

Gig Harbor 'Theology on Tap' 2024 Annual Summary

Theology on Tap (ToT) meets the third every Thursday of every month at Round Table Pizza in Gig Harbor. ToT is non-denominational (or perhaps 'inter-denominational') though most attendants in Gig Harbor are Lutherans from Agnus Dei Lutheran Church. Its purpose is to foster discussion on theological and religious topics in an open, non-judgmental, and non-proselytizing format. Many Christians aren't sure exactly what they believe and Theology on Tap is an opportunity for a safe conversation on a wide variety of topics while having dinner and an adult beverage. (Drinking is not required!)

Since November of 2021 Phil Waite has taken responsibility to lead ToT in Gig Harbor which includes scheduling a location every month, researching topics, preparing summaries of those topics, and emailing the summaries out to interested parties in advance of the third Thursday monthly meetings. (prior to November 2021 Lyle Miller was the ToT leader)

The ToT discussion introductions/guides/summaries (called euphemistically 'One-Pagers') that are usually between 2 and 6 pages in length that Phil researches, writes, and sends out. Phil tries to take an unbiased, 'academic' point of view without shading the topic one way or another but often his biases and snark slip through. All the 'one-pagers' follow the same structure:

- I. **The Issue** – usually a definition and a description of why it's important
- II. **Background & History of the Topic** – how the topic developed in church history
- III. **Considerations** – different stances, views, or schools of thought on the topic
- IV. **Conclusion** – usually what the only thing we can say with certainty about the topic
- V. **Discussion** - questions to consider that our discussions are based on
- VI. **Resources** - not always included, but sometimes useful for those who may want to dig deeper. Sometimes the footnotes are thorough enough that this section is unnecessary
- VII. **Footnotes** - the footnotes are usually extensive and cite quotes and resources used in the research or develop further questions on the topic

In 2024, ToT met every month except the summer months of June, July, and August when many attendee's travel plans take them out of town. These are the discussion topics from each month in 2024:

- **January: The Wesleyan Quadrilateral**
- **February: Spirituality (SBNR)**
- **March: The Kingdom of God**
- **April: Mysticism and Contemplation**
- **May: Designing God**
- **June – July- August: *off for the summer***
- **September: Human Nature: Good, Evil, or?**
- **October: Theologians: Jurgen Moltmann**
- **November: Liberation Theology**
- **December: Pietism**

Attendance: Average for 2024 was 12 attendees. Low:8; High 16

Email invitations: Monthly email invitations to Theology on Tap go out to over 35 people on the regular email list. Most invitees are members of ADLC, but several are not. Five pastors are also cc'd each month who can read the 'one-pager' if they like and provide feedback, comment, or adjustment as necessary. They are:

- **JT Burk** – pastor of ADLC
- **Dan Wilson** - co-interim pastor at ADLC
- **Tom Aiken** – co-interim pastor at ADLC
- **Kim Latterall** – co-interim pastor at ADLC
- **Seth Novak** – past pastor of ADLC and current pastor at Key Peninsula Lutheran Church
- **Adrian Bonaro** – pastor at First Lutheran Community Church in Port Orchard

Attached are the 2024 'One-Pagers' for reference.

THEOLOGY ON TAP

Gig Harbor, Washington – January 18, 2024

“The Quadrilateral”

