_of_VN_bible.htm

What seems true, though, is this: The *Gospel of Matthew* played a key role in the formation of these earliest Christian communities. Why? Because this book commands that we live it, copy it, and hand it on.

Matthew structures his Gospel in the form of a familiar Hebrew pattern, a chiasm. In a chiasm, the first section mirrors the last, the second section mirrors the second to last, and so on, until you get to the center. The center is the turning point or place of emphasis. It was a literary structure that helped people memorize the material and discern a writer's intention. If you're interested, look at Matthew's arrangement of the material, down below. I believe that the center of Matthew's Gospel is the very inconspicuous verse, 13:52, which contains Jesus' words, 'Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a household, who brings out of his treasure things new and old.' Wow, isn't that weird?

But it makes sense. Matthew was a tax collector, a meticulous scribe who once counted coins for the Roman government taxing Israel. When he met Jesus, he became a different kind of scribe. He became a disciple of the kingdom, and as a scribe, he also asks us to become 'scribes' for Jesus' kingdom, too. That is, we are to copy Jesus' teaching and pass it on. In this case, Matthew is referring to his own book, but again, not in a way that excludes the other writings of the New Testament. And now that almost everyone has their own Bibles already, the text of Matthew is physically in people's hands, so to speak, but it still needs to be taken off the shelf.

The Kingdom Charter: We have been given this revolutionary document, which in the first few centuries shaped the greatest missionary movement we've ever seen. May it shape us and spur us on, too!

The Literary Structure of the Gospel of Matthew⁵

A. Jesus, Israel & the Gentiles, Fulfillment, God With Us (1:1 – 25)

Israel is still in exile, from the Babylonian captivity (1:11, 12, 17)

Gentiles included: Four Gentile women are included in Jesus' Jewish genealogy, the line of David (1:1 – 17)

An angel appears, announces fulfillment of what was spoken (1:22)

Immanuel: the title given to Jesus means 'God with us' (1:23)

B. Jesus as King, Rejected by Herod, Acknowledged by Magi (2:1 – 3:17)

Resistance from one ruler: King Herod (2:1ff.)

Jesus' title as 'king' or 'Messiah' occurs (2:2; 2:4; Micah's messianic prophecy of 'a ruler from Bethlehem' in 2:6; 'star' is likely from prophecy of Messiah in Num.22 & 24; Gentile magi/kings honor Jesus as king and *worship him* in 2:11)

Jesus begins to retell Israel's story (descent to Egypt and return in 2:13 – 23, fulfilling Hos.11:1 and Num.24:8)

Jesus' baptism (foreshadowing death and resurrection) is God's declaration of Jesus' kingship; God speaks at Jesus' baptism (3:13 – 17)

C. Jesus Overcomes Three Temptations in the Wilderness (4:1 – 11)

D. Jesus Gathers and Prepares the Disciples for Ministry (4:12 – 25)

E. First Major Discourse: Blessings, the New City on a Hill (5:1 – 7:28)

Eight blessings (5:3 – 12) for openness to heart change (5:21 – 7:14)

Jesus calls his disciples' community the new city on a hill, the new presence of God (5:13 – 16)

Ends with the wise and foolish builders, emphasis on obedience to Jesus' word; how great is its fall (7:21 – 29)

F. Jesus Calls to Israel as the Prophet Like Moses (8:1 – 9:34)

Jesus speaks ten words: ten miracles of healing and deliverance (8:1 – 9:34)

Jesus restores people to who they were meant to be, physically (8:1 – 9:34)

Jesus heals two blind men who call him 'Son of David' (9:27 – 31)

Jesus engages and divides Jewish leadership: Pharisees, scribes, synagogue official (9:1 – 13, 18 – 26)

G. Second Major Discourse: Jesus Trains the Disciples to Call More Disciples (9:35 – 11:1)

Jesus sends disciples to Israel in mission, planting households and more disciples (9:35 – 10:42)

H. Jesus as Messiah, for Jews Now and Gentiles Later (11:2 – 12:45)

John the Baptist asks for the identity of Jesus; Jesus answers that he is the Messiah, from Isaiah (11:2 – 6)

Jesus compares Israel unfavorably to Tyre, Sidon, Sodom (11:7 – 24)

Jesus says he is greater than the Temple, and is Lord of the Sabbath, referring to Isaiah (11:25 – 12:21)

Jesus does miracles to attest his identity, Beelzebub controversy (12:22 – 37)

Pharisees demand a sign; Jesus' sign is believing Gentiles: Nineveh, Queen of the South (12:38 – 42)

I. Third Major Discourse: Kingdom Growth as a Household (Mt.12:46 – 13:58)

Jesus is building a household around 'the will of my Father' (12:46 – 50)

Jesus tells parables about the kingdom and the cost of reaching others (13:1 – 51)

Jesus forms his household around his word ('Therefore every scribe...is like a head of a household...'), but is rejected by his human household (13:52 – 58)

H.' Jesus as New Temple Presence of God, for Jews and Gentiles Now (14:1 – 17:27)

John the Baptist is beheaded (14:1 – 12); Jesus answers that he is the Messiah and new Temple (14:13ff.)

Jesus uses Temple bread numbers 5, 7, 12 on mountains as the new Temple of God (14:13 – 15:39)

Jesus denounces Temple corruption, referring to Isaiah (15:1 – 20)

Jesus compares the disciples unfavorably to the Canaanite woman (15:21 – 28)

Pharisees demand a sign; Jesus offers sign of Jonah, reminders of bread miracles (16:1 – 12)

Jesus shows his superiority to the Temple: transfigures his humanity, belittles Temple tax (16:13 – 17:27)

G.' Fourth Major Discourse: Jesus Trains the Disciples to Shepherd Other Disciples (18:1 – 19:2)

Jesus trains his disciples to honor and shepherd new Christians, and extend forgiveness (18:1 – 33)

F.' Jesus Calls to Israel as the Prophet Like Moses and Heir of David (19:3 – 22:46)

Jesus speaks ten words: answers ten questions about the Old Testament from opponents (19:3 – 22:46)

Jesus restores people to who God meant them to be, relationally: marriage, wealth, power (19:3 – 20:28)

Jesus heals two blind men who call him 'Son of David' (20:29 – 34, almost verbatim to 9:27 – 31); 'Son of David' title appears in dense repetition (20:29, 21:9, 21:15, 22:41 – 46)

Jesus engages Israel's leadership in the Temple; they reject him (21:15 – 22:46)

E.' Fifth Major Discourse: Woes, Fall of Jerusalem, the Old City on a Hill (23:1 – 25:46)

Eight woes for lack of heart change (23:1 – 39)

Fall of Jerusalem, the old city on a hill, the old site of the presence of God (24:1 – 51)

Ends with wise and foolish virgins, and emphasis on obedience to his disciples' word (25:1 – 46)

D.' Jesus Prepares His Disciples for His Death (26:1 – 35)

C.' Jesus Overcomes Temptation Three Times in the Garden, Peter Fails Temptation Three Times (26:36 – 75)

B.' Jesus as King, Rejected by Jewish and Gentile Leaders (27:1 – 66)

Resistance from all rulers: the Jewish chief priests and the Roman rulers (27:1ff.)

Jesus' title as 'king' or 'Christ' or 'Son of God' occurs repeatedly (27:11, 17, 22, 37, 42, 43, 54)

Jesus retells Joseph's story, betrayed by Judah for silver into exile (27:1 – 10) and Israel's story, betrayed by sin into exile (27:11 – 54)

Death of Jesus, resurrection of the dead (figure of water baptism); Jesus speaks at his death (27:52 – 53)

A'. Jesus, Israel & the Gentiles, Fulfillment, God With Us (28:1 – 20)

An angel appears, announces fulfillment of what was spoken, 'Just as he said' (28:6) and 'Behold I have told you' (28:7)

Jesus is resurrected and given Adamic authority (cf. Dan.7:13 – 14), meaning God has brought a human back from exile (28:6, 18)

Gentiles included: All are invited and called to Jesus, the heir of David (28:16 – 20)

Immanuel: Lo, I am with you always (28:20)

⁵ Chiastic literary structure developed by Mako A. Nagasawa and Peter K. Kim, last modified August 20, 2013

Power Beyond Our Own: Jesus Goes With Us: Mt.28:20

28:20 And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

True, Jesus sends his disciples out into the world. But he does not send us alone. Nor does he simply send us with a good manual. He actually goes with us. Compare the beginning of Matthew's Gospel with the end. At the beginning, Jesus is called 'Immanuel, God with us' (1:23). Now at the end, Jesus enacts what that title means: 'I am with you always' (28:20).

How strange: In Luke, Jesus ascends to the Father and sends his Holy Spirit to empower the disciples. But the presentation in Matthew is different. It seems as if Jesus intends to physically go with his disciples down the mountain and into the world. Matthew simply means what Luke describes in another way. In reality, Jesus does go with us, spiritually. He dwells in us individually. And he is present when two or more are gathered in his name. Mysteriously enough, he is present in the evangelism and discipleship his disciples do, encouraging, directing and empowering us.

Matthew's literary parallel to the Torah reinforces Jesus' presence with us. The ending of Matthew's Gospel parallels but 'improves on' the ending of the Torah. How does the Torah end? With Moses on a mountain, overlooking the land that Israel was going to inherit. Sadly, God stopped Moses from going with the people: God took Moses home, so Moses died on that mountain and Israel had to pursue their inheritance without him (Dt.34). So Israel lost a tremendous leader. Compare that to the end of Matthew's Gospel: Jesus also stands on a mountain, but not to die – in fact, he has already been resurrected. So Jesus' followers aren't going to pursue the inheritance alone – Jesus goes with them. And this time, the inheritance isn't land – it's people. This is a more important battle, led by a vastly more powerful leader.

When I first tried leading a bible study, the summer after my freshman year of college, I was really, really nervous. Before the first meeting, I arrived 30 minutes early to pray, and went to the bathroom three times in that 30 minutes! But even then, I vaguely sensed Jesus leading us. I had gone back home to Los Angeles, CA for the summer and wanted to gather friends and acquaintances to meet with Jesus together in his word. I pitched the idea of studying Matthew 5 – 7, since my mentor David had led me through that section while at school. During the second meeting of that summer study, we were studying Jesus' teaching on anger and reconciliation (Mt.5:21 – 26) and two people reconciled with each other in the meeting. I was stunned. Suddenly I felt like Jesus was there with us.

A transformation started to happen in me as well. I'm still learning that Jesus really is at work around me, that he does things in people that I couldn't foresee, didn't expect, and can't take responsibility for. This was counterintuitive to everything I had learned in life, where effort in equaled results out. Swimming competitively for 10 years and being an engineer by training certainly reinforced that. But with Jesus involved, who can predict anything? Later, in other studies and at other times, I saw people transformed, and it has definitely seemed like Jesus was there with us: some people were healed of physical problems, some people found knowledge they ordinarily wouldn't have, and some people came to Jesus to start a lifelong journey of personal transformation. How does this happen?

Sometimes subtle, sometimes spectacular, yet always significant, Jesus goes with us as we participate in what he's doing. These are his battles – battles for human lives – and every victory is his victory.

Chapter 2: The Historical Background – Israel at the Time of Jesus

The Prequel: The Role of Israel

In order to better understand the Gospel of Matthew, not to mention Jesus himself, we must understand something about Israel, the community from which Jesus came. Indeed, Matthew connects Jesus to Israel's history from the very beginning of his Gospel: 'The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David' (Mt.1:1). Since Matthew writes for a Jewish audience, he introduces Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. **Messiah** (or 'anointed one') was the title of the King who would come from David's line. He would come and rule over both Israel and the Gentile world. He would deliver Israel – or at least, the true and faithful in Israel – from her enemies. He would bring restoration to the world as the good Creator God always intended – in a messianic era with peace and justice. He would bring about 'the happy ending.'

And that gives us the opportunity to back up. Why did God make Israel His 'chosen people'? Why not skip directly to Jesus? Why did Israel hope for a Messiah King, anyway? What's the big deal about a Messiah? Short answers to those big questions are hard, but let's try to answer them.

Israel as God's Chosen People: Chosen to Diagnose and Document the Human Nature Problem

At a basic level, God invited Israel to be His human partner to prepare for His personal coming in Jesus. But more specifically, He set them into an existence so that they would accurately diagnose the human condition, document it in writing, and actually *want* to be transformed by Jesus when he came.

That wasn't an easy task! The first human, Adam had denied his responsibility altogether. Adam's first response was to blame Eve for 'making' him sin. Then Adam blamed God Himself. 'This woman You gave me' (Gen.3). The same blameshifting evasiveness is found in all of us. Two recent books on psychology highlight that: Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson's book *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts* and Cordelia Fine's book *A Mind of Its Own: How Your Brain Distorts and Deceives*. The basic theme of these books: we are really good at deceiving ourselves.

Throughout Israel's long relationship with God, Israel repeatedly failed God. What happened then? They could not blame bad circumstances, since they were in the Promised Land, a 'garden land' much like Adam and Eve's original garden of Eden. Israel could not blame bad laws either, since they had the Law of Moses; the problem was they couldn't live up to it. What explanation was left? Those with insight said the problem was internal, not external, to Israel. Hence, Moses, David, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel said: 'The Lord will circumcise your **heart**' (Dt.30:6). 'Create for me a clean **heart**' (Ps.51:10). God will write His 'law upon their **hearts**' (Jer.31:33). He will 'give you a new **heart**' (Ezk.36:26). In fact, the reason for Israel's subordination to Gentile powers in the first place was Israel's **corrupted human nature**, or, to use the language above, their **hearts**. As we will see in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus agrees with the diagnosis, repeats it (Mt.15:18 – 20), and sets out to heal and transform human nature in every single person: first in himself, and then in others.

Yet if Israel needed the same heart level transformation as the rest of the Gentiles, then the Jews would have to look hard at their past bitter attitudes towards the Gentiles and completely reevaluate what it meant to be 'separate' from them.

Israel as God's Chosen People: Chosen to Hope for a Happy Ending

A second reason God chose Israel was so they could hope for '**a happy ending.**' Popular historian Thomas Cahill makes a concise comparison between Israel and all the other peoples of the world: 'All evidence points to there having been, in the earliest religious thought, a vision of the cosmos that was profoundly **cyclical**... The Jews were the first people to break out of this circle, to find a new way of thinking and experiencing, a new way of understanding and feeling the world, so much that it may be said with some justice that theirs is the only new idea that human beings have ever had.'⁶

Israel's hope that God would defeat evil developed logically from Israel's assertion that there is only one true God, who is all good and loving. Since there is evil in the world, however, that means this one God must act in a decisive way to defeat evil. And since human beings are the main agent in the world, to overcome humanity's evil God would act through Israel, His human partner, and specifically the heir of King David as His closest human partner. This was Israel's messianic hope. God would not abandon the world or simply let it go on in endless cycles of good and evil. Instead, He would act to save the world from the world's evil. The logical consequence of Israel's monotheism was messianic hope – a happy ending.

Perhaps you or other people you know live in a circular story which just goes around and around forever. Do you think that there are two or more gods of equal power who will keep fighting it out forever (e.g. Zoroastrianism)? Do you think there is one god who is both good and evil where the distinction between good and evil is an illusion in our own heads (e.g. Hinduism, Buddhism)? Do you think there is no god and therefore no ability to change human nature or escape the endless cycles of conflict (e.g. atheism)?

Perhaps you want to live in a story with a happy ending but you're not sure why the story ends up that way. Every story with a happy ending must overcome the fundamental problem to reach that happy ending. But if the problem in your story is external to humanity, then why haven't we figured out what to fix? For example, Western Enlightenment modernists and neo-conservatives believe the problem is 'lack of democracy,' an external problem that we can fix. But is that true? Why then were the great liberal democracies (France, Germany, Britain, U.S.) uniformly racist? Why was racial segregation maintained by democratic means in the U.S.? Why was Hitler democratically elected? Or Hezbollah?

We can go on and on about issues external to humanity: better schools, better environments, better families, etc. Don't get me wrong – those are important tasks to shoot for. But what if the problem is *internal* to humanity? What if *we* are the problem? That is the deeper opinion voiced in the Old Testament, and Jesus says later in Matthew's Gospel, 'Out of the heart comes evil...' (Mt.15:18). Then the Messiah, Jesus, must also be God's human agent to undo the evil *in* humanity. We are the problem that must be overcome in order to reach the messianic happy ending. That must be Jesus' role and destiny! Indeed, we'll see that in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection where he becomes a fresh, new kind of human being, physically saturated by the love and glory of God.

⁶ Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels* (Thorndike, ME: G.K. Hall & Co., 1998), p.13 – 14

Israel During the Time of Jesus

Sadly, the Israelites sinned and turned their backs on God. Their leaders broke God's law by amassing wealth in Jerusalem at the people's expense, which drew the greed of foreign powers (e.g. 1 Ki.12; Isa.39). Israel's reliance on those powers was a further sin, which drew them into being conquered. After the kingdom divided into the southern kingdom of Judah and the northern kingdom of Israel, the Assyrian Empire took over the northern kingdom in 721 BC. The Neo-Babylonian Empire conquered Judah and Jerusalem and took Jews captive in 586 BC (discussed by the book of Daniel). The Medo-Persian Empire conquered Babylon, and Cyrus the Great permitted the return of many Jews to the traditional homeland of Israel (described in 2 Chr.36 and the book of Ezra-Nehemiah). The Greek Empire, led by Alexander the Great, displaced Persian authority in the region, establishing the Greek language and culture throughout but provoking cultural resistance from the Jews.



The Roman Empire succeeded the Greeks. In Roman eyes, Israel was part of a string of valuable buffer states between the Roman Empire and the Persian Empire (see map). At the time of Jesus, Pontius Pilate ruled as the Roman procurator of Judea. The Romans installed as a client king an Edomite named Herod; despite practicing Judaism, King Herod and his sons were rejected by the observant and nationalist Jews of Judea because he was not of the royal line of David.

Every Passover, devout Jews would pray that they had no king but God. Passover was for the Jews what the Fourth of July is for Americans: a celebration of independence. This annual feast commemorated the day God liberated Israel out from Egypt in the days of Moses. But the bitter irony of celebrating Passover under Roman occupation was the reminder that Israel was not free. They were not free from their sins nor from their Gentile captors. Israel did consolidate her Scriptures, what we now call the Old Testament. Yet questions abounded about

whether there would really be a Messiah, whether Israel's sins were preventing the Messiah from coming, whether the Messiah would come and then cleanse Israel, etc.

How Jews Felt About Each Other: Cultures and Politics

By the time Jesus was born, Diaspora Jews remained scattered throughout the world, and the Hebraic Jews living in the land of Judea were fragmented into various camps. This chart, borrowed from sociologists Kitano and Daniels to describe how ethnic minorities relate to a dominant culture, gives a general sense for what those camps were. You will meet all of these characters as you read through the Gospel of Matthew. *This chart will also help you understand how we can build and participate in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural ministry.*

<p>High Identification with Jewish covenant</p>	<p>The Essenes in the Dead Sea region defined Jewishness around physical separateness and waiting for the Temple to be cleansed.</p> <p>Revolutionary zealots defined Jewishness around a military Messianic hope of liberating Jerusalem from Rome and restoring the corrupt Temple.</p> <p>The Pharisees, lawyers, and scribes defined Jewishness around aspects of the Mosaic Law (Sabbath-keeping, ritual purity, kosher laws). Many believed Israel to be an ethnicity, by genetic descent from Abraham.</p>	<p>The priests kept up the Jerusalem Temple's sacrificial system but had to work the Roman system to do so. They benefited financially.</p> <p>Other Jews (Essenes, revolutionaries, Pharisees, scribes) saw them as collaborators and contaminated.</p>
<p>Low Identification with Jewish covenant</p>	<p>The Samaritans were half-Jewish and half-Assyrian and were rejected by mainstream Jewish society. They were not allowed to worship in Jerusalem.</p> <p>The sinners, prostitutes, and outcasts were not welcomed into the synagogue and mainstream Jewish society for what were perceived as their moral failures.</p>	<p>The Sadducees changed their beliefs about resurrection and made political alliances with Rome for land.</p> <p>The tax collectors became part of the Roman taxation machinery and were seen as traitors to the Jewish nation.</p>
	<p>Low Assimilation with Greco-Roman culture</p>	<p>High Assimilation with Greco-Roman culture</p>

Military Messianic Movements in Israel 163 BCE – 135 CE

To give you a sense for how fervently many Jews hoped in a military Messiah who would liberate Jerusalem from the Romans, cleanse the Jerusalem Temple to renew worship, and oust the enemies of Israel, here is a list of revolutionary movements. These movements called

themselves ‘messianic.’⁷ This will help you understand not only what the disciples also thought of Jesus initially, but also how Pharisees and zealots often made common cause. *Knowing this will help you pose a very important apologetics question, and answer it: How do you explain why the earliest Christians started to love their Roman enemies, instead of wanting to kill them?*

- 163 BCE: Judas Maccabeus recaptured Jerusalem from the Greek Seleucid Empire and cleansed the Temple, providing the model for a Jewish resistance tradition
- 40 BCE: Hezekiah led revolts and skirmishes. He was put down by Herod the Great. Samaia the Pharisee objected to this.
- 4 BCE: Young men, as Herod lay dying in 4 BCE, pulled down Roman eagles from Jerusalem, who were then killed on Herod’s orders. They were supported by the teachers Judas ben Sariphaeus and Matthias ben Margalothus (*War* 1.648 – 55; *Ant.* 17.149-66). The young men who were egged on by the teachers Judas and Matthias to pull down Roman eagles from Jerusalem, were then killed on Herod’s orders (*War* 1.648 – 55; *Ant.* 17.149 – 66).
- 3BCE: There was another violent revolt on the following Passover, which was renewed at Pentecost (*War* 2.1 – 13; 39 – 50; *Ant.* 17.206 – 18; 250 – 64). Josephus says that it involved ‘a countless multitude’ from all over Palestine, especially Judea itself. They laid siege to the Romans, fought them, and besieged the commander himself in the palace. At this, anarchy broke out in Palestine (*War* 2.55; *Ant.* 17.269, referring to ‘continuous and countless new tumults’), including a revolt by Herod’s veterans and one by Judas, son of Hezekiah.
- 6 CE: Judas the Galilean (*War* 2.118, also probably ‘Theudas’ mentioned in Acts 5:37), who may have been the same person as Judas the son of Hezekiah the bandit leader.⁸ Judas, together with Zadok, a Pharisee, headed a large number of Zealots and offered strenuous resistance. Judas proclaimed the Jewish state as a republic recognizing God alone as king and ruler and His laws as supreme. The revolt continued to spread, and in some places serious conflicts ensued.
- An individual called the ‘Samaritan’ led a group of armed followers and ended up in guerilla warfare. Precise date unknown.
- The unnamed prophets of *War* 2.258 – 60/*Ant.* 20.167b – 8 were part of the general brigandage noted in *Ant.* 20.167a. Precise date unknown.
- The ‘Egyptian’, according to *War* 2.262, intended to force entry to Jerusalem, overpower the Roman garrison, and set himself up as a tyrant. Precise date unknown.
- The unnamed prophet of *Ant.* 20.188 appeared in the context of widespread brigandry (since some ‘prophets’ and their followers entertained dreams of violent revolution). Precise date unknown.
- Jonathan the Weaver (*War* 7.437 – 50), according to Josephus’ *Life* 424f., aroused an uprising in Galilee. Precise date unknown.
- ~28 CE: Pontius Pilate crushed upstart Galileans, mingling their blood with their sacrifices (Luke 13:1)
- 30 CE: Barabbas, and the revolt in which he took part (Luke 23.19; in John 18.40 Barabbas is described as a lestes, ‘brigand’). Presumably the two *lestai* crucified alongside Jesus count as well.

⁷ This data is distilled from N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), p.170 – 203. I have preserved references to Josephus’ two works *Antiquities of the Jews* and *Wars of the Jews*.

⁸ See N.T. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, p.180

- 40's CE: The sons of Judas the Galilean, Jacob/James and Simon (*Ant.* 20.102), continued their father's insurrection. They were crucified in the late 40s by Roman governor Tiberius Julius Alexander.
- All the 'common people' were punished along with Eleazor ben Deinaeus; in *War* 2.253, Josephus says the number of them was 'incalculable'.
- Jesus ben Ananias entered Jerusalem on the Feast of Sukkot and decried the Temple; the governor interrogated him but later released him.
- There are the further outbreaks of brigandage reported in *War* 2.264f.; these may be the same ones who are mentioned in 2.271, but in the earlier passage it appears that the revolutionary fervor was far more widespread than a small group.
- 66 CE: The Sicarii, the 'dagger men,' led by Menahem, another son or grandson of Judas the Galilean (*War* 4.198, *Ant.* 20.186f., etc.) forced their way into the Temple and then burned the houses of Ananias, Agrippa, and Bernice, and the Record Office with the records of debt. Menahem broke into the armory at Masada, distributed arms, and returned to Jerusalem as 'king' over the revolutionary forces.
- 66 – 70 CE: Simon bar Giora was captured after the revolt of 66 – 70 and brought to Rome. He was executed in Rome in 71.
- 67 – 70 CE: John of Gischala and his followers came from Galilee to Jerusalem to participate in the revolt. John was captured at the end of the war and condemned to life imprisonment (*War* 2.590 – 632).
- 73 CE: Eleazar ben Yair, possibly the same person as Eleazar ben Simon, led a Sicarii rebellion at Masada. The size and scope of the group is disputed, as is the manner of their death; possibly it was mass suicide.
- 132 – 135 CE: Finally, there was the Jewish military leader known as Bar-Kochba and his Jewish uprising of 135 AD which was finally crushed at Masada. This ended the period of Jewish militancy.

Needless to say, Jesus' own definition of the problem, as well as its solution, were quite different than all this. This background will help you understand why Jesus wanted to draw a following and be identified as the Messiah by his disciples (for example, Matthew 16:13 – 28), but expressed real hesitation early on with being very public about it. During the last week of his life, however, Jesus marched into Jerusalem openly claiming to be the Messiah, the king of the Jews. This is described in Matthew 21 and following. The explanation for Jesus' earlier secrecy is to avoid stirring up the militant interpretation of the Messiah that many Jews held.

Chapter 3: Study Notes and Leader's Guide for Matthew 3 – 7

The following passages are part of the first literary section of Matthew, which goes from Mt.1:1 to 7:29. For the purposes of campus ministry, I typically start with the story of the baptism and wilderness temptation of Jesus in Mt.3:13 – 4:11. This passage is fundamental:

- To understanding Jesus as the one who heals human evil at its source: in human nature
- To learning how to articulate the evangelistic significance of Jesus to every person
- To understanding the Bible as a story with repeated patterns, and studying it well
- To understanding the basic nature of temptation and spiritual warfare
- To giving a mentor and mentee a chance to share their personal stories of being transformed by Jesus
- To fostering a context where we expect Jesus to transform us

I will give a high level overview of the passages, and why each is important.

1	Matthew 3:13 – 4:11	Jesus Retells Our Story
2	Matthew 4:12 – 25	Jesus Calls Us to Call Others
3	Matthew 5:1 – 12	Spiritual Transformation
4	Matthew 5:13 – 16	Spiritual Influence
5	Matthew 5:21 – 26	Heart Transformation for Reconciliation
6	Matthew 5:27 – 32	Heart Transformation for Purity
7	Matthew 5:33 – 37	Heart Transformation for Integrity
8	Matthew 5:38 – 48	Heart Transformation for Love
9	Matthew 6:1 – 18	From Public Show to Deep Authenticity
10	Matthew 6:19 – 34	From Greed to Generosity
11	Matthew 7:1 – 6	From Judging to Healing
12	Matthew 7:7 – 29	The Great Choice

For the Leader: Your mentee will receive a Participant's Guide with all the materials in the Leader's Guide, except for the leader's questions and notes.

Jesus Retells Our Story

Matthew 3:13 – 4:11

^{3:13} Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan coming to John, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ But John tried to prevent him, saying, ‘I have need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ ¹⁵ But Jesus answering said to him, ‘Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then he permitted him. ¹⁶ After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on him, ¹⁷ and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.’ ^{4:1} Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² And after he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he then became hungry. ³ And the tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.’ ⁴ But he answered and said, ‘It is written, ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.’’ ⁵ Then the devil took him into the holy city and had him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶ and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you’; and ‘on their hand they will bear you up, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’’ ⁷ Jesus said to him, ‘On the other hand, it is written, ‘You shall not put the LORD your God to the test.’’ ⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory; ⁹ and he said to him, ‘All these things I will give you, if you fall down and worship me.’ ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to him, ‘Go, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the LORD your God, and serve Him only.’’ ¹¹ Then the devil left him; and behold, angels came and began to minister to him.

Historical and Cultural Background:

- **Baptism:** Baptism was a rite of passage for Gentile *converts into Judaism*. It represented God cleansing a person from sin through that person’s repentance, and new birth as a new person into Israel, the community of God’s people. Baptism was based on an Old Testament pattern. Notice:

Adam and Eve	Noah & Family	Israel
Gen.1:2 the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters ... ²⁷ God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (God then placed humanity in a garden land .)	Gen.7:24 The water prevailed upon the earth one hundred and fifty days. ^{8:1} But God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark; and God caused a wind to pass over the earth, and the water subsided. (Noah then planted a garden .)	Ex.14:29 But the sons of Israel walked on dry land through the midst of the sea, and the waters were like a wall to them on their right hand and on their left. ³⁰ Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians... (Israel was in the wilderness for 40 years until God placed them in the garden land .)

- **John the Baptist:** Therefore, John, the ‘herald’ of Jesus, was making a fairly radical statement by calling for *Jews* to be baptized.

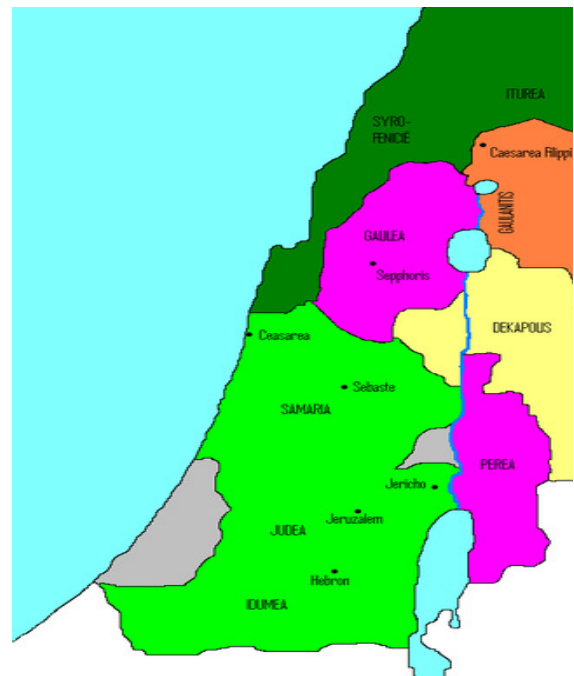
Jesus Calls Us to Call Others

Matthew 4:12 – 25

^{4:12} Now when Jesus heard that John had been taken into custody, he withdrew into Galilee; ¹³ and leaving Nazareth, he came and settled in Capernaum, which is by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali. ¹⁴ This was to fulfill what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet: ¹⁵ ‘The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, by the way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles – ¹⁶ the people who were sitting in darkness saw a great light, and those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death, upon them a light dawned.’ ¹⁷ From that time Jesus began to preach and say, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ ¹⁸ Now as Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon who was called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.’ ²⁰ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ Going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and he called them. ²² Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. ²³ Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people. ²⁴ The news about him spread throughout all Syria; and they brought to him all who were ill, those suffering with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics; and he healed them. ²⁵ Large crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan.

Historical and Cultural Background:

- *Israel's Exile:* Long ago, in 721 BC, the Assyrian Empire had taken over the northern Galilee section of Israel and Samaria starting with ‘the land of Zebulun and Naphtali.’ The prophet Isaiah (quoted in Mt.4:15 – 16) had foretold that that land, first to be conquered, would be the first to see the light dawning on Israel. Since the Babylonian takeover in 586 BC, all the Jews had been ruled by a foreign power.
- *Herod:* The non-Jewish ruler Herod Antipas had taken John the Baptist (Jesus’ cousin and predecessor) into custody because John criticized his adulterous marriage (Mt.14:1 – 12). Herod’s territory was in purple on the map (right), marked ‘Galilee’ and ‘Perea.’ Hence, Jesus began his ministry in a dangerous region politically.
- *Messiah:* Almost all Jews hoped for a military Messiah (which meant ‘anointed one’) to oust the Romans, inaugurating the ‘kingdom of heaven/God’ in a new sort of ‘independence day.’



Spiritual Transformation

Matthew 5:1 – 12

¹ When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² He opened his mouth and began to teach them, saying,

³ Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

⁵ Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.

⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

⁷ Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

¹⁰ Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Historical and Cultural Background:

- *Israel's Exile*: The Jewish people knew that they had sinned and were in exile. This exile began with Babylonian captivity in 586 BC but it continued under the Persians, Greeks, and Romans.
- *The Kingdom of God*: The Old Testament expressed unflagging hope that God would rescue Israel and restore them to His reign. This was called 'the kingdom of heaven' or 'kingdom of God'. Almost all Jews interpreted this to mean a military Messiah (anointed king) who would unite Israel and defeat the Romans. Jesus, however, understood these passages to mean a deeper and more profound transformation in human nature, which he had to accomplish first in himself (Mt.3:13 – 4:11), and then in his followers. Jesus had just announced 'the kingdom of heaven' (Mt.4:12 – 25), triggering all kinds of questions, hopes, and expectations.
- *Jesus' Authority*: The fact that Jesus sits down (5:1 – 2) is significant. Rabbis sat down to deliver their most important teachings.
- *The Beatitudes*: The beatitudes (5:3 – 12): they are a distillation of Old Testament hope, in particular as the OT anticipated the Messiah and the new covenant. Jesus is now gathering up all the prophetic expectations together and placing himself and his movement squarely within them, expressing them, fulfilling them.

Guiding Questions

1. Who does God bless in the kingdom? How?
2. Is Jesus describing eight different people ('blessed' x8) or one person?
3. What does this tell us about the character of this God?

Matthew 5:1 – 12 Old Testament Background (Optional Examples)

Jesus	Fulfills the Old Testament Hope for Renewal
³ Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.	Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool. Where then is the house you will build for me? And where is a place I may rest? For my hand made all these things. Thus all these things came into being, declares the Lord. But to this one I will look, to the one who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at my word. (Isa.66:1 – 2)
⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.	The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, to proclaim the favorable year of the LORD and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn (Isa.61:1 – 2)
⁵ Blessed are the <i>humble/meek</i> , for they shall inherit the earth.	But the <i>humble/meek</i> will inherit the land, and will delight themselves in abundant prosperity. (Ps.37:11, 22, 29) But he who takes refuge in Me will inherit the land (Isa.57:13) Enlarge the place of your tent; stretch out the curtains of your dwellings, spare not; lengthen your cords and strengthen your pegs. For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left. And your descendants will possess nations and will resettle the desolate cities. (Isa.54:2 – 3)
⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.	Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, and delight yourself in abundance. Incline your ear and come to Me. Listen, that you may live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, according to the faithful mercies shown to David. (Isa.55:1 – 3)
⁷ Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.	The merciful man does himself good, but the cruel man does himself harm. (Prov.11:17)
⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.	Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord? And who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to falsehood and has not sworn deceitfully. (Ps.24:3 – 4) But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD, I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. (Jer.31:33)
⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.	I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will lead him and restore comfort to him and to his mourners, creating the praise of the lips. Peace, peace to him who is far and to him who is near. (Isa.57:18 – 19)
¹⁰ Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.	e.g. Elijah (1 Kings 21), Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc.
¹¹ Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.	
¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.	

Matthew 5:1 – 12 Old Testament Background (Optional Example from Isaiah)

Old Testament Hopes for Renewal...	...Are Inaugurated by Jesus
Example passage: Isaiah 57:12 – 21	³ Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (see also Isa.66:1 – 2)
¹² “I will declare your righteousness and your deeds; But they will not profit you.	⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. (see also Isa.61:1 – 2)
¹³ When you cry out, let your collection of idols deliver you. But the wind will carry all of them up, And a breath will take them away. But he who takes refuge in Me will inherit the land And will possess My holy mountain.”	⁵ Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. (see also (Ps.37:11, 22, 29; Isa.54:2 – 3)
¹⁴ And it will be said, “Build up, build up, prepare the way, Remove every obstacle out of the way of My people.”	⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. (see also Isa.55:1 – 3)
¹⁵ For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, “I dwell on a high and holy place, And also with the contrite and lowly of spirit In order to revive the spirit of the lowly And to revive the heart of the contrite.	⁷ Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. (see also Prov.11:17)
¹⁶ For I will not contend forever, Nor will I always be angry; For the spirit would grow faint before Me, And the breath of those whom I have made.	⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. (see also Ps.24:3 – 4, and Dt.30:6; Jer.31:31 – 34; Ezk.36:26 – 27)
¹⁷ Because of the iniquity of his unjust gain [opposite of mercy] I was angry and struck him; I hid My face and was angry, And he went on turning away, in the way of his heart .	⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. (see also Isa.57:18 – 19)
¹⁸ I have seen his ways, but I will <u>heal</u> him; I will lead him and restore comfort to him and to his mourners ,	¹⁰ Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
¹⁹ Creating the praise of the lips. Peace, peace to him who is far and to him who is near,” Says the LORD, “and I will <u>heal</u> him.”	¹¹ Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.
²⁰ But the wicked are like the tossing sea, For it cannot be quiet, And its waters toss up refuse and mud.	
²¹ “There is no peace ,” says my God, “for the wicked.”	

Spiritual Influence

Matthew 5:13 – 16

¹ When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² He opened his mouth and began to teach them, saying,

³ Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

⁵ Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.

⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

⁷ Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

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¹⁰ Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

¹³ You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. ¹⁴ You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; ¹⁵ nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. ¹⁶ Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

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- *The Beatitudes*: Recall that in Matthew 5:1 – 12, Jesus is describing one person, not eight different people. He is describing a sequence of how he transforms our character through our faith in him. Now, Jesus will talk about influencing others using this language of being salt and light in the world.

Heart Transformation for Reconciliation

Matthew 5:21 – 26

^{5:21} You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not murder” and “Whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.” ²² But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, “You fool,” you will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³ So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

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- *Liable to Judgment:* The local town court would hand down judgments in cases of conflict.
- *Liable to the Council:* The Sanhedrin, the ruling body of Jews made up of 70 elders, would weigh in on cases of the highest importance.
- *Liable to the Hell of Fire:* The valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem was a place where non-Jews and some Jews once sacrificed their children to the fires of the false god Molech (Jeremiah 19:1 – 6)
- *You Fool:* This was not a casual insult. From the Psalms, this is a term of excommunication or shunning. The Psalms say, ‘The fool has said in his heart there is no God’ (Ps.14:1; 53:1; cf. 107:17).

Heart Transformation for Purity

Matthew 5:27 – 32

^{5:27} You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’; ²⁸ but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰ If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell.

^{5:31} It was said, ‘Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce’; ³² but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

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Heart Transformation for Integrity

Matthew 5:33 – 37

^{5:33} Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.’ ³⁴ But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king. ³⁶ Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ But let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no’; anything beyond these is of evil.

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- *Vows:* Just before this, Jesus had addressed the issue of lust and easy divorce (Mt.5:27 – 32). Since marriage is a type of oath, there is a logical connection between the previous topic and this one.
- *Oaths:* At the time of Jesus, some Israelites believed that swearing by less holy objects like ‘heaven’ or ‘Jerusalem’ was not as binding as swearing by God’s name. In the Old Testament, Israelites made certain vows as a public commitment to God for some purpose or other (Lev.27; Num.30). It was usually of a specific duration, maybe involving a journey (Gen.24:1 – 4; 28:20) or a promise of faithful conduct (Num.21:2). People also made vows to other people to honor promises or agreements (Gen.21:22 – 24; 25:33; 47:29 – 31). Breaking oaths, vows, and sworn promises was considered sinful; it polluted the vow-breaker and required ceremonial cleansing (Lev.5:4 – 5). Swearing by the name of God was a holy bond (Gen.24:3; Dt.6:13; 10:20); breaking that promise was to ‘profane the name of God’ (Lev.19:12). Regarding vows, Jesus critiqued the scribes and Pharisees for separating holy things (Jerusalem, the Temple, the altar, etc.) from God Himself (Mt.23:16 – 22).

Heart Transformation for Love

Matthew 5:38 – 48

³⁸ You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹ But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. ⁴⁰ If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. ⁴¹ Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. ⁴² Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you.

⁴³ You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.’

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- *Clothes:* Clothes were often used as collateral in Jewish culture and law (Ex.22:25 – 27; Dt.24:10 – 13). It was what you needed at night to stay warm (Ex.22:27, Dt.24:12 – 13).
- *Going a Mile:* Under Roman law, Roman soldiers were allowed to force Jews to carry their equipment for one mile. Needless to say, Jews despised Roman occupation.

From Public Show to Deep Authenticity

Matthew 6:1 – 18

¹ Beware of practicing your righteousness before people to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven. ² So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. ³ But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. ⁵ When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by people. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. ⁶ But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. ⁷ And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸ So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. ⁹ Pray, then, in this way:

Our Father who is in heaven,	¹² And forgive us our debts,
Hallowed be Your name.	as we also have forgiven our debtors.
¹⁰ Your kingdom come.	¹³ And do not lead us into temptation,
Your will be done,	but deliver us from evil.
On earth	For Yours is the kingdom
As it is in heaven.	and the power
¹¹ Give us this day	and the glory forever. Amen.
Our daily bread.	