‘Quad’ – four; ‘lateral’ – sides

- I. **The Issue:** Sooner or later, every Christian must grapple with questions like: “How do I learn to do Christian life and practice?” Or answer the question “How do I do ‘theology’?” or “How do I do Christian spirituality?” A Christian asking these questions is usually given an answer that would apply to all three questions above. It goes something like this: “A Christian’s resources for seeking answers are **(1) Scriptures, (2) tradition, (3) reason, and (4) experience.**” This array of four resources is often called “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral”¹ but most churches use something like this. The issue is this: not every Christian denomination, sect, group, or tradition uses all four of these resources nor do they use them all in the same way and nor do all place the same degree of emphasis on each of them. How are these four defined and how are they generally applied? Are all four equal? Is there a primary, followed by a secondary, a tertiary, then a quaternary? Is one or more left off entirely?
- II. **Background:** How **Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience** are defined and critiqued begins to highlight the differences in how different denominations view these resources.
 - a. **Scripture:** Obviously, ‘Scripture’ is usually defined as the Bible. But which Bible? The Eastern Orthodox canon, the western Catholic canon, or the Protestant canon? And further, is it the whole Bible or just the Old Testament or just the New Testament? These questions are further complicated by the relationship between tradition and scriptures. “It was the church that decided which books belonged in the canon, and which were to be excluded. Because they [*the early Fathers*] believed that the significance of Jesus could not be adequately apprehended without the antecedent Hebrew writings, the Old Testament became canonical for Christians. The Old Testament canon did not establish the rule of faith. Rather the rule of faith [*i.e. tradition*] designated the Old Testament as canon.”²
 - b. **Tradition:** Our word ‘tradition’ comes from a Latin root *traditio* which means “handing over” or something “transmitted” down over and over through time. The Greek word for this is *paradosis* and means the same thing. In the religious sense in the church it is the transmission of beliefs, doctrines, rituals, and even entities such as the scriptures, whether in oral or written form. Writings and traditions handed down from a time *before* the canon was established (usually circa 397AD and thus the ‘early church fathers’) are especially revered simply because those writers were closer to the origins of Christianity than we are. (It should be noted that the ‘official’ Catholic canon was formalized at the Council of Trent in 1546.)

¹ The Wesleyan denomination, along with the Nazarene, are sub-branches of the Methodist branch on the Christian tree. Nazarenes tend to be more conservative than most Methodists and Wesleyans are more conservative than Nazarene.

² Peters, Ted. **God-The World’s Future** (2015) Fortress Press. pg.102-3

It's probably also important at this point to clarify the difference between 'tradition' and 'traditionalism'. Jaroslav Pelikan is fondly remembered for his aphorism: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."³

c. **Reason:** The stature of reason in the quadrilateral is rooted in Jesus' command to "love God with all your mind" in Mark 12:30. Though sometimes deemed in conflict with faith, reason does have a place in our theological resource tool kit. But some downplay or even reject reason because, they say, "God is beyond reason."⁴ Nevertheless, our understanding of science – whether astronomy, biology, or physics, etc. – is rooted in the belief that God created the world with natural laws and orderliness, which undergirds the entire scientific enterprise. The founders of modern science also believed the universe was regular, orderly, and rational because God is personal, rational, and faithful. Further, God expects us to use our powers of reason. Galileo is reputed to have said, "I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect has intended us to forgo their use and by some other means to give us knowledge which we can attain by them."

d. **Experience:** Experience is the individual's understanding, appropriation, and applying of their faith in the light of their life – what John Wesley called '*vivified in personal experience*.' But this fourth side of the quadrilateral is perhaps the most controversial. Many argue that **experience** should never be considered in the same discussion as Scripture, tradition, and reason. Some see '**experience**' as a slippery slope that ultimately leads to rampant individualism because they believe what the term '**experience**' really means is "this is how I feel." They further assert that when this view of **experience** is held the believer's faith is basically between them and God with no communal aspect. **Experience** becomes the trump card played when Christian doctrine gets in the way of our unlimited personal freedom.⁵ Others reasonably (see what I did there?) argue that it's foolish to believe we can read and study the Scriptures *objectively*. Every one of us bring our '**experience**' to it whether we officially acknowledge it or not: we read it *subjectively*. Morgan Guyton said "It's not really possible to stand outside ourselves enough to distinguish between interpreting our lives in light of the canon and interpreting the canon in light of our lives. We will always be doing a little of the latter even if we're genuinely trying to do the former...(to) dropkick '**experience**' from Biblical interpretation is really to say the Holy Spirit is not allowed to speak to us outside the Biblical text." If we say that our life **experience** cannot be allowed to influence our reading of scripture, then what you're really saying is that the Holy Spirit is trapped in the Bible like a genie inside a lamp. "Furthermore, you're saying that we don't really have a personal relationship with a *Christ who lives and speaks today*, but only with a Holy Book through which we learn about a *historical figure named Jesus*."⁶