¹⁴ For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions. ¹⁶ Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by people when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. ¹⁷ But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face ¹⁸ so that your fasting will not be noticed by people, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

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- *Almsgiving, Prayer, and Fasting:* These were basic and central practices in Jewish life. They were done publicly in addition to privately.

From Greed to Generosity

Matthew 6:19 – 34

¹⁹ Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; ²¹ for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. ²² The eye is the lamp of the body; so then if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. ²³ But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! ²⁴ No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

²⁵ For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? ²⁷ And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life? ²⁸ And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, ²⁹ yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith! ³¹ Do not worry then, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear for clothing?' ³² For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³ But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. ³⁴ So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

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From Judging to Healing

Matthew 7:1 – 6

¹ Do not judge so that you will not be judged. ² For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. ³ Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? ⁴ Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and behold, the log is in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye. ⁶ Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.

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The Great Choice

Matthew 7:7 – 29

⁷ Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. ⁹ Or what man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? ¹¹ If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good [the Holy Spirit]⁹ to those who ask Him! ¹² In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

¹³ Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. ¹⁴ For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

¹⁵ Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? ¹⁷ So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ So then, you will know them by their fruits. ²¹ Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven will enter. ²² Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' ²³ And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you who practice lawlessness.'

²⁴ Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. ²⁶ Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. ²⁷ The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell--and great was its fall.' ²⁸ When Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at his teaching; ²⁹ for he was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

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⁹ Luke 11:13 supplies 'Holy Spirit' in place of Matthew's 'what is good.' Both were likely variants of an oft-repeated phrase of Jesus. In the Old Testament, the hope for God's Spirit to indwell people was another way of speaking of the hope that God would change human hearts (Ezk.36:26 – 36), speech (Num.11:25; Joel 2:28 – 29), lives (Isa.32:15; 44:3; Ezk.37:1 – 14) and forge a new, faith-filled humanity.

interpreted this to mean a military Messiah (anointed king) who would unite Israel and defeat the Romans. Jesus, however, understood these passages to mean a deeper and more profound transformation in human nature, which he had to accomplish first in himself (Mt.3:13 – 4:11), and then in his followers. Jesus had just announced ‘the kingdom of heaven’ (Mt.4:12 – 25), triggering all kinds of questions, hopes, and expectations.

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Chapter 4: Doing Evangelism with the New Humanity Paradigm

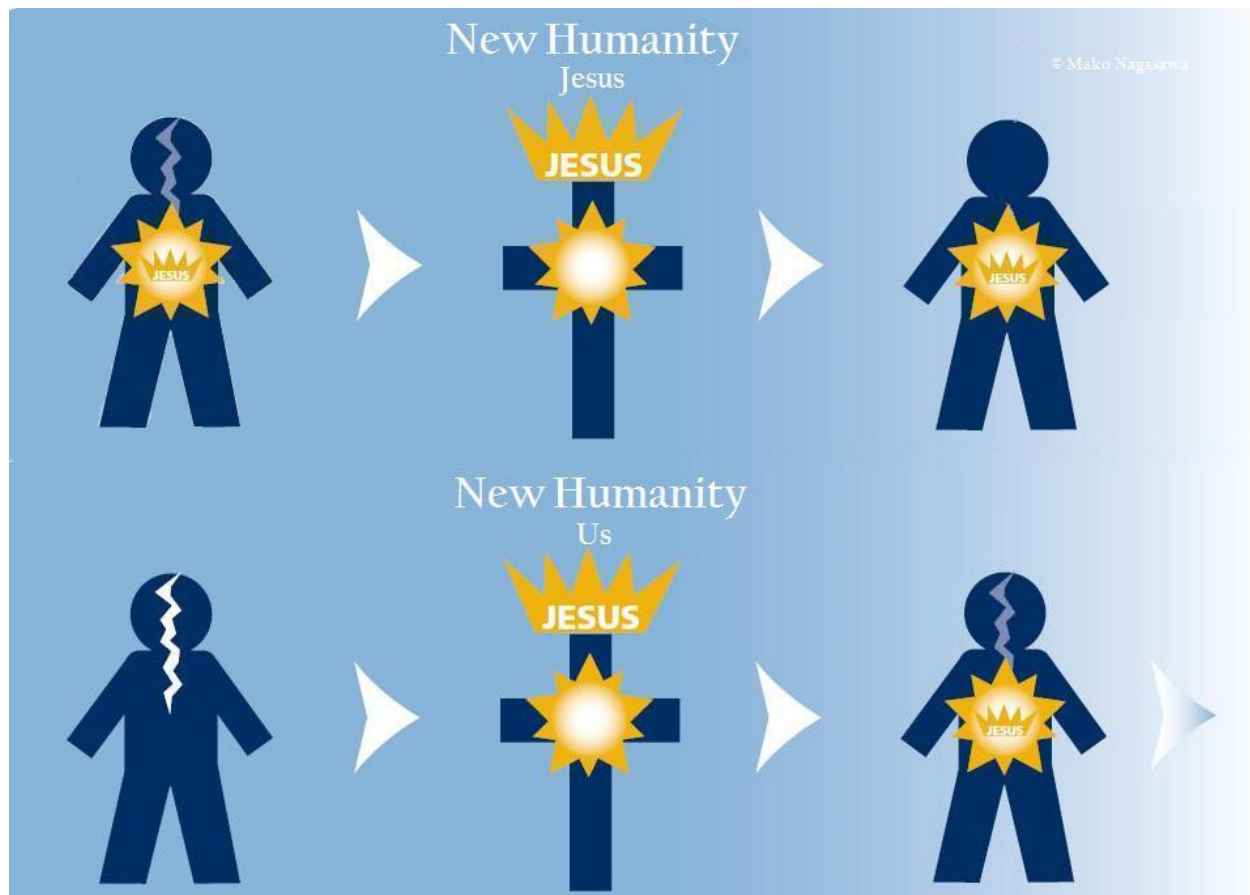
‘This emphasis on Jesus as God’s new humanity has made him so much more relatable... I never really understood how Jesus undid all the sins and evil within the nature of human beings. In many ways, Jesus’ death had made me feel guilty, because I found that I was so unworthy to have Jesus suffer on behalf of my sins. However, understanding how Jesus conquered sin through healing humanity during his life and finally conquering the greatest evil of death, I now see his act on the cross as a moment of triumph.’

— Danielle Chung, Boston College, class of 2010

The New Humanity Diagrams

Diagrams can often help us communicate important things. This is what I call the ‘new humanity’ paradigm that flows out of the earliest, oldest theology of the church. I find that this paradigm flows nicely from the Gospel of Matthew (as well as all the New Testament writings).

The top line helps us tell *Jesus’* story. The bottom line helps us tell *our* story. Let me tell you how I use these diagrams. Then later, if you’re interested, you can read about where this comes from, and why I use them to present Jesus to other people.



Jesus' Story (Top Line)

- Left (incarnation, life): The Son of God became human as Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus took to himself a broken human nature, symbolized by the crack running down the human figure. He did this to fight the corruption and brokenness in his own human nature. But he never sinned. Within himself, Jesus poured out the wrath of God upon that brokenness that was in him. He bent his human nature back into the love of the Father.
- Center (death, resurrection): Jesus died and rose again. Ultimately through his death on the cross, he killed the corruption and brokenness in himself, overcoming its final resistance. In his resurrection, he became God's new humanity.
- Right (resurrection, Spirit): Jesus now has a God-drenched, God-soaked, God-cleansed, God-healed, God-purified, and God-perfected new humanity. That's why there is no crack left in him. He has become what God always wanted for human beings: to bear God's glory from within himself. He can share his new humanity with us by his Spirit if we just ask him. But we have to agree with him that we need him to heal our human nature.
- *Invitation: Do you want Jesus to heal and transform you?*

Jesus' Story: Tips for Telling It

- *Study Matthew 3:13 – 4:11* if you haven't yet. That passage will really start to help you see how Jesus takes the same fallen human nature we have, and start to change it.
- *Reflect on Romans 6:1 – 11* as another example of how Jesus saves us from *ourselves*. Or more precisely, Jesus saves us from *the corruption within ourselves*.
- *Consider* analogies and stories. Here are a few I often tell along the way:
 - Jesus is like a blood donor. All of us have a poison in our bodies, a disease called evil or self-centeredness. We need healing from it. The reason why God became a human being – why the Word became flesh – was to *acquire our disease*. That is the entire punishment Jesus took on. To have the disease that coursed through his veins, and fight it at every moment. In the physical body of Jesus, God resisted every shred of self-centeredness living in that body, pushing it all the way to sits death. He *cleansed that humanity* and crucified the resistance. And by raising Jesus from the dead, God gave Jesus a fresh, new humanity perfectly fused with the divine. Jesus is our blood donor spiritually. When we entrust our lives to him, he joins himself to us by his Spirit.
 - Jesus is like *Harry Potter*. When Harry Potter was 1 year old, the most powerful evil wizard of all time, the Dark Lord Voldemort, killed Harry's mother and father. But when Voldemort cast a killing curse on Harry, it rebounded back onto Voldemort. The reason it didn't kill Harry was because Harry's mother had sacrificed herself first, and thus given a magical protection to Harry. The reason it didn't kill Voldemort was because Voldemort had already split his soul into objects outside his own body, and had achieved a kind of immortality in a very

evil way. Voldemort becomes re-embodied, regathers his army, and starts to take over the wizarding world again. This time, Harry is commissioned to fight the Dark Lord. In book 7, Harry and his friends Ron and Hermione have to find the objects in which Voldemort put pieces of his soul, to destroy them. But Harry discovers that he has a piece of Voldemort's soul *in him*. It got implanted by mistake when Voldemort tried to kill him as a 1 year old. That piece of soul is what caused Harry great pain. And the only way for Harry to destroy that piece of Voldemort's soul is for Harry to die, at the hands of Voldemort himself. And so, Harry goes to face Voldemort, and to die. In order for Harry Potter to defeat the evil of his day, he had to die because there was a part of the evil in him. Similarly, in order for Jesus to defeat the evil in humanity, he had to die because there was a part of that evil in him. But he never gave into it; in fact he fought it every moment of his life, and it was a heroic struggle.

- Jesus is like Frodo, in *The Lord of the Rings*: The moment Jesus entered into the womb of Mary is like the moment Frodo took hold of the Ring of Power. It wasn't just this neutral thing. It tried to take him over. The same thing is true with Jesus when he took fallen human nature to himself. It fought with him. It tried to take him over. It tried to make him as self-centered as we are. But he never let it. And Jesus couldn't just put down some object like the Ring. It was part of him. He couldn't say, 'Hey, where's my Sam??? Can't I give this to someone else?' But he resisted the flesh, every moment, at the source, all the way to the end. He never sinned – in action, and further upstream in emotion, and further upstream in thought, at the very source of his will where he gave himself to the love of the Father. And unlike Frodo, who gave into temptation and kept the Ring, Jesus cast his struggling humanity 'into the fire,' so to speak.
- If you'd like others, I keep a list of illustrations here:
<http://www.anastasiscenter.org/preachers-corner-illustrations>.

Exercise: Talk to one other person about this. It will probably lead to good conversations about human nature, good and evil, whether Jesus was real, etc. I'll give more help on those things below.

Our Story (The Bottom Line)

- Left (before Jesus): I was created by God to reflect Him. But I am corrupted and broken, symbolized by the crack running down the stick figure.
- Center (coming to Jesus): Jesus invited me to die and rise with him. Coming to Jesus was challenging, but good. Jesus said it would feel that way. He said that everyone who comes to him and follows him must take up their cross and deny themselves, but he who loses his life for Jesus' sake will find it in him (Mt.16:24 – 25).
- Right (with Jesus): Now, Jesus lives in me by his Spirit. He shares with me his new humanity. So he is healing me, retelling my story (see notes for Matthew 3:13 – 4:11), and shaping my life to look more like his. The crack is still there, but I'm not defined by

it. Jesus defines me instead. And the arrow to the right of that represents the fact that my story is not over. Jesus will one day heal all things, including me.

Our Story: My Transformation Story as Example

- Left (before Jesus): When Jesus came into my life, he began to re-tell my story and re-live my story to undo patterns of sin in my life. The most powerful instance of this was during the summer after my junior year of college. That was the time my parents finally decided to get their divorce. My dad's drinking had escalated to an alarming place. Now my way of dealing with my family, ever since 10th grade, was to leave. After I got my driver's license and my car keys, I was out of there. I'd go over to a park or to a friend's place to distract myself. I didn't even have a thought for my younger sister, who was four years younger than me, who I left at home to deal with the mess I didn't want to deal with.
- Center (coming to Jesus): But that summer, I felt Jesus say to me, 'I want you to stay.' I said to him, 'I don't have the strength to do that. If what you said is true, Jesus, then you need to be here in me, living your life out through me.' And he did. My parents couldn't afford a lawyer, so they had me arbitrate who gets what. I remember going into that time saying, 'I can't do this!'
- Right (with Jesus): But during that time, Jesus filled me with a sense of his love for me. And he gave me his love for my parents. I was able to listen sensitively to both of them. In fact, every other time before that, my response to them was, 'You have to stay together – for my sake' or 'You have to get a divorce – for my sake.' But I had never considered it for their sakes. Jesus helped me separate myself from my parents' marriage so they could make a decision that was best for them. Jesus gave me his love for my parents. He gave me his strength to stay at home. He gave me insights so I could counsel my sister with what she was feeling. At the end of that summer, I was talking to my friend Malcolm, whose family had gone through a similar thing earlier. I told him what I was experiencing and how I was meeting Jesus throughout it all, and he said these words to me that I'll never forget: 'Mako, how can you be so other-centered at a time like this?' I treasure those words as a reminder to me of the difference Jesus makes.

Our Story: Tips for Telling It

- Is this my conversion story or transformation story? *Transformation story.*
- I meet many who say, 'But I gave my life to Jesus at age 5, then 6, then 7, and every year until I was 15! How did I tell that story?' *But this isn't about your conversion story necessarily. It could be. It's about structuring your transformation story (or stories).*
- Personal note: Since I came to Jesus at age 17 from a non-Christian family, I have a clear conversion story that is also one of my transformation stories. But if you notice, I told a transformation story that spanned about 6 years of my life. My healing and transformation, while very real, was not instantaneous.
- So don't stress out if you are from a Christian family and grew up in the church. Your transformation story is about what it's like to bring a sin issue in your life (like your anger, your way of treating the opposite sex, your dislike for a certain kind of person, your impatience, your greed, or whatever your particular form of selfishness was) to

Jesus. Talk about what you were like before you brought that issue to Jesus. Talk about what it was like to bring it to Jesus and surrender; that will feel both challenging (because it's a real letting go of something you want to control) and good (because Jesus will give you a new love, power, freedom, and direction). Talk about what you are like now with Jesus (hopefully you're changed in some way, even though you're not perfected yet!).

- If you are telling a non-Christian person your transformation story, be aware that this is what s/he needs to know about what giving their life to Jesus will feel like, and possibly look like.
- If you feel like you are still waiting for and longing for more change to happen in your life, that's okay too. Just say so.

Exercise: Talk to one other Christian person about this. Ask the person to help you be a better story teller, eliminate details that are distracting, and stick to one theme. Then, pray for the Lord to give you the awareness for opportunities to tell your story, and courage do it!

Deeper Conversation: Other Belief Systems Compared with Christian Faith

With this 'new humanity' framework, you can also understand how other religions or worldviews would compare. A helpful framework that I've used is to look at the implicit or explicit 'story' told by each belief. We all understand stories because we watch movies, read books, and tell stories. Belief systems also tell a story. So this is an easy way to talk about belief systems.

Not a Happy Ending Story

The first question is: Is there a happy ending or not? By this, I mean not just for the individual person, but for the whole world. If there is, that means good triumphs over evil. If there is not a happy ending, then it means that good and evil exist in some sort of balance. Let's practice on movies, just to get our juices flowing. The following movies do not have a happy ending:

Up in the Air
The Social Network
Romeo and Juliet
The Butterfly Effect
The Departed
Blood Diamond
Pay It Forward

Boys Don't Cry
Gangs of New York
Scarface
Atonement
Moulin Rouge
Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon
My Sister's Keeper

What do you feel when you watch movies like this? You may feel mad, like when my wife and I watched Clive Owen in *The International*, and the evil banks win in the end, despite all the efforts the heroes make to uncover the corruption. You may feel, 'Well, that was realistic.' You may also feel, 'How sad. That's depressing.' You may feel the same way when you listen to these songs:

Don't Stop Believing, by Journey
Changes, by Tupac

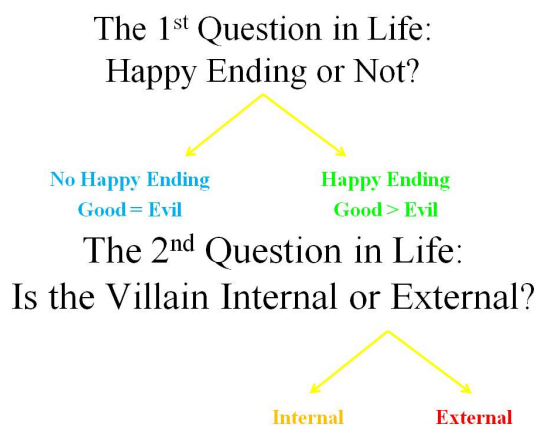
The Way It Is, by Bruce Hornsby
The End of the Innocence, by Don Henley
Fast Car, by Tracy Chapman

In high school, two of the books I read that really touched me were William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and John Knowles' *A Separate Peace*. Both of those books have a not-happy ending. They are poignant reflections on the state of the human heart and how they led to broken friendships, and even war. A story without a happy ending is one that seems to go on and on in the same way.

A Happy Ending Story

Movies with a happy ending, by contrast, make you feel hopeful, optimistic, and generally happy. Every Disney movie has a happy ending. If you have a plot line with the superhero who defeats the villain; the kids who stop the robbers; the guy and girl who hold out for each other and wind up together; the family that stays together through adversity; the natives who beat the invaders; the lawyer who persuades the jury of the truth; the scientist who beats the disease; the teacher who gets through to the kids and helps them pass the test. Those are all happy ending stories.

The second question is for those who believe in some kind of larger happy ending story. If good defeats evil, you have to know who or what is the villain. The villain in *Cinderella* is the Queen. The villain in *The Transformers* is Megatron and the Decepticons. These villains are external to the hero(es). Those kinds of stories are rather simple. However, in *Star Wars*, there are villains both external and internal to the hero, Luke Skywalker. The external villain is Darth Vader and Emperor Palpatine. The internal villain is Luke's own anger. He has to resist both. In the epic *The Lord of the Rings*, the villains are also both external and internal. The external villain is Sauron. The internal villain is that part of every person that is tempted to grasp the Ring and make it their own. These kinds of stories are more complex, because the battles take place both inside and outside the hero.



Maybe the better question is: *Where* is the villain? Is the villain *external* or *internal*? You can put that question to each worldview. By definition, happy ending stories must have a powerful villain that is defeated somehow. That's the plot twist, the high point of the story, the resounding climax.

Now it may interest you to know that most stories in most cultures in most times did not believe in a happy ending. If you could talk to those people, they would ask you, ‘Why would you think there is a happy ending for you?’ Just look out at the world. The sun rises, and then sets. The seasons come, and then go. People are born, and then they die. There is good, and there is evil. We do good, and we do evil. The most natural conclusion people can make about the world is that good will never triumph over evil; they will just always be there in a circular story without a happy ending.

Let’s get very specific, and look at one faith in particular: Hinduism. On Wikipedia (granted, it’s Wikipedia, but I cite this website because I actually show it to other people – as you will see, it does a lot of evangelism for me), there is an article called the *Problem of Evil in Hinduism*. Before it was changed, it used to say:

‘This shows the existence of earlier cycles of creation, and hence the number of creation cycles is beginningless. Thus Sankara’s [a Hindu commentator on the Vedas] resolution to the problem of injustice is that the existence of injustice in the world is only apparent, for one merely reaps the results of one’s moral actions sown in a past life...On the higher level of existence, however, *there is no evil or good*, since these are dependent mainly on temporal circumstances. Hence a jnani, one who has realized his true nature, *is beyond such dualistic notions*.’

Here’s the problem: If everything comes from the supreme Hindu god behind all the other gods, then that god is both good and evil, or more properly, neither. And if that is true, then there is no victory of good over evil because there is *no difference between good and evil* in the deepest reality of all; that difference is just our opinion. The sooner you get used to that challenging truth, according to Hinduism, the sooner you will understand reality. Reality cannot be changed. The sooner you come to accept that, the better. Then, you can one day individually escape the cycles of reincarnation and escape to nirvana. This universe will continue, but you as a person will basically cease to exist because you will become one with reality.