III. **Considerations:**

Albert Outler, a 20th century American Methodist professor, theologian, and pastor coined the term '**The Wesleyan Quadrilateral**' to describe these four resources of **Scripture, tradition,**

³ Peters, Ted. **God-The World's Future** (2015) Fortress Press. pg.102

⁴ Ibid, pg 152

⁵ Source: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2018/10/30/the-nonwesleyan-nonquadrilateral/> Retrieved online 1/11/24

⁶ Source: <https://um-insight.net/blogs/morgan-guyton/in-defense-of-%22experience%22-and-the-wesleyan-quadrilateral/> Retrieved online 1/10/24

reason, and experience.⁷ John Wesley himself (the founder of Methodism) never used the term ‘quadrilateral’ but he did say “...*the living core of the Christian faith was **revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason.***”⁸ The Methodists still hold to this four-part resource and believe that “all truth is God’s truth⁹...(they) hold scripture up to be the primary source of God’s inspired truth...And (they) also embrace truth that is found in three other places: **reason, tradition, and experience.**”¹⁰

Like the Methodists in holding scripture as the primary resource, most other branches on the Christian tree would likely describe their resources this way: **a rule of the primacy of Scripture within a trilateral hermeneutic of reason, tradition, and experience.**¹¹ But different branches on the Christian tree over-emphasize one of these hermeneutic resources while de-emphasizing other two. For instance, the Roman Catholic church has placed **tradition** nearly (if not actually) **equal** with Scripture. The Council of Trent (1546) affirmed both the **Bible and Tradition** as divine sources of Christian doctrine. Later, Vatican II stated “It is clear...that in the supremely wise arrangement of God, sacred Tradition, sacred Scripture, and the Magisterium of the Church [*the teaching office of the church centered in the Pope*] are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others. Working together, each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit, all contribute effectively to the salvation of souls.”¹² Notice that Vatican II placed ‘sacred **Tradition**’ ahead of ‘sacred **Scripture**’ and failed to mention either **reason** or **experience**. We may as Protestants bristle a little at this elevation of **tradition**, but one protestant author said this: “...it is difficult to draw a line marking where **scripture** ends and subsequent **tradition** picks up. Assessments of early church history show a reciprocity between **scripture** and ecclesial **tradition** that prevents any simple identification of **scripture** as norm independent of **tradition.**”¹³

The Reformers like Luther & Calvin of course pushed back on the Catholic emphasis on **tradition**. They argued that many medieval traditions of the Catholic church did not derive from the apostles and that theologically only **scriptural traditions** are normative. This argument was expressed in the formal principle of ‘Sola Scriptura’ (*Scripture Alone*) endorsed by the reformers. Since then, those ‘protestant’ denominations that have descended from the Reformation have tended to de-emphasized **tradition** and elevate **reason**. Although Baptists insist they don’t follow any **tradition**, though tongue in cheek will say Baptists “are bound by their historic Baptist position.”¹⁴ Other groups, “particularly the free churches, ostensibly repudiate any use of **tradition**, eschewing it in favor of a total reliance on Scripture.”¹⁵ Most evangelical churches elevate **reason** over **tradition** and **experience**. It’s probably only the Assemblies of God, Four

⁷ Outler is quoted as saying later “...more than once, I have regretted having coined it for contemporary use, since it has been so widely misconstrued.” He (and others) have been bothered by the tendency of some to assume all sides of the quadrilateral are equal. Retrieved online at <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2018/10/30/the-nonwesleyan-nonquadrilateral/>

⁸ From the Methodist Book Of Discipline (2016 edition) pg 103

⁹ This is actually a quote from John Calvin: “All truth is God’s truth; and consequently, if wicked men have said anything that is true and just, we ought not to reject it for it has come from God.” From Calvin’s commentary on Titus.