And here’s the deeper problem: A spirituality like that leads to an ‘accept-the-world-as-it-is’ posture. That is partly why the Hindu caste system resists change. You would not naturally have a ‘change-the-world’ posture towards evil, injustice, poverty, and so on if you were ‘beyond’ the dualistic notion that some things are good and some things are evil.

You might be surprised to know that in ancient times, everyone except the Jews believed in this kind of circular story. Historian Thomas Cahill, who writes to make history very accessible, puts it simply:

‘All evidence points to there having been, in the earliest religious thought, a vision of the cosmos that was profoundly cyclical. The assumptions that early man made about the world were, in all their essentials, little different from the assumptions that later and more sophisticated societies, like Greece and India, would make in a more elaborate manner. As Henri-Charles Puech says of Greek thought in his seminal *Man and Time*: ‘No event is unique, nothing is enacted but once...; every event has been enacted, is enacted, and

will be enacted perpetually; the same individuals have appeared, appear, and will appear at every turn of the circle.’ The Jews were the first people to break out of this circle, to find a new way of thinking and experiencing, a new way of understanding and feeling the world, so much that it may be said with some justice that theirs is the only new idea that human beings have ever had.’¹⁰

The Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) was the first literature to expect a happy ending. Everyone else – the Hindu *Vedas* from India, Homer’s *Iliad* from Greece, the *Atrahasis Epic* from Babylon, the *Avesta* story from Persia – were all circular. All the modifications of Hinduism, like Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, are circular. If you could plot the story visually, it would be a circle. The Greek tragedies were based on this circular plot arc. You’re born, you die. Empires are born, and they also die. Everything goes back to where it came from. The way things were – the way things are – the way things will always be. Life is circular. There is no ultimate victory of good over evil.

Israel was different. The Jewish people alone had a linear perception of life. There are two reasons for this. First, they experienced their God as someone who made a promise, and then fulfilled it. That gave rise to a linear sense of history. You could mark things in time. All times are not the same. *God* makes things different. Second, they believed that their God was 100% good, and that He would ultimately triumph over evil. Good and evil were not equal entities or equal principles in the world. Therefore, they would not keep going around each other, cycling through forever in a yin and yang kind of pendulum. No, God would actually triumph over evil one day. And that period of history that all Jews hoped for, longed for, was called the Messianic period. It was the happy ending. Jewish monotheism, belief in one good God, created the idea of the happy ending.

But in every linear story, or hero story, or happy ending story, there is a problem that is overcome. What was the problem in the Jewish story?

- Every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually (Gen.6:5)
- The intent of man’s heart is evil from his youth (Gen.8:21)
- Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart (Dt.30:6)
- Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. (Ps.51:10)
- Circumcise yourselves to the LORD and remove the foreskins of your heart (Jer.4:4)... The sin of Judah is written down with an iron stylus; with a diamond point it is engraved upon the tablet of their heart (Jer.17:1)... The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick (Jer.17:9)... I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it (Jer.31:33)
- I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, so that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances and do them (Ezk.11:19)... I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you (Ezk.36:26)

¹⁰ Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels* (Thorndike, ME: G.K. Hall & Co., 1998), p.13 – 14

Israel documented the problem: a corrupted human nature. It was an internal problem. The evil is in us. How did they discover that? Partly because they just looked around and asked, ‘Why do we keep screwing up?’ Jeremiah and Ezekiel, for example, were social critics. They looked at urban injustice, corruption, and oppression of the poor. They asked, ‘Why do we sin?’ Not because we need better circumstances: We’re in the promised land and it doesn’t get much better than this. Plus, it’s mostly the rich who commit these crimes, and do they need *better circumstances*? No, we can’t blame that external factor. Can we blame our laws? Do we have bad laws? No, we have God’s laws through Moses, and they’re pretty good. So we can’t blame that external factor either. The problem is not *external* to us – it’s *internal*. So Jeremiah and Ezekiel understood that the God of Israel would have to one day change their hearts. He would write His laws on their heart (Jer.31:33) and give them a new heart and a new Spirit (Ezk.36:26 – 36). In the view of this God, human nature had to be changed. The evil was in each human being.

Jesus inherited this diagnosis. He said, for instance, ‘Out of the heart comes evil...’ (Mt.15:18 – 20). In the Christian story, Jesus was God come in human form, meaning that he took human nature to himself. And he fought it from within, never giving into the self-centeredness and rebellion from God that we give into all the time. He crushed the corruption that was in his fallen human nature, and killed it and purged it out of his own body by crucifying it. If Frodo had succeeded in throwing the Ring of Power into the fires of Mount Doom on his own, we would have an analogy to Jesus throwing the fallen human nature into the judgment of God. Then Jesus rose again as a new kind of human being, a fresh, God-drenched, God-soaked human being that had transformed his own human nature. And he can share his Spirit – the Spirit of his new humanity – with anyone who asked, so they could be transformed in a relationship with him.

The old Jewish prophecies said that ‘out of Zion would come a message of salvation.’ Zion – or Jerusalem – would be the epicenter of a renewal that would ripple from Jesus across the whole world. God’s happy ending was dawning. Evil was defeated in the body of Jesus by Jesus’ moment by moment choices to never break his relationship with the Father by the Spirit, and he was sharing his new humanity with all who asked. Jesus sent his people into the whole world to proclaim a message that they were joined with him spiritually, and that anyone who wanted to be joined to him could be, by believing in him. And one day God will triumph over all evil (human and supernatural) when Jesus returns.

As evidence that Jesus really did change people, we can point to the fact that the early Christians were radicals for Jesus. They rescued babies left out on Roman doorsteps.¹¹ They went into plague infested cities and cared for the sick and buried the dead.¹² And whenever a Roman army official waging war on someone else wanted to become a Christian, they would say, ‘That’s great, but you’re going to have to find a new job because Jesus commanded us to love our enemies, and we don’t think you can do that while you’re killing them.’¹³ All this was unheard

¹¹ Vinoth Ramachandra, *Subverting Global Myths: Theology and the Public Issues Shaping Our World* (Downers’ Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), p.99 writes, ‘Medical historians have pointed out, for instance, that the care of defective newborns simply was not a medical concern in classical antiquity. The morality of the killing of sickly or deformed newborns appears not to have been questioned until the birth of the Christian church. No pagan writer – whether Greek, Roman, Indian or Chinese – appears to have raised the question whether human beings have inherent value ontologically, irrespective of social value, legal status, age, sex and so forth. The first espousal of an idea of inherent human value in Western civilization depended on a belief that every human being was formed in the image of God.’

¹² William Hendrickson, *New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1962), p.144 – 5

¹³ Dale W. Brown, “Pacifism” in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics & Pastoral Theology*, p. 645

of in the classical world, and it started what David Bentley Hart called ‘a revolution of the human.’¹⁴ When people realized that the Christian happy ending story was true, it unlocked a burst of courageous, loving energy. Aside from the supernatural power of the Spirit of Jesus indwelling people, the *story* was important. When you believe that there will be a happy ending, and that there is a way to jump on the hero’s side and not be the villain, you ask a whole set of new questions: What can I do to participate in that victory? How can I side more and more with the true hero? How can I battle my own inner weaknesses faithfully?

So to back up, the Messianic story was a story of two basic elements: (1) a suffering hero who (2) brings salvation to the whole world. From Jesus to the rest of humanity. From Jerusalem to the rest of the world. I want you to keep those two basic elements in mind, because we are now going to see what happened to that story.

Two movements started that were parodies of the Christian story: Islam and the European Enlightenment. The Islamic view of God is that God is too pure to touch humanity, which is corrupt. How this problem can be fundamentally resolved is inconsistent in the Qur’an. The Qur’an in Surah 94 says that God had to purify the prophet Mohammed’s heart before he could receive the revelation of the Qur’an. Two hadiths also say this (Sahih Muslim, Sahih al-Bukhari). But why does Mohammed get a free ticket to cleansing, while the rest of us need to work pretty hard to be cleansed, through reading the Qur’an, fasting, and all the other Muslim spiritual practices? And even Mohammed called himself a sinner, later in life (Qur’an 40:55; 48:2; 47:19; Bukhari’s Hadith 8:335, 379, 407, 408).¹⁵ Did this affect his ability to speak truth? Was he cleansed again? Meanwhile, the Muslim God keeps an infinite distance from us. This means that the problem being dealt with is external to humanity: we don’t have the right laws. The Muslim God’s role is to give his divine law. We need to be informed and submit to Islam, and those laws are important because this is what human beings have to do. One day, the Muslim God will judge everyone and bring in the new age. Meanwhile, our role, in the Muslim story, is to receive the Muslim law and spread it.

The European Enlightenment also externalized the problem. Essentially, when the West started to reject Jesus himself, Western philosophers wanted to hold on to the happy ending, but without Jesus. After all, who wants to go back to a circular story? That’s boring, fatalistic, depressing, and repetitious. They didn’t want to go back there. So they kept a linear story, but changed the plot. The Enlightenment philosophers became story-tellers. Hegel told a story about conflicting ideas that merged with each other and culminated in his philosophy, which would spread to the whole world. Adam Smith told a story of how capitalism can and will produce wealth for all nations, starting in England and spreading to the rest of the world. Marx told a story of revolution and socialism, starting in England and spreading to the rest of the world. Social Darwinism told the story of European civilization becoming more and more complex, like life apparently, over time. So it became the ‘white man’s burden’ to ‘civilize’ the rest of the world. Freud and Nietzsche told the story of people in Europe realizing that God is dead, an idea which

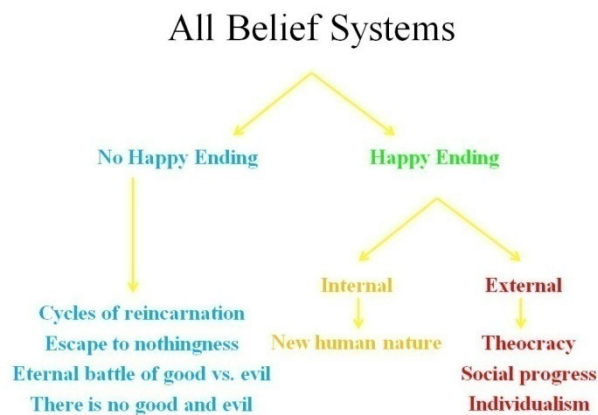
¹⁴ David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), ch.10 – 15 provides ample historical information on how Christian faith stressed our common humanity and thus invented the human. See also my argument that human dignity has no other foundation, in Mako A. Nagasawa, *Human Dignity: Does Every Human Being Matter?* at <https://www.anastasiscenter.org/evil>

¹⁵ For more information, see <http://www.answering-islam.org/Silas/mo-sinner.htm>

would then spread over the rest of the world, a world that was only primitive and superstitious. We protest those stories today, we argue with them, and yet we still live in them.

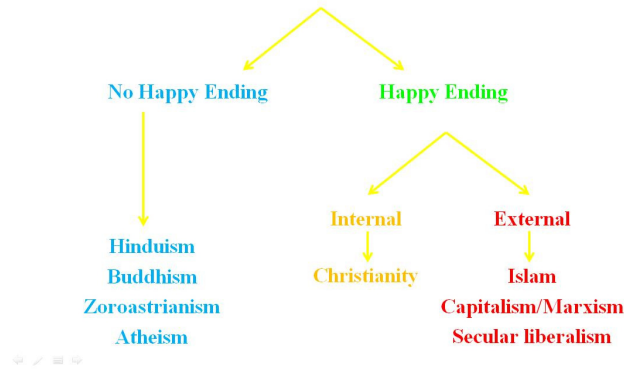
The poet T.S. Eliot wrestled with that. In 1922, after the devastation of World War I, people started to realize that the story that Europe told wasn't true. The story of European civilization bringing the world to a better place was shown to be a false story. So T.S. Eliot, for example, wrote *The Wasteland*, which many believe to be the greatest poem produced during the 20th century. No longer could people cling to this optimistic Enlightenment story that said evil is located in non-European styles of government and culture, and that the world just needed a little help from Europe...not when Europe itself lay in ashes. This is why I include political beliefs as having a religious quality, below, and why we will have to argue with them as well.

When you break it down this way, the choices become more clear. I break it down this way.



In belief systems without a happy ending, what happens through the course of time? Either the 'god' is both good and evil, and there are endless cycles of reincarnation with some kind of theoretical escape to nothingness for each person (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism), or there are two 'gods' – one good and one evil – who eternally battle each other without resolution (Zoroastrianism), or there is no god and therefore neither good nor evil but just the chaos of a universe running out of thermodynamic energy (atheism). Meanwhile, the stories with a happy ending can be divided into the one with an internal villain, primarily (Christianity) compared with those that define an external enemy, primarily: lack of divine law in the nation (Islam), lack of the right laws that will make for social progress (capitalism or Marxism), or antiquated religious dogma stifling individual rights (secular liberalism).

All Belief Systems



If you can understand the significance of those two questions, belief systems will become much clearer to you. And you'll understand a good deal of history and theology, too. Remember: the first question is, 'Is there a happy ending?' and the second question is, 'If there is a happy ending, then is the villain internal or external to us?'

I find that if you articulate Christian faith in its basic story form like this, people have a much easier time understanding it. If you compare it to other stories, they really get it. I think there is something in our hearts that yearns for a happy ending. But sometimes we resist owning up to the fact that we have an internal problem: sin, the corruption of our originally good human nature.

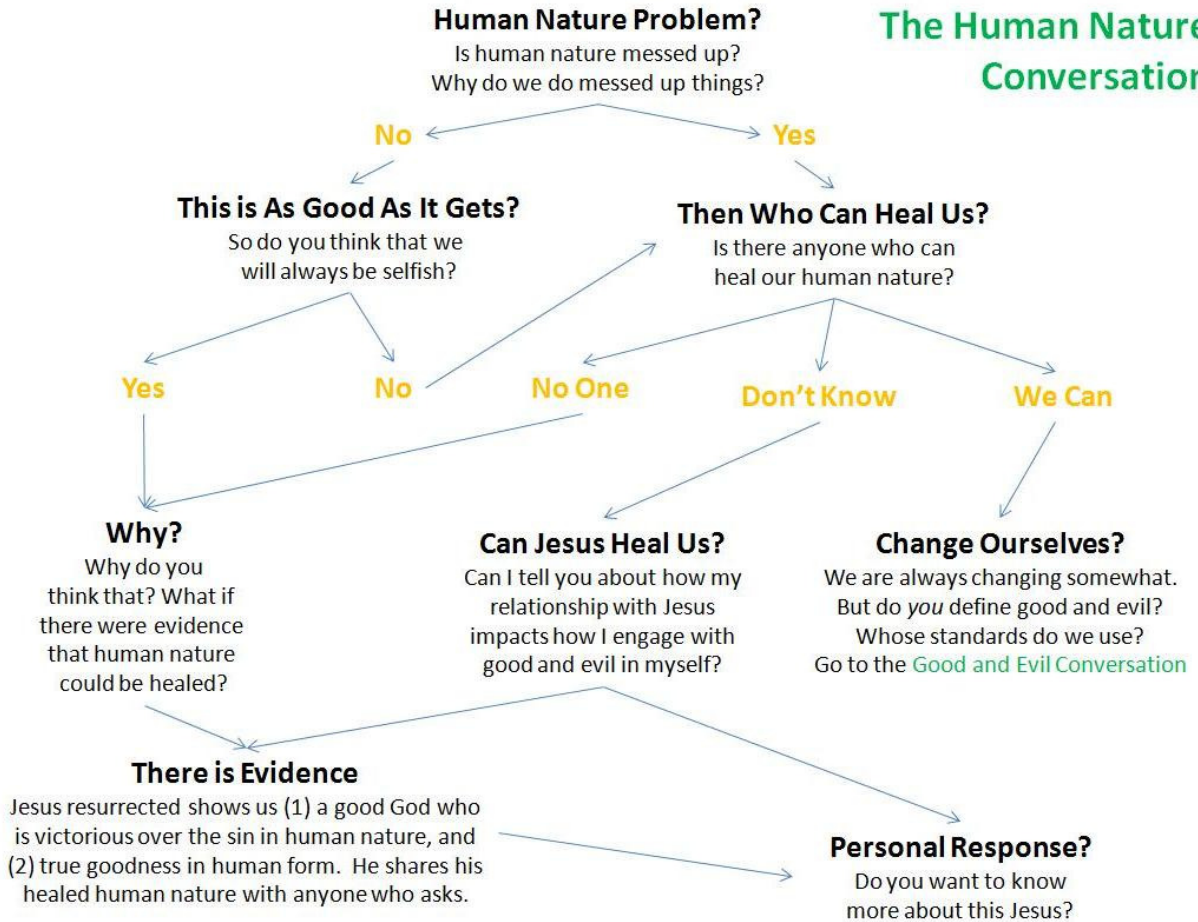
A good number of people have come to faith in Jesus this way. One young man was trying to explain these stories to another non-Christian, and he found himself wanting to believe the Christian story. A few days later, he gave his life to Jesus!

Deeper Conversations: The Human Nature Question

I want to help you go a little deeper with certain conversation areas. My most effective discussions with non-Christians have explored three topics: human nature, good and evil, and the character of God. I've drawn up a 'conversation tree' for each topic. They are interrelated, though. So it helps to be familiar with all three topics. These conversations are also posted to www.anastasiscenterblog.org.

Be mindful that I'm really just giving you a bare bones outline here. Be more personal than this in actual conversation. Use humor. Tell personal stories. But watch out for how I keep pressing other people to have a coherent story of good and evil, a clear location for the evil, and whether they can really live in the story they're telling me. I think that I can find big problems with other people's beliefs. If they come to realize those problems, sometimes they will question themselves or their current stance, and start being open to Jesus. Sometimes this is what we have to do before we explain Jesus to a person.

The Human Nature Conversation



Exercise: Role Play. One person role play a non-Christian. The other role play a Christian (or just be yourself). Have an intelligent conversation. Try to follow, generally, the flow of conversation here.

Here are abbreviated examples of real conversations I've had. See if you can follow the conversational path I followed. At times, I bring up a side argument or use some connection point with the other person. But then I try to come back into the main argument.

Conversation #1

Postmodern Skeptic: Even if Jesus was raised from the dead, so what? You think I need him...why?

Me: Because the only person who can offer us a healed human nature is Jesus. Why do you think we're messed up as people?

Postmodern Skeptic: Well, what makes you say we're messed up?

Me: Do you think we're okay? Why do we do so much evil?

Postmodern Skeptic: No, I guess we do kind of suck.

Me: Well, so doesn't that include you and me? I can tell you my epiphany story if you like.

Postmodern Skeptic: Sure, let's hear it.

Me: [testimony of transformation story]

Postmodern Skeptic: So you've told me your story. Do you think we're only evil? What about all the good that people already do?

Me: How do you define good?

Postmodern Skeptic: Not being selfish. It's realizing that we are all connected. I don't think we need religion or God to realize that.

Me: I think we do good because we were made in the image of a good God. The question is: Why do we do evil? And then the question is: Can Jesus heal our human nature?

Postmodern Skeptic: How do you know it was Jesus? Why not just connect with a 'force' like 'the force' in Star Wars?

Me: If the problem is cancer in the body, the solution must be antibodies that fight the cancer in the body. In the same way, if human nature really has a disease, the only solution for it must be a healed human nature. Some 'force' that floats out there can't be the solution to human nature. An actual human being in actual human history must perfect the antibodies to evil in his own body. We have to be able to see true goodness in human form and human life. Then he has to be able to spiritually connect with us. The only person able to do that is a God who is 100% good. That is why he came in the person of Jesus. Do you want to compare what you currently believe with Christian belief?

Conversation #2

Social Activist: So this sounds different than what I was taught when I grew up in church. I was taught that Jesus saves us from *God*, who is about to throw us into hell because He's pissed off. I thought Jesus was our 'get out of hell' card, our afterlife insurance.

Me: I'm aware of that kind of thing. What's your response to that?

Social Activist: Well it makes God seem more focused on the next world, and less on this one.

Me: Yeah, that never made much sense to me, either. I think God is focused on healing this world, and healing our human nature. He is wrathful, but against the spiritual cancer in us, the corruption and brokenness *in us*. He loves *us* and wants to heal *us* so that we can reflect His image again.

Social Activist: Well, I think Christians waste a lot of time in church, just singing and getting their shout out. Why can't people just get out there and do some good?

Me: Great question. On the one hand, I totally agree that Christians can be more effective. On the other hand, some of the greatest social movements were because of the church and Jesus: the Civil Rights Movement led by the Black church, the Filipino People Power Movement led by Catholics, and so on. I think that our emotional needs and spiritual needs are also important, along with our physical needs, and that Jesus calls us into relationships in which we get to practice being other-centered like he is.

Social Activist: I think we've just got to change laws, schools, structures, and systems. We have to empower poor people. That's going to be more effective anyway.

Me: I'm with you when it comes to changing those things. I'm part of [a group of people giving to microfinance]. And I'm glad you're doing your part, too. But I think what you're doing is assuming that things external to us are the source of the problem. I think you're missing the biggest problem, the internal factor: human nature.

Social Activist: So what's the big deal there?

Me: Well, it's not like poor people are only victims and not perpetrators. Look at alcoholism and domestic violence and stuff. Jesus makes a big difference in the lives of poor families and poor kids. Plus, it's not like making people rich means that they'll do the right thing. Rich people cheat on their spouse just like they'll cheat on the financial system. Like Bernie Madoff or Tiger Woods. And there are plenty of students who *will* take that job with Goldman Sachs because of the money.

Social Activist: I see what you mean. So, do you think that Christians are better than other people?

Me: Well, I would say two things. (1) Christians have a stronger foundation for good and evil because Jesus is good and not evil. I would ask you, 'Do you have a foundation for defining good and evil?' And (2) we have more power to live it out because of Jesus empowers us. I would ask you, 'Are you on your own?'

Social Activist: You mean to say that atheists can't be moral?

Me: I mean to say that whatever a Christian does, he or she can be held up against Jesus, who shows whether it's for or against him, good or sinful. If an atheist does something, what objective standard can you hold that person up to?

Social Activist: Hmmm. So that's why we need a foundation for good and evil?

Me: Yes. But it's not enough to 'know' what is good and what is evil. We need the power to live it out because we run out of love. I know that if I had not given my life to Jesus, I would not be [living in a high-crime, inner city neighborhood]. But because he is in my life, I do it. And there are a lot of other ways in which there is this difference that Jesus makes in my life, to make me less selfish and more loving. I've got a long way to go. But I do think every Christian would say the same thing. So one answer to your question is: Jesus makes a big difference. The first comparison has to be between who we are with him vs. who we would be without him.

Social Activist: So you think that Christians are better than who they would be without Jesus. I guess if you add up that difference across lots of people, it becomes a lot.

Me: Yeah, but also this radically loving God is making us a fit for Himself.

Social Activist: So why do you think God is good? There's a lot of evil in the world.

Me: God is still good, even though there is evil, because He gives all of who He is to deal with the evil in each one of us. Evil is not just out there. It's in here. And God loves us while He wants to surgically remove the evil. The question for each of us is the same: Will I let Him

remove the evil in me? Will you let Him remove the evil in you? Do you want to talk more about that?

Conversation #3

Evolutionist: So you're just saying that we need God to become better people. I think we are just moving on to the next stage of human evolution. We are becoming better people, just because of globalization, and because our survival depends on caring for all humanity. It's not just about raw competition anymore.

Me: So, within your own framework, you believe we can overcome our genetic inheritance of survival of the fittest?

Evolutionist: Definitely

Me: What makes you think we're capable of doing that?

Evolutionist: We're becoming better people. We have human rights. There are fewer deaths from wars. More people are trying to alleviate poverty, and more money is going there. Look at the Gates Foundation, for instance.

Me: Isn't that Western people and Western civilization you're describing there?

Evolutionist: Well, the West has more resources today, and we're realizing that we're all interconnected, and that we can't be colonialists.

Me: So you're saying that the West is at a higher stage in human evolution than the rest of the world? That's an interesting claim. Seems Euro-centric and U.S.-centric and neo-colonialist to me.

Evolutionist: Well, maybe a higher state of consciousness because of our technology.

Me: I could also argue that Western culture is more predatory than other cultures of the world, for example, fueling the rebirth of child sex trafficking and internet porn. But regardless, I'm talking about a change in human nature. Have we brought about a change in human nature?

Evolutionist: Maybe it's possible to think that. Or aim for that.

Me: I don't think the West has changed anyone's human nature. Did you read William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* in high school?

Evolutionist: Yes.

Me: I did, too. The main idea is that human nature contains 'the beast.' So these 'civilized' British schoolboys shipwrecked on an island become what we call 'savages.' And they are rescued from the island by 'civilized' British sailors on warships, whom we no longer call 'savages.' The boys longed for salvation. But who will save the adults? That's the question.

Evolutionist: You're saying we need saving from ourselves?

Me: Yes, exactly. Because our technology is neutral in itself. It only enables us to do more good or bad. It's not going to 'save' us. So unless we talk about human nature, and why we do good and bad, you and I are going to keep being surprised at how destructive people can actually be.

Evolutionist: How do you define good and bad? According to what 'God' tells you?

Me: Actually yes. How do *you* define it?

...(on to the Good and Evil Conversation, below!)

Conversation #4

Muslim: Do you think there's a real difference between the Christian God and the Muslim God?

Me: Isn't it said in Islam that the Muslim God would never become incarnate in human flesh and personally touch human nature?

Muslim: Yes.

Me: Why is that?

Muslim: Because He is too pure, and we are too impure.

Me: And that's one reason why Muslims deny that God could become incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth. Maybe he was a prophet, but he could not be God Himself. Right?

Muslim: Yes, that is what is taught.

Me: So then how does the Muslim God ever resolve the problem of human nature?

Muslim: We only have free choices to make. There isn't a problem with human nature.

Me: But the Qur'an Surah 94 says that God had to purify the prophet Mohammed's heart before he could receive the revelation of the Qur'an. Two hadiths also say this (Sahih Muslim, Sahih al-Bukhari).

Muslim: Yes, that is said. Ibn Ishaq states that two men clothed in white had seized him and opened his chest.

Me: What did he need to be cleansed of?

Muslim: Just something in his humanness.

Me: So then, there's something wrong with human nature. It's somehow impure, right?

Muslim: I suppose.

Me: And then why does Mohammed get a free ticket for cleansing, but the rest of us need to work pretty hard to be cleansed, through reading the Qur'an, fasting, and all the other things?

Muslim: Well, he was the prophet. He had to receive the Qur'an, or so it is said.

Me: And if nothing is wrong with human nature, then how do you explain why we're so messed up?

Muslim: It's just our bad choices.

Me: I agree that we make bad choices, but is that all that there is to us? I don't think so. What this is boiling down to is (1) realism and (2) consistency of ideas. (1) Realistically, if we were just neutral, and made our choices neutrally, then why are we all sinners? It's more realistic to say that we are damaged, corrupted from an originally good design. Even Mohammed called himself a sinner, later in life (Qur'an 40:55; 48:2; 47:19; Bukhari's Hadith 8:335, 379, 407, 408; see <http://www.answering-islam.org/Silas/mo-sinner.htm>). That explains a lot more. Would you agree?

Muslim: I follow you. I'll have to think about it.

Me: As for (2) Consistency, Christianity seems more consistent and coherent. The Christian God addresses the human nature problem by grabbing hold of human nature in one person, Jesus, fixing the problem, and then sharing Jesus' healed new humanity with anyone who asks. Why? Because Jesus never sinned, and because God wants to saturate human nature and be in us and with us, drawing us into His very life, His radically loving, other-centered life. That's why our process of growth now is a preparation for us to live a holy, radically loving, other-centered life in eternity. But in the Muslim faith, my impression is that there is incoherence about human nature because Mohammed is treated differently than everyone else. If your God did for Mohammed something that He could do for everyone else but isn't, then by definition He is not doing everything He could to undo human evil. That would make Him at least partly evil. Or at least it would seem that way to me. And then your process of spiritual growth now seems to be

delayed gratification. The Qur'an speaks of heaven as a place where you can have lots of sex and wine, and indulge all the desires you didn't indulge in the present. It gives the impression of delayed gratification. But if that's so, then why? Why does the Muslim God tell us to deny those desires now, only to indulge them later? So it's not just that our Gods are different. The elements of (1) realism and (2) the consistency and coherence of our belief systems are different. All because our sense of human nature is different. Would you like to talk more about that?

Conversation #5

Apathetic Dawdler: I actually like what you're saying here, because I feel like there's not a rush for me to come to Jesus!

Me: What do you mean?

Apathetic Dawdler: I mean that you're not threatening me with hell. Other Christians would try to make me feel scared that I could die on my car ride home, and then I'd be in hell because I didn't accept Jesus right here, right now. So you make it sound like I have a lot of time.

Me: Well, I think there is still a real urgency to looking into Jesus now. Do you think you can live a self-centered life, and then when you're old and on your deathbed, you can accept Jesus?

Apathetic Dawdler: Exactly!

Me: But what makes you think you will become the type of person who will want to give your life to Jesus later, if all you want now is more time to yourself?

Apathetic Dawdler: What? Why? Won't it be easy?

Me: No. Because self-centeredness is addicting. The brokenness in your human nature will become addicted to self-centeredness, self-flattery, self-justifying, self-indulgence, self-importance, and so on. So if that is how you are training your human nature to respond to Jesus, when you meet him, you will probably look at all eternity stretched out in front of you and say, 'Jesus, what's the rush? You've got lots of time in this eternity. How about 10,000 more years of freedom for me, and then I'll accept you?'

Apathetic Dawdler: Say, that's right! I'm going to use that with him. See, there is no rush. [smiles]

Me: There *is* a rush, actually. Not a rush because your life might be cut short by a car crash, but a rush because you are shaping your own human nature and your own desires to become more and more sinful.

Apathetic Dawdler: Why is that?

Me: Imagine that you're an alcoholic. And that one day you stand before Jesus and say, 'I'd like alcohol.' Jesus will say, 'I don't have alcohol here for you. But because I love you, I am offering you a human nature that is healed of alcoholism and responsive instead to God the Father. Do you want to receive it?' If you're addicted to alcohol, what will you answer?

Apathetic Dawdler: That's a good question. If I'm an addict, I would probably say, 'I don't want what *you* have. Give me what *I* want.'

Me: Absolutely. So what's your addiction?

Apathetic Dawdler: What?

Me: I think you are already pretty addicted to your own self-centeredness. And Jesus will say, 'I'm not here to let you be self-centered. Because I love you, I am offering you a human nature that is healed of self-centeredness and responsive to God the Father. Do you want to receive it?'

Apathetic Dawdler: Wait a minute. You're saying Jesus only gives us a healed human nature? I thought he gives us a reward for just believing in him.

Me: As if heaven is a place you can eat ice cream and not get fat? Or a place where you'll get whatever you want right now?

Apathetic Dawdler: Right!

Me: That's not it at all. That would make Jesus just a middleman to something else people really want, which is not him, but ice cream instead. The problem is that we don't desire the right things. So heaven cannot be what we currently want, raised to the nth degree. Neither is hell what we currently hate, raised to the nth degree. Heaven and hell are not defined by *us*. They are defined by *Jesus*. Jesus is giving us good desires from his own self. He shares his human nature, and his desires. Heaven is the state of receiving him for those of us who want him. Hell is the state of being around him when you don't want to be, of him denying what you want, and then chasing you when you want him to stop.

Apathetic Dawdler: What if *we* don't want what *he* wants?

Me: Well, then for all eternity, he will never give up on calling you out, calling you to give up your addictions and your very self, and calling you to him. He'll be a stalker to you, saying, 'Hey, I love you. You were made for me. Give up whatever else you want. I am here for you.'

Apathetic Dawdler: Yeah, that does sound stalker-ish.

Me: That, my friend, is hell. It's being chased around forever by this Jesus who loves you, and can change you, but you don't want him because you're addicted to something else. Then, every step he takes towards you will just push you further and further away. Except that you can't hide. You can't escape from him.

Apathetic Dawdler: Dude, that sounds terrible.

Me: Well, it would be if you believe that you are fine, and that you've basically got everything you need.

Apathetic Dawdler: This is complicated. So you're saying that I actually can't trust myself completely.

Me: That's right. You can't trust yourself completely because you're not okay. The longer you let your desires go on your own, the harder it might be for you to give your life to Jesus. And one day, it might be too late. We are all not just human beings, but human *becomings*.

Apathetic Dawdler: So you think I'm headed for hell, too?

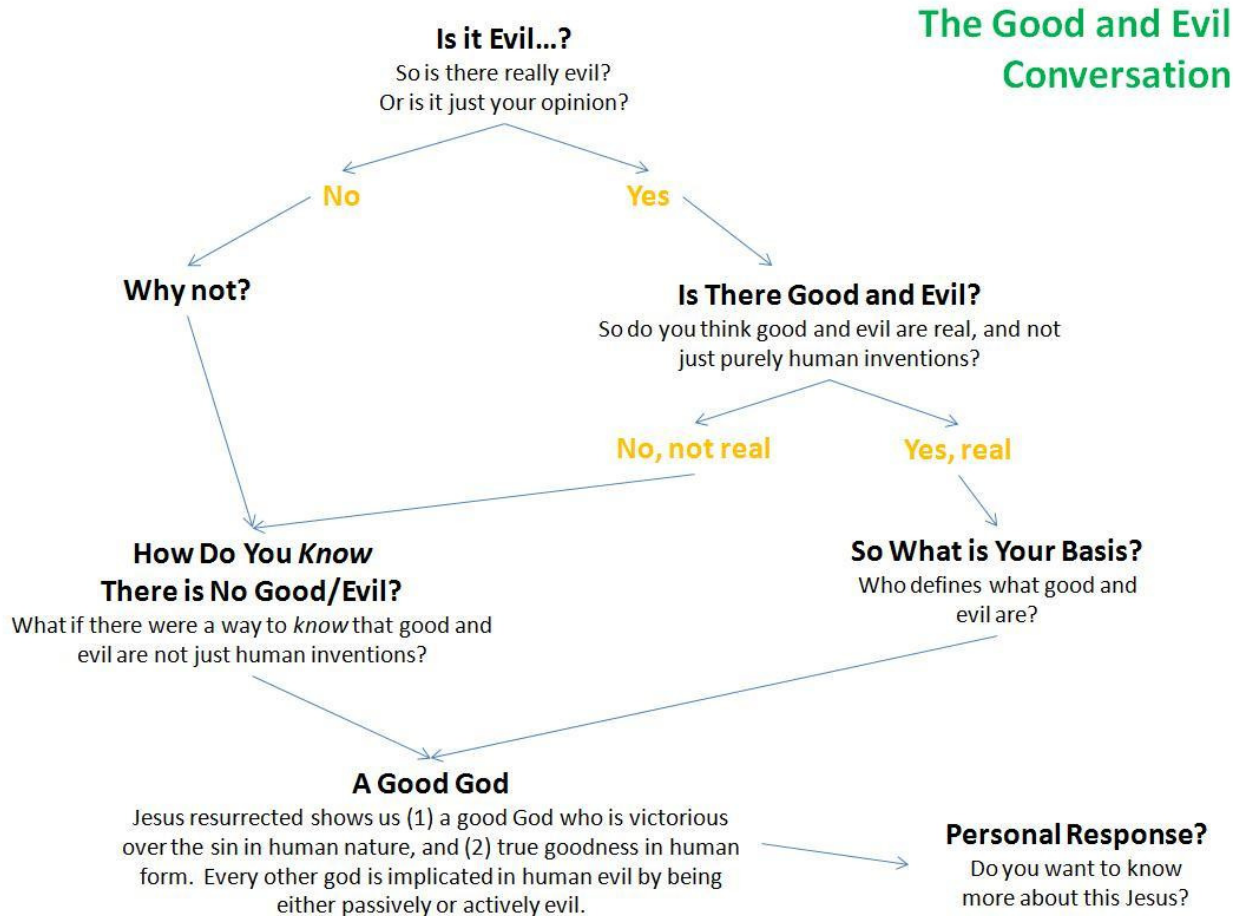
Me: I think you are *becoming* someone who would experience the love of Jesus as hell, because you're so apathetic, and Jesus wants you to be as loving as he is.

Apathetic Dawdler: [silence]

Me: Don't you look back on your life and see how apathy, lack of love, has hurt other people in your life? Hurt you? The question is whether you want to be in touch with the God of love. Maybe you'd like to read a short and surprisingly fun book by C.S. Lewis about why people in hell want to stay there (it's called *The Great Divorce*), and talk about it with me?

Deeper Conversations: The Good and Evil Question

At times, either I ask, or the non-Christian asks, whether good and evil is real or just in our heads. There is a helpful quote from J.K. Rowling that I like to start off with. In the first Harry Potter book, Professor Quirrell, speaking about what Lord Voldemort taught him, says, ‘There is no good and evil, only power, and those too weak to seek it.’¹⁶



Exercise: Role Play. One person role play a non-Christian. The other person, role play a Christian (or just be yourself). Have an intelligent conversation. Try to follow, generally, the flow of conversation here.

¹⁶ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (New York, NY: Scholastic, 1999), p.291

Here are examples of conversations that I've had.

Conversation #1

Been Hurt: What kind of God would allow all the evil in the world? What's your explanation for that?

Me: You mean you think that evil in the world is an argument against the existence of God, right?

Been Hurt: Yeah.

Me: Has someone done something to you that you think was evil?

Been Hurt: Well, yes. It's a personal thing, but yes.

Me: Well, if there was no God at all, then we'd just be chemicals wrapped in skin, competing for survival with other chemicals wrapped in skin. There wouldn't be any such thing as good or evil.

Been Hurt: Well, isn't that easier to believe?

Me: Except that you believe someone did *evil* to you. Something in you tells you that there is evil, which means there is good. And if there is good, there is Someone higher than us who defines it as good. So your belief in evil is an argument that God exists.

Been Hurt: That's ridiculous. You're just playing games.

Me: No, I'm not. Have you read the first Harry Potter book? Where Professor Quirrell, speaking about what Lord Voldemort taught him, says, 'There is no good and evil, only power, and those too weak to seek it.'¹⁷

Been Hurt: Sure.

Me: Well, do you agree with that, or not? 'There is no good and evil, only power, and those too weak to seek it'? Whatever was done to you wasn't really *evil*. It was just someone using power. And you were too weak to resist it?

Been Hurt: Well...

Me: Look, I can tell that something in you doesn't believe that. I don't believe it either. I believe there is good and evil. I believe Jesus is offering to heal our human nature, the source of our evil. Whatever was done to you, he wants to heal that but also destroy whatever it was in the other person. Because he destroyed something in himself, like Harry Potter did to Voldemort's soul, so he can share his new humanity with each of us. That's the only way evil can really be tackled. It can't just be forgiven or passed over. It has to be destroyed, and people need to be healed. Have you ever heard of that explanation of Jesus before?

Conversation #2

Cultural Relativist: Do we really need an objective standard for good and evil? Why can't we just define it for ourselves?

Me: Has that ever worked?

Cultural Relativist: What do you mean? What's so hard about it?

Me: Let's take one issue as an example. Have you heard of Amy Chua's book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*?

Cultural Relativist: Sure.

¹⁷ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (New York, NY: Scholastic, 1999), p.291

Me: One of the good discussions that book encouraged was this: Can white parents tell Asian parents that they are too controlling, and to be less demanding? Can Asian parents tell white parents that they are too lazy as parents, and to be more directive?

Cultural Relativist: On one level, sure: Everyone is entitled to their opinion. So people should be able to say that. But I see what you mean. I've seen both extremes in my friends' families. Is there a real right and wrong? Good and evil? How do we know where to draw the line?

Me: And why do we draw the line there in your camp? Why not in my camp? Or closer to my camp?

Cultural Relativist: And to make things more complicated, we're taught to respect other peoples' cultures, and that we shouldn't judge other peoples' cultures.

Me: And if it's all relative, then anyone can hide behind 'culture.' Men can treat women horribly and say, 'It's my culture.'

Cultural Relativist: How would we know that the Christian definition of good and evil is the right one, then? Isn't that just one opinion against other opinions?

Me: What if God had a way of revealing Himself to us personally? Like in the Jesus of history. And especially in his resurrection?

Cultural Relativist: Don't we have to use science here? A resurrection is impossible.

Me: We can use science, but not in the sense of lab science. Have you ever served in jury duty?

Cultural Relativist: No, why?

Me: Because when someone is on trial, you can't repeat the crime in a lab. It's unrepeatable, so you can't use lab science. Instead, you have an unrepeatable event. So you have to use evidence, witnesses, forensic science, and other tools like logic, what we understand about human motivation, and so on.

Cultural Relativist: So what does that wind up telling us?

Me: Well, when Dr. Simon Greenleaf, one of the founders of Harvard Law School, and an expert in the use of evidence in court, looked at the New Testament, he first set out to disprove it. But he found that the more he examined the evidence, the more it held up. So he became a Christian.

Cultural Relativist: No way. One of the founders of Harvard Law School became a Christian because he looked at the evidence?

Me: Yup. Do you want to look at the evidence for Jesus?