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wesleyan_Quadrilateral. Retrieved online 1/11/24

¹¹ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2018/10/30/the-nonwesleyan-nonquadrilateral/>

¹² Stravinskias, Peter, Ed. **Our Sunday Visitor’s Catholic Encyclopedia** (1991) Pg. 939

¹³ Peters, Ted. **God-The World’s Future** (2015) Fortress Press. pg.102

¹⁴ Erickson, Millard. **Christian Theology** (1994) Baker Book House. pg. 258

¹⁵ Ibid pg 258

Square, Pentecostal and Charismatic churches that elevate **experience** to a more or less equal footing with **reason** and **tradition**.¹⁶ Given their location within Catholicism it might seem odd, but other groups that lean into **experience** are those Catholic monastic orders that are known for their focus on contemplation and mysticism.

IV. Conclusion:

When questions arise over interpretation, "...Scripture alone rarely settles controverted points of doctrine or practice. When detailed exegesis among the best of biblical scholars fails to stem the tide of debate, we turn to tradition, reason, and experience to clarify our understanding. They function as cooperative partners in our interpretation of the Bible, not as judges. They are ancillary sources, not usurpers of Scripture's primacy, helping us grasp God's word with greater clarity."¹⁷

V. Discussion:

- In a stab at intellectually honest self-evaluation, which of these four resources do you rely on the most?
- In your denominational heritage or 'denomination of origin', which resource was relied on the most heavily? Second? Third? Fourth?
- In your practice, is it possible to come to the scriptures objectively? Or do we always bring our experience to our reading of the scriptures and our understanding of doctrine & theology?
- Do you view the use of 'experience' in interpretation as a slippery slope to be avoided?



¹⁶ Those Pentecostal and Charismatic churches that tend towards fundamental evangelicalism exhibit a strong streak of fundamentalist **anti-intellectualism** that doesn't make a lot of room for 'reason' in their interpretive frameworks.

¹⁷ Source: <https://www.wesleyan.org/the-wesleyan-quadrilateral> retrieved online 1/2/24

THEOLOGY ON TAP

Gig Harbor, Washington – February 15, 2024

Spirituality

“I’m spiritual, but not religious.”

VI. The Issue:

Though there are many ways to define ‘spirituality’, for the purposes of this ToT One-Pager, I will be focusing on ‘Christian spirituality’ without reference to the spirituality of other religions (e.g. Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, all of which have a robust spiritual tradition). This topic comes up because within the Christian ecosystem, ‘spirituality’ is often inextricably linked with religion and theology. This linkage goes back to the beginning. From earliest Christian times, spirituality has been integral to theology. It was assumed that anyone engaged in theology would have made a personal faith commitment; a theologian’s credibility depended on such a commitment. For centuries most theologians were cloistered monks. Theology and spirituality were almost two words for the same thing and this understanding prevailed in western Christianity until the 12th century and the founding of European universities. Then theology departed the monastery and convent and entered the classroom as an academic discipline. In the 20th century as organized religion has declined in the West, spirituality has become increasingly detached from not only theology but religion in general.¹⁸ Then, in the 1960s the phrase ‘spiritual but not religious’ (SBNR) was coined and became widespread in the early 2000s and continues to find many adherents.¹⁹ According to a recent Pew Research Center paper, the number of Americans now identifying as SBNR is 22% of all adults.²⁰ But what do most Christians mean by “I’m spiritual but not religious?” Can one really be spiritual without being religious? How might religion and/or theology effect our spirituality?

VII. Background:

Let’s start with ‘**religion**’. The word religion comes from the Latin *religio* which means to “re-join” or “re-connect”. Historically, religion has played this role in societies and culture: reconnecting people to God, to each other, to nature / creation, and to a sense of meaning and purpose for life.