Conversation #3

Strong Critic: Look, I don't see how Christians can claim to know what good and evil are. You guys came down on the wrong side of slavery, women, and now homosexuality. Your definition of good and evil is totally crazy.

Me: You raise a good point, that Christians have made mistakes in the past. I could explain what was going on if you want. But yes, I do think that the Christian definition of good and evil is the only one that makes sense. I'd like to compare it with yours.

Strong Critic: You have a quick explanation for all that? I find that hard to believe.

Me: Sure. The earliest Christians freed slaves. The first kingdoms to abolish slavery did so because of Christian influence: France, Hungary, England, Iceland, the Netherlands, and the

Scandinavian countries.¹⁸ Western Europe got back into the slavery game because they took over Muslim slave ports in West Africa. Christians then re-abolished slavery (like Wilberforce in Britain), and it took longer in the U.S. because American Christians were simple-minded.

Strong Critic: I've not heard that history before. But what about all those Bible references about slavery? It's right there in the Ten Commandments: 'Do not covet your neighbor's slave...'?

Me: The kind of slavery that was practiced in the Old Testament was self-indentured servitude to either make money through a contract of labor or pay off debts for a very limited time. That is obvious when you look at two verses. In Exodus 21:16, people could not be kidnapped into slavery or forced into it. And in Deuteronomy 23:15 – 16, slaves can run away at any time and the Israelites were commanded by God to help the runaway run away and settle anywhere he likes. If 'slaves' can run away at any time, then that means this type of 'slavery' was voluntary. So I understand why Americans would have strong feelings about slavery, but you've really been misinformed about what the Bible says about it.¹⁹ Slavery in the Bible didn't mean the same thing as slavery in the U.S. Just because you know a *word* doesn't mean you know the *meaning*. Do you know what the phrase, 'I'm mad about my flat' means?

Strong Critic: Doesn't it mean you're upset about a flat tire?

Me: If I'm an American, yes. But if I'm a Brit, in London, it could mean that I'm happy about my apartment.

Strong Critic: I get it. The word slavery here doesn't mean the same thing as the word slavery there. Look, I just think that what is 'good' has to start from the individual, not from some God or some book.

Me: So the more freedom you have, the better?

Strong Critic: Yes.

Me: So when my dad was an alcoholic, was he doing what was 'good' for him?

Strong Critic: No, he was destroying himself.

Me: You're right, and not just himself. So you're actually saying that you have to be good before you can be properly free. Goodness is different from freedom and more important than freedom and comes before freedom. So the question is still where does your definition of good and evil come from?

Strong Critic: Can't we just say that it's just obvious?

Me: No, it's not obvious. My mom really does not like the fact that I live in a lower income, black neighborhood. She's basically an atheist, so she thinks that by living in not the best school district, that I'm doing something *morally wrong* to my children. But my wife and I do this because we believe in Jesus, and are trying to live out his care for the vulnerable, and teaching our kids something *morally valuable*. My point is that you actually can't start with your own definition of good and evil, and evaluate someone else by it, because that's just intellectually lazy. You want to lob arrows at the Christian sense of good and evil from within your own castle of good and evil, but you actually don't know what good and evil are. You have no foundation for it.

Strong Critic: I see what you mean.

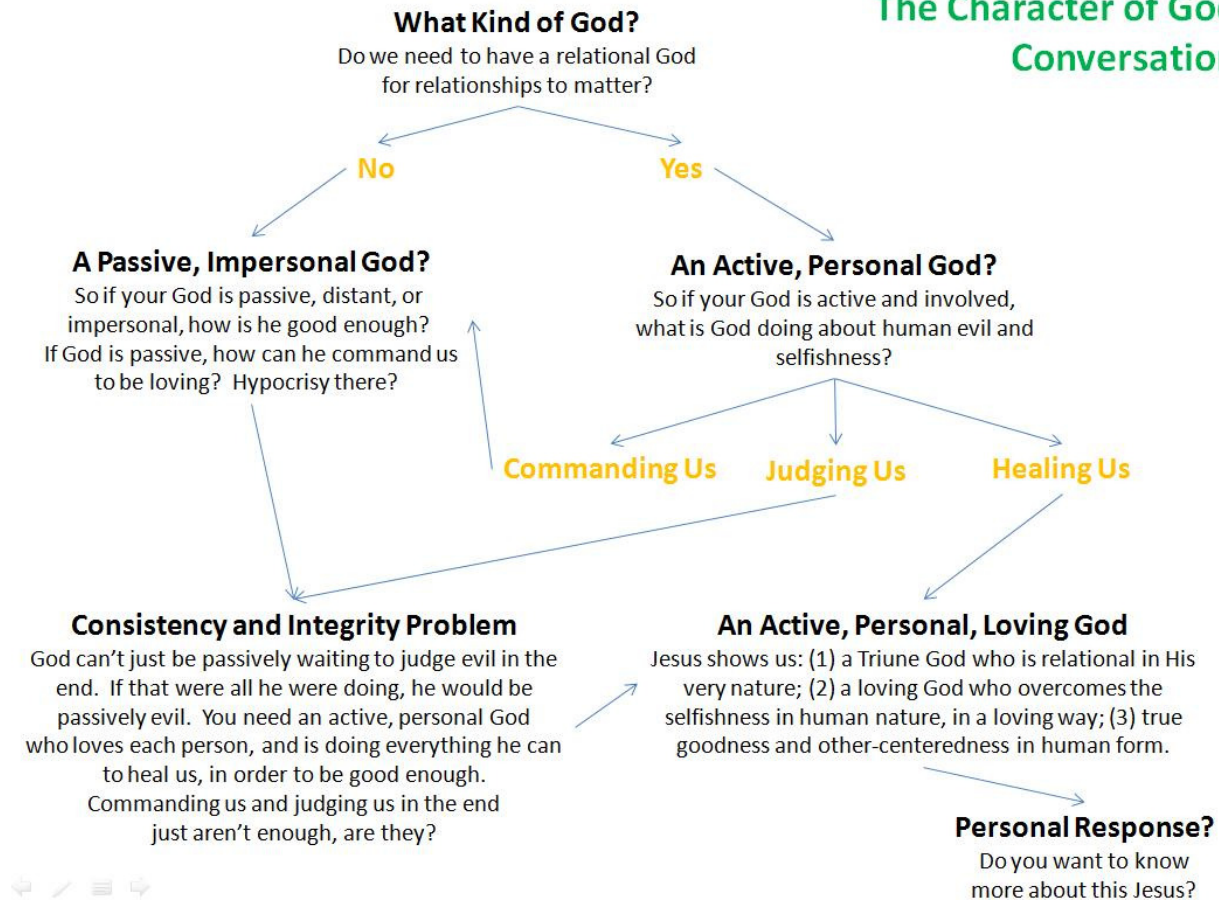
Me: So if you're going to say no to Christian faith, you have to explore why it might be true, regardless of what your prior commitments to a 'good' and an 'evil' are. You have to look at the historical evidence for Jesus, and his resurrection to give us a new humanity.

¹⁸ For a more extensive summary of how Christians dealt with slavery in the first millennium and a half, primarily in Europe, see my paper, *Slavery in Christianity: First to Fifteenth Centuries*, see <https://www.anastasiscenter.org/race-slavery-belief-systems>

¹⁹ For more information and a treatment of every Scripture related to biblical slavery, see my paper, *Slavery in the Bible and Slavery Today*, <https://www.anastasiscenter.org/race-slavery-belief-systems>

Deeper Conversations: The Character of God Question

The Character of God Conversation



Read the examples of conversations that I've had. Then do the exercise below.

Conversation #1

Daniel the Deist: I just believe in a god. He made everything. That seems reasonable. It's hard to imagine all this coming from nothing.

Me: So what is this 'God' doing now?

Daniel the Deist: Well, nothing. I think He's just sitting back and watching.

Me: And why do you believe in this 'God'?

Daniel the Deist: Seems consistent with the Big Bang.

Me: Does this 'God' care about us? Like want a personal relationship with us?

Daniel the Deist: I don't think so.

Me: Is this 'God' doing anything?

Daniel the Deist: No. But I think he does serve to give us human dignity, so that we're not just random cells.

Me: But if this 'God' doing anything to undo human evil? Or is he just passive?

Daniel the Deist: Just passive. This is a god who doesn't intervene. So he doesn't get my hopes up. I used to go to a Catholic church, you know. And we'd talk about miracles. I prayed for one. When it didn't happen, over and over, I got tired of praying. What's the use? It seemed like God was passive, and didn't do anything. I think I'm in good company. A lot of the American founding fathers were deists. 'Endowed by our creator with certain inalienable rights,' and stuff.

Me: But the Christian God isn't passive, and especially not about human evil.

Daniel the Deist: You've got to be kidding me. What is he doing?

Me: At least two things. He speaks to us through our conscience, and that's why we have some notion of goodness, love, justice, beauty, order, and so on. But he also is actively undoing the corruption in human nature. He acquired a human body, acquired the same disease that we all have – sin, fought against the disease throughout his human life, and then died and rose again so he could kill the corruption in himself and raise his humanity new and fresh. With that understanding, he is really active. And I do believe in miracles, so I think occasionally miracles do happen. But the main thing is His healing of human nature.

Daniel the Deist: So what difference does that make?

Me: The difference is that the Christian God is 100% good, and giving 100% of himself to undo the damage to human nature that we have inflicted on ourselves. Your deist 'God' is passive, is doing nothing about human evil in any way. But to do nothing in the face of human evil is to be... evil! Would you agree?

Daniel the Deist: I suppose so.

Me: Therefore, the passive deist 'God' that you speak of actually cannot anchor human dignity and value, because he does nothing to uphold it. Only the Christian God, who is 100% good, 100% loving, and actively doing stuff, who will do more stuff, can anchor human dignity and value.

Daniel the Deist: So our concept of 'God' matters, is what you're saying?

Conversation #2

Wandering Catholic: I believe that there is a 'God,' but I think Jesus was just a man. I think the church just kind of deified Jesus over time, and raised him up higher and higher until they thought of him as God. So I can still sit through my church services and stuff, and appreciate it, because Jesus was a great teacher. Whether or not I think of him as God really doesn't affect anything. Does it?

Me: Well, I think it actually does. If Jesus is not God in the flesh, then how is God fixing the evil in human nature?

Wandering Catholic: Huh? I don't follow you.

Me: The earliest understanding of Jesus being God was that God wanted to solve the problem of evil in human nature. We had corrupted ourselves. So God took a human body, and along with that body inherited the human disease of sin. He fought against the sin and never committed a sin. But he did have a fallen human nature. So in his death and resurrection, he killed the sin and raised his humanity new, cleansed, and God-soaked. The church didn't actually deify Jesus over time. They started out that way. In John's Gospel, one of the first disciples, Thomas, says to Jesus, 'My Lord and my God.'

Wandering Catholic: I've never heard it that way before.

Me: Well, just for a moment, imagine if you separate Jesus from God. What are you left with?

Wandering Catholic: You're left with a God that can still serve as the Creator, and Jesus can serve as a teacher.

Me: But then they both become hypocrites.

Wandering Catholic: What? Why?

Me: God becomes a hypocrite, because He claims to be good but doesn't do anything about human evil. And to do nothing about human evil is to be evil. Wouldn't you agree?

Wandering Catholic: I'll think about that.

Me: And Jesus becomes a hypocrite, too, because he taught that we could become joined to God, and share in God's goodness and life and love. He wouldn't give us forgiveness from God, because he couldn't really speak for God. He wouldn't be the fulfillment of the Old Testament, because the Old Testament hoped for God to heal the problem of human nature and reunite people to God. I guess Jesus would still seem like a cool guy on some level, but he would really fail in some key ways.

Role Play. One person role play a non-Christian with some other concept of God. The other person, role play a Christian (or just be yourself). Have an intelligent conversation. Try to follow, generally, the flow of conversation in the diagram.

Chapter 5: The Personal Development Pyramid, and How to Teach It

CONTENTS

1. What is this framework we're using?
2. Why this framework?
3. How long does mentoring last?
4. What are my responsibilities as a mentee?

PART ONE: WHAT IS THIS FRAMEWORK WE'RE USING?

Introduction & Analogy: John Wooden's Pyramid of Success

What does it mean to grow spiritually? We need a simple and biblically faithful framework for understanding that. Let me first make an analogy. When I was in junior high, I wanted to be a good basketball player. So I went to basketball camp one summer, directed by the winningest coach in NCAA basketball history, John Wooden. John Wooden led UCLA to 10 NCAA championships in 12 years. He was a great coach. And the way he helped his players the most was by giving them his framework for being a great ball player, and then working at it. Here is his framework: what he called The Pyramid of Success. He drew a pyramid. At the top was the most difficult part of the game: Competitive greatness. And underneath that were the building blocks that supported that. At the very bottom were core character qualities that you needed.

The Development of Basketball Players

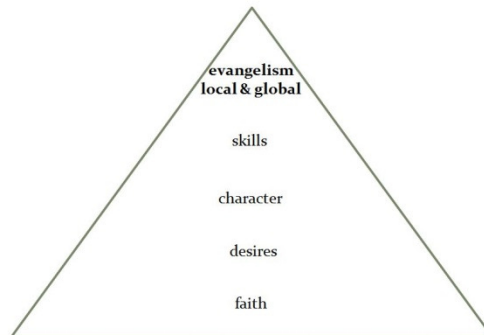


These were not skills at the bottom, but character qualities. In other words, if you did not work at cooperation, your teamwork would suffer, and you would not be great at this game. You would have a whole side of you undeveloped. So I went to this camp in junior high and won this award; it was awesome.

The Framework: Discipleship for the Purpose of Mission

But recently, I've asked, 'What if we took this tool and diagrammed what it takes to develop as a Christian?' Here it is: A triangle or pyramid, and what goes at the top? What is the most difficult part of being a Christian, of following Jesus? Living out Jesus' evangelistic mission, locally and globally. What does that mean? I'll explain that in a minute. And I'll explain *why* I think that. But first let me explain the other parts of the pyramid.

The Development of Christians



At the base is *Faith*: Your personal relationship with Jesus, your knowledge of him, your experience of him, your understanding of how he reveals who God is, and the character of God to us. That would include the following questions:

- How authentic and confident do I feel when I think about sharing Jesus with others who don't know him?
- What is my understanding of Jesus? Why is Jesus unique?
 - How does Jesus reveal who God is? He reveals *all* of God's character, not just the 'loving and forgiving' side of God, as if the Father is the offended, angry lawgiver and Jesus is the suffering victim. Rather, Jesus reveals the Father perfectly as the God who is healing and transforming humanity by crushing human evil within us. See Hebrews 1:4, Colossians 1:19 and 2:9, John 14:8 – 11.
 - How does Jesus reveal what it means to be fully human? See the Gospels. Everything Jesus did was through his human dependence on the Father.
- What have I experienced of him through his Spirit?
 - For hearing the inner voice of the Spirit, see Rom.8:16, Psalm 32, Psalm 91
 - For empowerment by the Spirit, see Rom.8:1 – 17, Eph.1:15 – 2:10
 - For character of Christ and the fruit of the Spirit, see Gal.5:22 – 23
 - For the gifts of the Spirit, see 1 Cor.12 – 14
- How do I relate to him? i.e. How is my prayer life? What are my regular patterns of spending "date time with God"? Journaling, taking walks, times of silence and solitude?
- How do I handle loneliness? Is my faith too dependent on other people?
 - God often draws people close to himself during 'wilderness times.' Notice the pattern with Joseph, Moses, Samuel, David, Jeremiah, Daniel, Jesus, Paul, John. See especially Jesus' time alone in the wilderness, Mt.3:13 – 4:11, and the SG notes at www.anastasiscenter.org/bible-messiah-matthew
- How do I engage with God when I read Scripture?

- Am I entering this story? Or am I just using God to supplement my personal story and desire for success, etc.?
- What parts of Scripture are most important to know? Generally, I think that the Gospels, Acts, Romans, Ephesians, and Colossians are most important because they were written with the broadest purposes.
- Am I allowing Jesus to train me in his mission as I read the Gospels and Acts?
- What parts of my life are easy to entrust to Jesus? What parts are difficult?

Above that is *Desires*. When God starts healing us and drawing us to Himself, He reawakens desires that come from us being made in the image of God. Throughout the Hebrew wisdom literature, the ancient Israelites recognized that God's commands were appropriate to God's creation of us as His image bearers. Sin was a problem, yes. But fundamentally, there was a nice 'fit' or 'match' between God's wise commands and us. Sin made us resist God at times, but God's commands themselves were good for us. Hence, they said they *desired* God's laws (Ps.119) and said to one another, 'Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the *desires* of your heart' (Ps.37:4). For us nowadays, I think we desire goodness, love, truth, justice, significance, meaning, beauty, and order. As people allow the Spirit of Christ to shine Christ's image in us, the more we will desire those things again, in convergence with our original design as God's image bearers. Usually, our desires will be ahead of our character, although our desires may be mixed. In other words, we will want more of Christ in our lives before we actually make a firm commitment to him. But ultimately, I believe that healthy spiritual desires really propel us towards transformation in Christ and into Christ's mission. So I have collected and developed some resources for this: www.anastasiscenter.org/desire. Developing desires would include the following questions:

- What do you really want in life?
- Are you able to distinguish between the desires in you that come from God, and the desires in you that come from sin?
- How can you make choices that strengthen the godly desires in you?
 - See the message *How Our Choices Shape Our Desires: Experiencing the Triune God*
- What are you passionate about? What difference do you want to make? Maybe that is worth exploring as a career?
 - See the message *Career Discernment: A Christian Perspective Based on Passions and Desires*
- Do you carve out time to journal, pray, and do things to help you cultivate your desire for God? You might want to develop a 'spiritual fitness plan' or 'rhythm of life'.
 - See the message *Developing a Rhythm of Life to Cultivate Godly Desires: A Spiritual Fitness Plan*

Above that is *Character*: This involves your ability to let Jesus love people through you, to have healthy relationships, to forgive, to put yourself second consistently. Developing character would include the following questions:

- Who do I find it easy to enjoy? Who do I find it difficult to relate to? What does this tell me about myself?
- When I read key sections of Scripture, for example Jesus' teaching on the heart in Matthew 5 – 7, what do I sense I most need to focus on? Is it: humility and willingness

to change (Mt.5:1 – 12), evangelism (5:13 – 16), anger and reconciliation and ability to be in community (5:21 – 26), lust and sexuality (5:27 – 32), integrity and truthfulness (5:33 – 37), loving others who are difficult (5:38 – 48), prayer and inner integrity before God (6:1 – 18), forgiveness (6:14 – 15), materialism (6:19 – 34), worry (6:25 – 34), judgmentalism (7:1 – 6)?

- What do others say I most need to focus on?
- Your ability to be in healthy Christian community is a part of your character. Where do Christian friendship, accountability, and community fit into your life?
 - See passages about community, forgiveness and reconciliation (Mt.5:13 – 16, 21 – 26)
- Do I make space for non-Christians in my life? Am I trying to integrate my non-Christian friends into my Christian friends and my life?
 - Notice how Levi/Matthew came to Jesus and then threw a party for his tax-collector friends to meet Jesus (Mt.9:1 – 13). He immediately tried to live an integrated life.
- Do I care about the social justice issues related to this person or people group? Especially if they are a historically or currently oppressed group.
 - See Luke 4:14 – 30, where Jesus says that he has come to preach to the poor. See also Luke 14:12 – 14 about inviting the poor to your table, and 18:15 – 19:10 here Jesus called the rich man to give to the poor, and Zaccheus paid restitution for those he had wronged.
- Am I dating someone (or wanting to) with the purpose of discerning for marriage? What am I struggling with in dating? Asking questions about? Learning about myself?
 - For Scripture on marriage and sexuality, see 1 Corinthians 7 and Song of Songs. See also www.anastasiscenter.org/bible-writings-megillotsong

Above that is *Skills*: Your ability to articulate what you've experienced or what you believe. Your ability to compare Christian views with other views, like atheist views, or Buddhist views, etc. Developing skills could involve any of the following:

- How do I bring up spiritual questions?
- How do I help others ask spiritual questions?
- How do I interpret reality as fundamentally spiritual?
- How does the Christian faith compare with other belief systems?
- Explaining how Christian faith has led to lots of social justice movements
- Explaining the concept of hell and how it relates to the character of God
- Having a thoughtful explanation for why homosexuality is not God's ideal
- Explaining how science and faith can co-exist
- Explaining how Christianity is not a "White man's religion"
- Explaining how Christian missionary work is not simply "imperialism"
- Understanding another person's or group's cultural background (or even language) so I can meaningfully share the Jesus story
- Understanding the places of resonance and dissonance they will have with the biblical story

Again, these are only sample questions, many of which come up on college campuses. Really the list of possible skills goes on and on.