Author Adam Brady defines religions this way:

“Religions are most often based upon the lives, teachings, and beliefs of a historical or archetypal figure (e.g., Christ, Buddha, Moses, Krishna, Muhammad). The details of their lives as holy or highly evolved beings have been carried to us across the mists of time through oral tradition and written scriptures. These figures are the subject of worship

Religion: a compound word from the Latin: *religio*: **re** – meaning **again**; **ligio** meaning **connection**. (compare our word **ligament** - that which **connects** bone to bone.)

¹⁸ Schmidt, Richard. **God Seekers: Twenty Centuries of Christian Spiritualities** (2008) Eerdmans. Pg xiii

¹⁹ Retrieved online 1/29/2024: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spiritual_but_not_religious#

²⁰ Retrieved online 1/29/2024: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/12/07/measuring-spirituality/>

and devotion and form the foundations of religious practices and rituals in a community.”²¹

‘**Spirituality**’ on the other hand has a whole different journey as a word. “Spirituality is a relatively new word. Although it derives from a Latin root, it first appeared in seventeenth-century France, where it carried both positive and negative connotations. It referred to a personal relationship with God leading to a holy life, but also to fanatical behaviors suggesting an unbalanced personality. One person’s saint was another’s kook (a difference in perceptions hardly limited to seventeenth-century France)...Before it was coined, what came to be called spirituality had been called by a variety of other names – Christian perfection, discipleship, faithfulness, devotion, obedience, piety, holiness...”²² To quote Adam brady again: “*Spirituality...connotes an experience of connection to something larger than you; living everyday in a reverent and sacred manner.*” In contrast to religion, spirituality is more often based upon the *practical application* of the religion founder’s teachings. In this sense, spiritual aspirants heed the advice of Japanese poet Matsuo Basho, “*Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the wise. Seek what they sought.*”²³ In this sense, spirituality’s end game is the same as religion’s: searching for a (re)connection to God, to others, to nature / creation, and to a personal sense of meaning and purpose but via inward, interior, personal, and subjective means.

VIII. Considerations: Let’s compare and contrast religion and spirituality on a variety of topics bearing in mind that these distinctions can be somewhat fluid and there are no absolutes.²⁴

- **Objective vs Subjective Experience**
 - Religion on the whole is often an *objective* experience: it’s usually focused on externals such as a house of worship, a book or scriptures, rituals and observances
 - Spirituality is often an internal, self-reflective inward journey that is a shift from external observances and outward activity to a *subjective* internal awareness
- **Organized vs Formless**
 - The hallmark of religion is organization; it is structured; has moral rules, doctrines, codes, criteria, and a specific belief system.²⁵
 - Spirituality often breaks free of the organization, restriction, and rigid structure; often a ‘pathless path’ of self-discovery.
- **Tradition vs Evolutionary Approach**
 - Religions are by nature often deeply rooted in *tradition*, ritual, creed, and doctrine. Religious institutions conservatively guard their practices and values, holding to the past and the original interpretations of the founder’s teaching
 - Spirituality by comparison is often less focused on the rigidly traditional approach and favors an *evolutionary* mentality with a more flexible and adaptive mindset toward the core teachings of the founder.
- **Exclusive vs Inclusive**

²¹ Retrieved online Jan 22, 2024: <https://chopra.com/blogs/meditation/religion-vs-spirituality-the-difference-between>

²² Schmidt, Richard. **God Seekers: Twenty Centuries of Christian Spiritualities** (2008) Eerdmans. Pg xii

²³ Retrieved online Jan 22, 2024: <https://chopra.com/blogs/meditation/religion-vs-spirituality-the-difference-between>

²⁴ Retrieved online Jan 22, 2024: <https://chopra.com/blogs/meditation/religion-vs-spirituality-the-difference-between>