TO DO: Identify one issue in each category: faith, desire, character, skills. If you feel okay discussing those issues, do so with a mentor. Tackle at least one issue each week, in no particular order.

NOTE: The pyramid is not a chronological roadmap. You can develop faith, desire, character, and skills simultaneously. You don't need to 'perfect' one stage and then move onto the next. They are too interrelated.

PART TWO: WHY THIS FRAMEWORK?

The Personal Reason

Now why do I think this framework is helpful? First let me give you a personal reason, and then the biblical reason, and then the pastoral reason. I came to Jesus late in high school, because I was asking a lot of questions about life and meaning and relationships, and three friends of mine introduced me to Jesus. During my junior year of high school, when I said yes to Jesus, I immediately had to think about my parents. How would I explain this to them? They were not Christians. They were not the religious type at all, really. I had to wrestle with the question, 'Is my experience genuine? Do I really know this Jesus?' Those were *faith* level questions. I also had to answer character level questions: 'Was I being changed so that even my parents could see it? Was I allowing Jesus to impact my life so that my walk matched my talk?' Then there were skill level questions: My dad asked me, 'What about science?' since he had studied physics and cosmology. I had to ask myself, 'Can I give an intelligent response to my dad, especially?' So you can see that early in my life, the driver of my spiritual growth was others, and the need to care for others relationally and spiritually. Jesus' mission to the world, locally and globally, was at the top of the pyramid, and so everything else needed to be strengthened.

Now, almost 20 years later, I find the same thing is still true. My wife and I have lived for 8 years in the second highest crime area in Boston, a lower-income area of Dorchester, down the red line. We do community organizing there and a few other things. In my neighborhood are some Haitian families who have escaped really difficult circumstances in Haiti. One of my friends on my street is a young Haitian man whose family has some vodou background. One day while we were talking about spiritual things, he turned to me and said, 'I don't tell a lot of people this, but I can see dead people.' With wide eyes, I said, 'You mean like Bruce Willis in *The Sixth Sense*?' Because I'm wanting him and others in my neighborhood to catch a glimpse of Jesus and fall in love with Jesus, that motivates me in faith, character, and skills. I need to wrestle with the supernatural and ask, 'Do I believe that Jesus is greater than anything else out there?' I have to ask the Lord to work in my character, because I need courage and patience and compassion. I also need to care about social injustices, racism, and institutional forms of oppression. I have to care about the public schools, and not just because *my kids* are in them, but for *all kids*. Then I have to develop skills. I've felt like the Lord pointed me to learn Haitian Creole, because speaking a language is a part of loving someone, and it's a skill. All of these

things build up to the top block, the hardest thing: caring about the world as God does, locally and globally.

The Biblical Reason

Here is the biblical reason I believe this pyramid is a good tool: Everything Jesus did before this with his disciples was preparing them for his and their mission to the world, to invite the world to be healed and transformed by Jesus, something Christians call the Great Commission. That's why every Gospel ends with a Commissioning passage.

- 'Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.' (Matthew 28:19 – 20)
- 'But go, tell His disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.' (Mark 16:7)
- 'Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.' (Luke 24:46 – 47)
- 'As the Father has sent me, I also send you.' (John 20:21)

Furthermore, most of Paul's letters end with Paul asking for prayer that he might share the great news about Jesus. This shows that Paul was not just a brilliant theologian, but first and foremost an active, courageous missionary. Here are some examples:

- 'And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, so that I would not build on another man's foundation; but as it is written, 'They who had no news of Him shall see, and they who have not heard shall understand.' (Rom.15:20 – 21) 'Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which...has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith; to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen.' (Rom.16:25 – 27)
- 'Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.' (1 Cor.15:58) 'I will remain in Ephesus until Pentecost; for a wide door for effective service has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.' (1 Cor.16:8 – 9)
- 'Pray on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in proclaiming it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.' (Eph.6:19 – 20)
- '[Pray] at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned; that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak. Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person.' (Col.4:3 – 6)

Jesus wants us to share in his excitement and joy of others coming to him (Lk.15). My son John was born in September of 2000. And my wife Ming and I were totally excited. He was our first child. And for two years, we loved hanging out with him, reading to him, crawling around with him, and getting to know this little guy as he got to know us and our family and friends and the

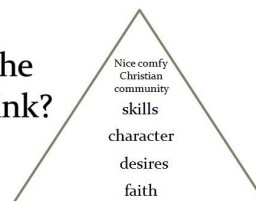
world around him. Then two years after John was born, our daughter Zoe was born. And I was a little worried. I had heard about the terrible two's, and I wondered, 'Will John be terrible? Will he get jealous of his little sister? Will he reverse potty train and pee in his underwear because of the baby?' I prayed, 'Lord, help him to love his sister!!' And, he totally did. I came to get him from home the morning after Zoe was born, and he called out her name: 'Zoe?' It was the first time he said a two syllable word. As we were walking to the hospital in the brisk October air, he stopped to pick up an acorn that had fallen from a tree, and said, 'For Zoe?' We saved that acorn and hung it on a string. And to this day, it is our family's most precious Christmas tree ornament we have. Because it symbolizes the fact that John shared in our love for Zoe. He was developing as a person. Similarly, Jesus wants to welcome other people into God's family, and to shape everyone's character to what is appropriate for the family of a loving Father. That is another way of saying that Jesus' mission is to love, transform, and heal humanity by bringing them (1) to himself and (2) *into his love for the world*.

The Pastoral and Practical Reason

Let's say you meet another Christian and you get the sense that 'just having a nice comfy Christian community' or 'having a nice little group of Christian friends' is on top of their pyramid? Let's see what happens? Well, how much *faith* is needed for that? Well, some. After all, you need to be a Christian to have Christian community. How much *character*? Some; you need to be okay at friendship, at reconciliation, at integrity. How many *skills* are needed for that? Not very many. You just need to speak the same language and have decent social skills. Notice how the pyramid would shrink? Their personal development would be stunted, and that Christian would become cliquey, exclusive, and unwelcoming. Do we want to be like that? No!

Case Study: What if the top changed?
What skills, character, and faith are
needed to have **nice comfy, Christian
community**?

NOT MUCH
Notice how much the
triangle would shrink?



When anything else is on top, Christians become hypocritical. Though we're never perfect, we'd become even more resistant to seeing our own cliquishness, lack of friendliness, lack of social concern, lack of hospitality, etc. We'd be like FEMA during Hurricane Katrina. We're *supposed* to serve others, but we'd wind up serving ourselves.

Even non-Christians can appreciate this. It's actually in their best interest if Christians are missional. Why? Because when something else is on top, and something always is, Christians

make bad mistakes. For example, if ‘patriotism and nationalism’ are on top, then Christians start to become American nationalists who don’t care about the rest of the world.

When Christians have rightly understood Jesus’ mission and our true mission, we’ve respected cultures and reconciled hostile cultures like with the Jesuits. We’ve cared about the poor like the two Christian men who founded Pura Vida coffee in order to employ the poor and reinvest the profits into education, health, and youth development in South America. We’ve even died for others, like when Martin Luther King and other Civil Rights marchers were marching against injustice. However, whenever we’ve had self-preservation in some form up there, then we’ve made mistakes, we’ve been cowards, we’ve not cared as Jesus does. So it’s for our own sake, for Jesus’ sake, and for other’s sake that this pyramid should have Jesus’ mission on top.

One day when you graduate (hopefully!) and get a job, you’ll hear the mission statements of different companies. Let’s say you graduate and go to work for Amazon.com. Their mission is, ‘To be the most customer-centric company in the world, where people can find and discover anything they want to buy online.’ Is that big enough for you? Goldman Sachs says, ‘Our goal is to provide superior returns to our shareholders.’ How’s that for you? Corporate mission statements are so much the rage nowadays. You can google ‘corporate mission statements’ and find tons of books and software to ‘help you write a really motivating mission statement.’ Corporations need a nice-sounding mission statement because of the general lack of meaning in people’s lives. I have seen in many of you a desire to give your life to something larger. You know you were made for a larger mission. But what is it going to be? And is it going to be big enough for your heart?

PART THREE: HOW LONG DOES MENTORING LAST?

Good mentoring relationships can last for a long time, certainly much longer than a few weeks. It depends on what program you are participating in. Let me give two different examples. In Boston College’s Asian Christian Fellowship, for example, we sign up to be mentors for 1 year. Being a mentor involves meeting with your mentee every week or every other week, to connect and deepen your friendship, but also to study Matthew 3 – 7, to bring the mentee out to do evangelism via our proxe stations, and to help the mentee reach out to their non-Christian friends. The goal of mentoring is to develop partners for the mission.

In other circumstances, without a formal mentoring program, I have offered to mentor people for 3 or 4 weeks, and suggested that limited framework for older Christian students serving as mentors. The reason why I used that as a starting point is because:

1. You as the mentor need a way out of the formal meeting relationship. You might decide that this person needs to make some important decisions before they’ll actually be a missional Christian. Perhaps you thought the person would be more missional than they actually are. Or, you might decide that the person has areas of hurt and brokenness that require a professional Christian counselor, and presumably you’re not one. Or, you might simply need to disciple someone else.

2. Your mentee needs a way out of the formal meeting relationship. Your mentee might have agreed to meet with you out of obligation, and might not really be missional or ready to become missional. Or, your mentee needs time to process more on her/his own. Or, your mentee might be ready to do specific outreach to non-Christian friends, or might be ready to disciple some other younger Christians. In this case, you could coach them as they become an evangelist/discipler/mentor, and that's exciting to see!

Again, you can always feel free to extend the number of meetings you have. But every mentoring relationship should have a goal, and it should be clear when it is over. This 3 – 4 week framework gives both mentor and mentee a chance to reflect and discern whether to continue with each other in this formal way, or to turn their attention to other people. It also gives the mentee the opportunity to 'own' their personal spiritual growth. If it's always spoon-fed them, there is the possibility that they will simply become dependent on you as the mentor.

The ultimate goal of discipling/mentoring others is to help make the mentee more independently dependent on the Lord. Sometimes a mentee will make their spiritual growth too dependent on a mentor. The mentor then becomes the victim of her/his own success. And the mentee's personal growth is undermined.

PART FOUR: WHAT ARE MY RESPONSIBILITIES AS A MENTEE?

Fundamentally, your mentor hopes you will take ownership of your own spiritual growth in the context of Jesus' mission. The specifics might vary. Your mentor might ask them to lead you in a Bible study. S/he will probably ask you which non-Christian friends you're praying for, who you're trying to reach out to.

Chapter 6: Other Resources to Help With Matthew 3 – 7

‘I want to reach out to my friends and tell them about Jesus. But I don’t want to stop sleeping with my boyfriend.’

When you’re trying to have spiritual integrity with Jesus, and especially when you’re trying to lead a ministry, hearing that is not pleasant. It’s easy for immature or new Christians to separate discipleship and evangelism, or separate character from outreach. But eventually, it catches up to you in one form or another.

‘The reason I stopped coming to the fellowship last year was because [X], my Christian friend, didn’t handle a conflict very well at all. I was so turned off that it took me a long time to figure out if I wanted to keep pursuing this spiritual stuff.’

Sometimes, despite our best intentions, sad things like this happen. We all have character flaws, but actions that directly impact another person will hurt our witness.

My conviction is that the more you have a ‘discipleship curriculum for Christians’ and an ‘evangelistic curriculum for non-Christians,’ the more you are setting yourself up for this kind of heartbreak.

That is one reason to keep digging into Matthew 3 – 7. It links character transformation and evangelism. In fact, it does evangelism through character transformation. All because Jesus wants to heal and transform our human nature. So here are some more resources.

First, if you are interested in reading more devotional reflections on Matthew’s Gospel, please see <http://anastasiscenter.org/bible-messiah-matthew>. Most devotionals that I’ve read take a verse of Scripture and then use it as a springboard. Often, the thought or insight is a good one. But those devotionals didn’t help me understand the Scripture itself. So I decided to write one that does. If you are looking for short, digestible, missional, college-student-oriented, daily devotionals that help you get to know Scripture and almost always come with a practical challenge, check those out.

Second, here are some good books that might be helpful:

- Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*
- Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*
- Glen Stassen and Paul Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics*
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*
- D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*

Chapter 7: The Rest of the Gospel of Matthew

Here are some highlights of how I've benefited from sections of Matthew, either in preaching or small group study.

In my church, which is a small neighborhood-focused church, we experienced a few miraculous physical healings. Immediately, I turned to Matthew 8 – 10 to see Jesus' ten miracles of healing by his word. This helped us see Jesus' heart for physical healing, to inspire us to pray more. It also helped us connect Jesus' physical healing to his spiritual healing. The physical miracles were illustrations of a deeper miracle he wanted to do in others. So when some people weren't healed, we could still interpret the physical healings that did happen as illustrations, signs, for the larger community. Matthew 8 – 10 also helped us tie our newfound experience to Jesus' mission.

In student leadership meetings and also in sermons for the whole campus fellowship, I've used the parables of Matthew 13. They contain really valuable lessons about how the kingdom grows, and what our part in it is.

Matthew 14 – 18 is a really helpful part of Jesus' training of his disciples in what we would call multi-ethnic and multi-cultural ministry. In this section, Jesus led his disciples back and forth around the Galilee region, to serve Jews and Gentiles. The things that come up – the tendency to centralize ministry around a 'temple' compared to the value of going out to reach the lost, the disciples' ethnic-cultural prejudice, the importance of servanthood, what it means to 'move mountains,' how to nurture new Christians, and constructive confrontation – were immensely valuable.

Matthew 19 – 20 is a punchy section where Jesus was being very clear about how different his stands are on issues of sex, money, and power. Jesus was approaching Jerusalem for the last time and was being absolutely clear how his own movement differed from others around him.

At one fellowship, I led small groups in the Gospel of Matthew for two consecutive years. This helped to lay a foundation of emphasizing Jesus' new humanity in the fellowship. The study gave me the chance to challenge poor practices of reading Scripture and deepen people's appreciation for the literary artistry of Matthew and the poetic and pastoral genius of Jesus. This study helped students see that Jesus' first battle was not with individualistic 'legalism' per se, but with a whole host of other issues.

I've developed small group leader notes for all of Matthew, written a few messages on Matthew, and explored a few textual or thematic difficulties in Matthew. They can all be found here: <http://anastasiscenter.org/bible-messiah-matthew>.

Appendix: Where Does This ‘New Humanity’ Paradigm Come From?

Occasionally I get asked where this paradigm comes from. I understand that this is not what most Protestants and Catholics have said. Here’s a quick summary of the differences between the classical physical theory of the atonement (what I’m calling the ‘new humanity’ paradigm), still held by the entire Eastern Orthodox along with some Catholics and Protestants who are returning to the church’s earliest theology, and the penal substitution theory of the atonement which is held by a majority of Protestants.

<i>Theory of Atonement</i>	<i>Penal Substitution</i>	<i>Medical Substitution/Recapitulation</i>
The framework is	Legal/Judicial	Ontological/Medical
Human sin is	Wrong actions	Wrong condition
God is analogous to a	Judge	Surgeon
God’s wrath is directed at	Our personhood	The corruption in our human nature (Rom.1:18; 7:14 – 8:4)
Jesus dealt with human sin	At his death only	In himself, throughout his whole life
God’s wrath went from...to...?	God to God, or Father to Son (<i>upon</i> Jesus’ personhood)	Jesus’ divine nature to his fallen human nature (<i>within</i> Jesus’ personhood)
Jesus is the	Victim	Victor
God gives us	Forgiveness	Jesus’ new humanity, the renewed image of God, and forgiveness based on identity change
Our forgiveness is based on	Jesus exhausting the wrath of God	An identity change in us by virtue of Jesus’ connection to us
Jesus saves us from our	Punishment for guilt; the consequences of sin	Evil; the source of sin in each of us
The resurrection of Jesus is	Proof that God accepted Jesus’ self-sacrifice; it has no direct effect on us	God making a new humanity in Jesus, to share with us (2 Cor.5:17; Rom.6:1 – 11; Eph.1:15 – 2:10)
Our motivation for doing ministry, justice, etc.	Gratitude for debt-forgiveness	Our new identity in Christ
Our motivation is	Psychological	Ontological
At first glance, which world does God seem to care more about?	Next world	This world
The Person and Work of Jesus	Are divided	Are one in the same; the Person is the Work
Evangelism is	Saving souls from God’s wrath	Reshaping souls into the image of God
Jesus addresses social injustice	In our later spiritual growth (maybe)	At our conversion, right away, in us

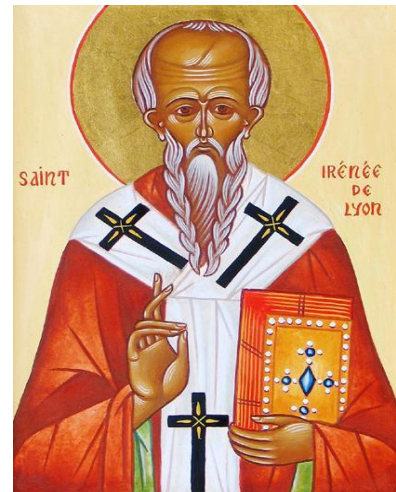
Most theologians and historians of the early church believe that the early church was united in upholding the broad Christus Victor theory for over a millennium. The varied language of Jesus as a healer, ransom, deliverer, and conqueror was used to denote Jesus being victorious over human sinfulness, death, and the devil.²⁰ Substitution, but not penal substitution, was clearly taught, for Jesus was victorious on our behalf and for our salvation. It was only Anselm of

²⁰ Gustav Aulen, *Christus Victor* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998, originally published 1930), chs.1 – 5

Canterbury who first articulated an atonement theory that positioned Jesus as a ‘satisfaction’ of ‘an attribute’ of God. In Anselm’s theory, Jesus satisfied God’s *honor*, which contributed to the idea that Jesus stored up a ‘treasury of merit’ others could access. Anselm could therefore leave the question of the scope of the atonement open, and genuinely open to human free will to choose Jesus. However, Anselm paved the way for John Calvin and others to position Jesus as satisfying God’s *retributive justice*, which became a broader category that was extended across people and across time, and which was understood in such a way that Jesus exhausted God’s wrath at one time, upholding God’s retributive justice on their behalf. Unlike Anselm’s theology where Jesus satisfied God’s honor in a personal way, giving others access, person by person, to his achievement, Calvin’s theology positioned Jesus against God’s justice in a categorical way, on behalf of the elect, all at once. This left no logical place for genuine human free will.

Irenaeus of Lyons

I will start with the first theologian outside the apostles: Irenaeus. Who was Irenaeus, and what did he have to say about Jesus’ atonement? Irenaeus (125 – 202 AD), was born in Smyrna in Asia Minor, where he studied under a Christian bishop named Polycarp, who reportedly had been a disciple of the apostle John. At some point before 177 AD, Irenaeus left Smyrna for Rome where he joined the school of Justin Martyr. He became bishop of Lyon in Roman Gaul, now modern France, in 178 AD. He was the earliest writing systematic theologian outside of the New Testament. He wrote a well researched critique of Gnosticism and a defense of Christian faith called *Against Heresies* between 175 and 185 AD.



Gnostic thought flowed out of the Greek philosophical dualism which opposed the world of intangible spirit against the world of physical matter. Gnostics believed that human beings were more fundamentally soul than body. In their ensuing belief system, they held various views of the body as inferior or irrelevant: the body would not be redeemed by God, therefore a person’s body was ethically unimportant and/or its desires must be suppressed completely.

This dualism stood in contradistinction from the Hebraic-Christian view which said that God in creation made physical things good, even the human body. The Gnostics wanted to deny the supremacy of the God of the Old Testament for His creation of matter; they posited another God higher than the Old Testament God. They denied the relation between the Old Testament and the New for its continuity along these lines. They denied the Incarnation of Jesus into truly a human nature because of their disdain for the human body. And they also denied the bodily resurrection of Jesus, which completed the incorporation of humanity’s physical nature into the very being of God.

Irenaeus understood that the entirety of biblical revelation, salvation, and the trustworthiness of God was at stake. Irenaeus knew that because of God’s original commitment to the physical world, God has acted in Christ to redeem not only the souls of people but also their bodies, and furthermore the creation story itself. Jesus’ incarnation and bodily resurrection is God’s affirmation of His commitment to physical matter in general, human bodies in particular, and the

creation story as a whole. After he demonstrates from Scripture that the Word of God himself took human flesh in Jesus,²¹ Irenaeus says that Jesus saves human nature in himself by destroying the sin in himself.

Therefore, as I have already said, He caused man (human nature) to cleave to and to become, one with God. For unless man had overcome the enemy of man, the enemy would not have been legitimately vanquished... But the law coming, which was given by Moses, and testifying of sin that it is a sinner, did truly take away his (death's) kingdom, showing that he was no king, but a robber; and it revealed him as a murderer. It laid, however, a weighty burden upon *man, who had sin in himself*, showing that he was liable to death. For as the law was spiritual, it merely made sin to stand out in relief, but did not destroy it. For sin had no dominion over the spirit, but over man. For it behooved *Him who was to destroy sin*, and redeem man under the power of death, that *He should Himself be made that very same thing which he was, that is, man*; who had been drawn by sin into bondage, but was held by death, so that *sin should be destroyed by man*, and man should go forth from death. For as by the disobedience of the one man who was originally moulded from virgin soil, the many were made sinners, and forfeited life; so was it necessary that, by the obedience of one man, who was originally born from a virgin, many should be justified and receive salvation. Thus, then, was the Word of God made man, as also Moses says: 'God, true are His works.' But if, not having been made flesh, He did appear as if flesh, His work was not a true one. But what He did appear, that He also was: God recapitulated *in Himself* the ancient formation of man, that *He might kill sin*, deprive death of its power, and vivify man; and therefore His works are true.²²

This is a very significant passage in Irenaeus. In it, he insists that Jesus came to resolve a problem within human nature itself, and offer back to us his renewed humanity. Irenaeus says this in three ways. First, he says here and elsewhere that Jesus took his humanity not from some other substance, like the virgin soil from which Adam was first taken, but from the virgin womb of Mary.²³ The Word of God did this to partake of the same human nature that we all share, to renew it and save it. He did not start a different type of human being, because that would have been of no help to us! This is why Irenaeus constantly referred to Jesus' person and work as the 'recapitulation' – or the summing up, or literally, the re-heading up – of all humanity. Taking this concept from Paul (Eph.1:10), Irenaeus says that Jesus is the 'second Adam' (Rom.5:12 – 21; 1 Cor.15:21 – 22; 45 – 49) the one from whom a new life passes into all other human beings.

Second, here and elsewhere, Irenaeus refers to the 'ancient formation of man.' Irenaeus saw humanity as patterned after the Word-Son of God from the creation. That is, as the Son of God has always been the true image of God through whom the Father is made known (Col.1:15, Heb.1:3), human beings were formed in the image of the eternal Son of God to similarly make God known in the creation (Gen.1:26 – 27). That relation that human beings were intended to have with God external to God but by the Spirit, the Son of God originally and eternally has with

²¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.16

²² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.18.7, emphasis mine; see also 2.12.4; 3.18.1; 5.1.3

²³ 'Why, then, did not God again take dust, but wrought so that the formation should be made of Mary? It was that there might not be another formation called into being, nor any other which should [require to] be saved, but that the very same formation should be summed up [in Christ as had existed in Adam], the analogy having been preserved.' (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.21.10; cf. 3.22.1 – 2)

the Father within the Godhead by the Spirit. This is why the Son of God inhabited human flesh, to remake the likeness of God in a human person.

‘But who else is superior to, and more eminent than, that man who was formed after the likeness of God, except the Son of God, after whose image man was created? And for this reason He did in these last days exhibit the similitude; [for] the Son of God was made man, assuming the *ancient production* [of His hands] into His own nature.’²⁴

‘...man, a created and organized being, is rendered after the image and likeness of the uncreated God, the Father planning everything well and giving His commands, the Son carrying these into execution and performing the work of creating, and the Spirit nourishing and increasing [what is made], but man making progress day by day, and ascending towards the perfect, that is, approximating to the uncreated One. For the Uncreated is perfect, that is, God.’²⁵

Irenaeus’ theology of atonement is therefore rooted in the goodness of God’s physical creation of humanity, the creation story itself with humanity’s original mandate to increase in stature and maturity, and behind that, an inner-Trinitarian relationship between the Father and the Son in the Spirit. This last point led Karl Barth to say that the Son of God not only became the ‘second Adam’ in the human man Jesus of Nazareth; he was also the ‘first Adam,’ the pattern by which God made man, the Image of God behind the image of God. But because we have tarnished the image of God within ourselves, and damaged the *relation* between ourselves and God, Jesus came to restore it. So he exhibited the ‘similitude,’ that is, the similarity with us: ‘the Son of God was made man, assuming the ancient production [of His hands] into His own nature.’ Now, the ‘ancient’ pattern in which God created human beings is affirmed by the Son of God who served as the template for that pattern in the first place. Jesus has restamped human nature with the image of God again, and reconciled human nature to God into the correct relation which God originally intended.

Third, and most importantly, Irenaeus saw Jesus as having cleansed his own humanity of sin. Irenaeus understood human sin as being a physical corruption within human nature, a defacing of the image and likeness of God in physical form, and a breaking in the relationship between God and man internalized into human flesh and reproduced by the human mind. In a comment on Genesis 3, Irenaeus held that the physical corruption in humanity is synonymous with sin in us:

‘Wherefore also He drove him out of Paradise, and removed him far from the tree of life, not because He envied him the tree of life, as some venture to assert, but because He pitied him, [and did not desire] that he should continue a sinner for ever, nor that the sin which surrounded him should be immortal, and evil interminable and irremediable. But He set a bound to his [state of] sin, by interposing death, and thus causing sin to cease, putting an end to it by the dissolution of the flesh, which should take place in the earth, so that man, ceasing at length to live to sin, and dying to it, might begin to live to God.’²⁶

²⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.33.4

²⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.38.3

²⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.23.6

That is why, for Irenaeus, Jesus needed to physically save and redeem his own humanity first. As the Gospels demonstrate, Jesus put the flesh to death through his moment-by-moment choices to always align himself with the love of the Father, never giving into temptation. And as Paul said, God personally condemned, in this way, sin in the flesh of Jesus (Rom.8:3). On the cross, Jesus put to death the old self, the body of sin (Rom.6:6), to raise his body into newness of life. This constitutes salvation of human nature for Irenaeus, even if it only happened in one particular individual, Jesus. For Jesus has become the source of that salvation (Heb.5:9) for the Spirit takes what is his – namely his renewed God-cleansed, God-soaked humanity – and discloses it to us (Jn.16:14).²⁷ For Jesus represents all other Israelites and all other human beings, and did this on our behalf, that he might share his Spirit with all who believe and trust in him. In the physical body of Jesus, human nature is in principle brought into full union with God by virtue of Jesus overcoming all sin and temptation in his personal choices. We become ‘partakers’ of the Spirit, the ‘earnest of incorruption.’²⁸ This is why Irenaeus stressed that ‘man, who had sin in himself, showing that he was liable to death’ needed Jesus to cleanse and remove that sin from human nature. Thus, the corruption of human nature required the eternal Son of God ‘himself [to] be made that very same thing which he was, that is, man; who had been drawn by sin into bondage.’ When God took human flesh to himself, He ‘recapitulated in Himself the ancient formation of man, that He might kill sin, deprive death of its power, and vivify man’ in the physical body of Jesus. This, Irenaeus says, constitutes humanity’s ‘salvation’ which many should receive and be justified by participating in Christ by his Spirit. ‘Salvation’ is not merely the turning aside of the wrath of God, as penal substitution advocates think of it, but the purging of the sinful corruption within us by the wrath of God, that God’s life and power might be joined to the whole human person in the love of God.²⁹

Athanasius of Alexandria

Athanasius (296 – 373 AD) was bishop of Alexandria, Egypt during the tumultuous years of the Arian heresy. His opponents referred to him as a short, black man. He was a leading opponent of the Arian heresy; he was the main architect of the Nicene Creed; and he gave us the final form of the New Testament as consisting of the twenty-seven books we now recognize. So he is a very important figure in church history.



In oversimplified terms, whereas Irenaeus argued to preserve the full humanity of Jesus Christ, Athanasius argued to preserve his full deity. But interestingly enough, Athanasius reproduces Irenaeus’ atonement theory, even though he was approaching it from the opposite direction, from the standpoint of Jesus’ divinity rather than his humanity. Christ had to be understood as both fully divine and fully human. Why? So that God could unite Himself with humanity in the

²⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.20.3; 3.24.1; 5.6.1 – 2; 5.8.1 – 4

²⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.24.1

²⁹ Irenaeus later says, for example, that Jesus *saved* the physical material of human flesh and blood (*Against Heresies* 5.14.1 – 4). This theme runs throughout Irenaeus and demonstrates that he understood salvation as not merely a forensic forgiveness but an ontological union with the life of God through the person of Jesus and by the Spirit.

person of Jesus and overcome the problem of corruption and resistance to God embedded within human nature. Athanasius writes:

‘Had it been a case of a trespass only, and not of a subsequent corruption, repentance would have been well enough; but when once transgression had begun men came under the power of the corruption proper to their nature and were bereft of the grace which belonged to them as creatures in the Image of God. No, repentance could not meet the case. What – or rather Who – was it that was needed for such grace and such recall as we required? Who, save the Word of God Himself, Who also in the beginning had made all things out of nothing?... Thus, taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death, He surrendered His body to death instead of all, and offered it to the Father... This He did that He might turn again to incorruption men who had turned to corruption, and make them alive through death by the appropriation of His body and by the grace of His resurrection. Thus He would make death to disappear from them as utterly as straw from fire.’³⁰

This passage is very significant because Athanasius does two things. First, Athanasius asks us to imagine Adam and Eve making a small mistake or committing a small offense against God, each other, or their future children – a raised voice, an inappropriate gesture, an unthankful or wasteful attitude, a fearful self-defense, etc. And he says that if they had done this, ‘repentance would have been well enough,’ because God would have easily forgiven them that. In a day and age where Anselm’s satisfaction theory and Calvin’s penal substitution theory have so colored our view of God that we view any small offense against God as calling forth infinite, unlimited anger from Him, it is startling to find Athanasius casually dismissing it as beneath God. Many have simply not known what to do about this statement other than say that Athanasius must have been wrong.³¹

Second, Athanasius says that the deep tragedy of the fall lies in the ‘subsequent corruption’ of humanity, not in God’s offended honor or justice, and not in the experience of human death. In Athanasius’ usage, ‘corruption’ means more than simply our mortality and eventual death. In his previous chapter, Athanasius also refers to moral, spiritual, and relational corruption as well:

‘When this happened, men began to die, and corruption ran riot among them and held sway over them to an even more than natural degree, because it was the penalty of which God had forewarned them for transgressing the commandment. Indeed, they had in their sinning surpassed all limits; for, having invented wickedness in the beginning and so involved themselves in death and corruption, they had gone on gradually from bad to worse, not stopping at any one kind of evil, but continually, as with insatiable appetite, devising new kinds of sins. Adulteries and thefts were everywhere, murder and rapine filled the earth, law was disregarded in corruption and injustice, all kinds of iniquities were perpetrated by all, both singly and in common. Cities were warring with cities, nations were rising against nations, and the whole earth was rent with factions and

³⁰ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 2:8 – 9

³¹ E.g. Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p.163. Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007) sidestep this passage in Athanasius altogether. One suspects that they do so because it would completely ruin their attempt to enlist Athanasius into their camp.

battles, while each strove to outdo the other in wickedness. Even crimes contrary to nature were not unknown, but as the martyr-apostle of Christ says: ‘Their women changed the natural use into that which is against nature; and the men also, leaving the natural use of the woman, flamed out in lust towards each other, perpetrating shameless acts with their own sex, and receiving in their own persons the due recompense of their pervertedness.’³²

Corruption is an ontological and relational category for Athanasius, reflecting the ontological change and relational opposition to God that humanity acquired from Adam and Eve internalizing rebellion into their very selves, their spiritual *and* physical beings. Notice that corruption for Athanasius is not identical with death – as he separates the two when he says, ‘so involved themselves in death *and* corruption’ – although they are certainly connected.

The divine dilemma in the penal substitution theory postulates a conflict between God’s attributes (love and wrath). But in Athanasius, and in the medical (ontological) substitution theory, the divine dilemma was not internal to *God*, but external to Him and internal to *humanity*. Athanasius says that it was ‘monstrous and unfitting’ for human beings to degenerate spiritually, morally, and physically like this.

‘It was unworthy of the goodness of God that creatures made by Him should be brought to nothing through the deceit wrought upon man by the devil; and it was supremely unfitting that the work of God in mankind should disappear, either through their own negligence or through the deceit of evil spirits... It was impossible, therefore, that God should leave man to be carried off by corruption, because it would be unfitting and unworthy of Himself.’³³

Whereas some aggressive exponents of the penal substitution theory say, perhaps out of sincere theological conviction, and perhaps for dramatic effect to play up God’s act of mercy in Jesus, that God could have let the whole humanity-creation project go to ruin and ultimately to hell (since they also conceive of hell as an eternal prison system), Athanasius would have found that view repulsive. It denigrates God’s love for humanity and goodness to say that God could have sat back and done nothing to save humanity in our fallen state. In Athanasius’ mind, God *had* to come in Jesus to bring us the salvation of human nature; He had no choice. God had a choice to create us and rest of creation; He could have chosen not to do that. But once He did, He was committed. He could not have chosen to ignore our fall into sin; that was not a choice open to His loving character.

Penal substitution theory also postulates that the object of God’s love and the object of God’s wrath are identical: our personhood. This is because the primary cultural context for Catholics and Protestants to draw up a model of God is the Latin judicial system of merit and penance, in which punishment must fall on *a person* for his disobedience to the law. I will highlight the significance of this misunderstanding below. The critical distinction Athanasius makes is that the object of God’s love is our personhood and the object of God’s wrath is the corruption in our nature. God’s love and God’s wrath *do not have the same object*. That is why the corruption in

³² Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 1.5

³³ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 2.6

Jesus' own body needed to be got rid of through his death as the very expression of God's love for us. God's wrath served God's love by purging away in Christ all that opposed intimate relationship with God.

'The Word perceived that corruption could not be got rid of otherwise than through death; yet He Himself, as the Word, being immortal and the Father's Son, was such as could not die. For this reason, therefore, He assumed a body capable of death, in order that it, through belonging to the Word Who is above all, might become in dying a sufficient exchange for all, and, itself remaining incorruptible through His indwelling, might thereafter put an end to corruption for all others as well, by the grace of the resurrection. It was by surrendering to death the body which He had taken, as an offering and sacrifice free from every stain, that He forthwith abolished death for His human brethren by the offering of the equivalent. For naturally, since the Word of God was above all, when He offered His own temple and bodily instrument as a substitute for the life of all, He fulfilled in death all that was required. Naturally also, through this union of the immortal Son of God with our human nature, all men were clothed with incorruption in the promise of the resurrection. For the solidarity of mankind is such that, by virtue of the Word's indwelling in a single human body, the corruption which goes with death has lost its power over all. You know how it is when some great king enters a large city and dwells in one of its houses; because of his dwelling in that single house, the whole city is honored, and enemies and robbers cease to molest it. Even so is it with the King of all; He has come into our country and dwelt in one body amidst the many, and in consequence the designs of the enemy against mankind have been foiled and the corruption of death, which formerly held them in its power, has simply ceased to be. For the human race would have perished utterly had not the Lord and Savior of all the Son of God, come among us to put an end to death.'³⁴

Like Irenaeus (and Paul) before him, Athanasius says that God's resolution to this problem was first to have the Word-Son of God take on human flesh, resist the corruption inherent in human nature since the fall, and overcome it through death and resurrection. Athanasius affirms along with Irenaeus that Jesus lived a sinless life as 'an offering and sacrifice free from every stain,' even though he had taken on the same sin-ridden humanity we all have. The Word-Son of God 'assumed a body capable of death' in order to live and die and rise again. Athanasius viewed the resurrection as an essential part of God's act of salvation, because it was a salvation of human nature by ridding it of its sinful corruption and antagonism.

'The supreme object of His coming was to bring about the resurrection of the body. This was to be the monument to His victory over death, the assurance to all that He had Himself conquered corruption and that their own bodies also would eventually be incorrupt; and it was in token of that and as a pledge of the future resurrection that He kept His body incorrupt.'³⁵

Here is where penal substitution advocates flatly contradict Athanasius himself and place a heavy emphasis where Athanasius would not. Some say, 'For Athanasius, then, Jesus' death was

³⁴ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 2.9

³⁵ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 4.22

the purpose of the incarnation; the immortal Son of God needed to become man to die.’³⁶ Failing to grasp Athanasius’ central theological concern that Jesus bring forth a purified, resurrected humanity in his own person, free of the stain of sin’s corruption, they also ignore the corruption of human nature as the central problem God was trying to resolve. Instead, they say that Jesus’ death was God’s way of inverting His own punishment so that, by punishing Jesus with death, death would now serve as the gateway to resurrection. ‘God became man in order to save sinful humanity from the divine curse on creation that is God’s punishment for sin, and Christ accomplished this by enduring and exhausting this curse in our place, as our substitute.’³⁷ Athanasius’ point is not that God wanted to simply bring Jesus under death to satisfy divine justice. Death is not identical with the definition of ‘corruption’ for Athanasius. Corruption, as Athanasius defined it, is not simply our physical mortality. Corruption for Athanasius, as I have shown above, is a weakening of human nature’s spiritual compass, a twisting and distorting of our original inclination towards God, and a genetic infection within us that leads to moral degeneracy and spiritual resistance to God. Corruption is distinct from simply ‘death’ or ‘mortality.’ Thus, for Jesus to die in our place is an act of joining us in death, of sharing in our whole condition, not an act of diverting an invisible torment from us to him.

Many more writings might be quoted to show how long and how faithfully Christians preserved this view. In fact, anyone who holds a different view has the responsibility to explain why he or she differs from the earliest theology of the church. Because John Calvin has been such an influential theologian, let me go straight to him. Here is what John Calvin said about the significance of Jesus’ death:

‘When it is asked how, after abolishing sins, Christ removed the discord between us and God and acquired a righteousness, it may be replied generally that he provided us with this by the whole course of his obedience...From the moment he put on the person of a servant, he began to pay the price of liberation for our redemption...In order, however, to define the manner of salvation more surely, scripture ascribes it to Christ’s death as its property and attribute. Yet there is no exclusion of the rest of the obedience which he performed in his life; as Paul comprehends the whole of it, from the beginning to the end, when he says, ‘he made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross’...Nor was this without inward conflict, because he had taken our infirmities, and it was necessary to give this proof of his obedience to his Father. And it was no mean specimen of his incomparable love to us, to contend with horrible fear, and amid those dreadful torments to neglect all care of himself, that he might promote our benefit.’³⁸

Calvin himself says that Jesus’ life was atoning, not just his death. His whole life was the undoing of human sin and the forging of a new humanity in an actual human life. So anyone who says that Jesus’ death alone is what matters in Calvinist theology isn’t reading Calvin himself! In other places, Calvin appears to make this a subsidiary part of the penal substitution atonement theory where Jesus absorbs the punishment for human guilt. Therefore he limits the atonement to the elect by the decree of the Father. He diverges from Irenaeus and Athanasius,

³⁶ Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), p.172

³⁷ *Ibid*, p.173

³⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes* 2.16.5

who saw Jesus as God's new humanity for all humanity, addressing the corruption in each one of us. But in this particular, limited instance, and for my purposes here, Calvin says it well.

For more information, look up 'Medical Substitution' or 'Recapitulation' (in the earliest, classical patristic writings and the Eastern Orthodox tradition³⁹) and 'Total Substitution' and 'Real Exchange' (in C.S. Lewis and in the Reformed stream of Karl Barth and T.F. Torrance⁴⁰; and represented by Catholics like J.R.R. Tolkien, Hans Urs von Balthazar, Thomas Weinandy, and Eleonore Stump).⁴¹ This understanding of Jesus' work is ontological and relational in its foundations, not merely legal or penal.

³⁹ A subset of the broader 'Christus Victor' theory of the atonement and what the Eastern Orthodox call 'theosis.' See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book 3, ch.18.7; Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, chs.2 – 5; Augustine, *On the Trinity*, book 13, chs.11 – 16; John of Damascus, *Orthodoxy*, book 3, ch.14; Stanley P. Rosenberg, 'Interpreting Atonement in Augustine's Preaching', edited by Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James, *The Glory of the Atonement* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004), p.233 – 8; Gustav Aulen, *Christus Victor* (1930); Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), p.135 – 55; Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London, England: Pelican Books, 1997) p.221 – 5

⁴⁰ E.g. C.S. Lewis, 'The Perfect Penitent', *Mere Christianity* (New York, NY: Collier Books, 1952), p.157; Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Helmets and Howard Publishers, 1992) and *Incarnation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008), p.61 – 67; Thomas H. McCall, *Forsaken: The Trinity, the Cross, and Why it Matters* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2012); for helpful online messages, see Grace Communion International, <http://www.gci.org/yi>.

⁴¹ E.g. Thomas Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh* (T&T Clark: Edinburgh, 1993). For more information on the medical substitution atonement theory, especially in contrast with other atonement theories, please see www.anastasiscenter.org/atonement