²⁵ Holt, Bradley. **Thirsty for God: A Brief History of Christian Spirituality** (2005) Augsburg Fortress. Pg. 2

- Traditional Religious beliefs are sometimes based on rigid interpretations of key teachings and can create an *exclusive* world view that isolates those who may not share those interpretations
- Spirituality tends to make no such distinctions and instead favors an *inclusive* approach. In other words, from a spiritual perspective, no one has a monopoly on the truth.
- **Belief vs Spiritual Experience**
 - At its core, religion is about faith and *belief* in something based upon unconditional acceptance of the religion's teachings
 - Spirituality, while not dismissing faith, tends to lean more heavily on *direct experience* of divinity. In the Christian tradition, this is the mystical and contemplative wing of Christianity.
- **Fear vs Love**
 - Religions, despite the best intentions, can sometimes contain a subtle (or not so subtle) undercurrent of *fear* woven into their teachings. Concepts like original sin, divine judgement, God's wrath, or eternal conscious torment in hell can create a burden of anxiety and fear often used to control followers.
 - Spirituality by contrast typically discards the vestiges of fear and worry in favor of a more winsome, loving, and compassionate approach to life (and death). Your choices and behavior are guided not by a fear of punishment, but rather by a desire for *love* and a choice to exercise compassion.

It's easy to see that despite the obvious benefits and attractions of religion, there are, no doubt, downsides. Those downsides can be ameliorated by engagement in a spirituality associated with a religion or denominational wing. A brief excursion into some of these spiritualities follows.

- **Catholic Spirituality** - In the history of the Catholic church there have evolved many forms of spirituality (e.g. Franciscan, Benedictine, and other monastic models, Ignatian, etc). The Second Vatican Council states with regard to lay (*as opposed to clergy*) spirituality that "Family cares should not be foreign to their spirituality, nor any other temporal interest...lay spirituality will takes its particular character from the circumstances of one's state of life (married and family life, celibacy, widowhood) ...from one's professional and social activity. Whatever the circumstances, each one has received suitable talents and these should be cultivated, as should also the personal gifts he has from the Holy Spirit."²⁶
- **Lutheran Spirituality**: Luther himself made a distinction between cognitive/intellectual religion and the feeling-borne knowledge of spirituality. The former he called *Lesemeister* (masters of reading) and the latter he called *Lebemeister* (masters of living) because they knew about the presence of God in experiential ways. Luther, in reference to 'the treasures hidden in Christ' (Col. 2:3) said "they are 'hidden' because they can only become visible through mystical and spiritual eyes."²⁷
- **Reformed Spirituality** – they tend to frown on the term 'spirituality', preferring the older term 'piety'. One Reformed author said that the popular understanding of spirituality as "an

²⁶ Stravinskias, Peter M.J., ed. **Our Sunday Visitor's Catholic Encyclopedia** (1991) pg 900-901

²⁷ Maas, Robin & Gabriel O'Donnell. **Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church** (1990) pg 147

individual's interior search for meaning and wholeness" as both concept and practice, stands quite outside the mainstream of Reformed experience of the Christian life. "For this experience, when faithful to its heritage, is neither individual nor interior – nor is it a "search" for anything at all. He prefers the older term 'piety' which focuses on a person's behavior as regards the duties and obligations inherent to religion...for Presbyterians its primary focus is always upon a manner of living that is consonant with responsible relation to one's religious commitments."²⁸

- **Anglican Spirituality** – "Anglican unity has most characteristically been expressed in worship which includes four essential elements: scripture proclaimed, creed confessed, sacraments celebrated, and order maintained through an authorized episcopal ministry. The defining marks of Anglicanism therefore...are found instead in the observation of and participation in public rites with a certain content that are conducted in a certain way...to speak, therefore, of Anglican spirituality – when one wishes to distinguish it from other spiritual traditions – is to speak of a corporate spirituality that is developed and sustained through the maintenance of a discipline of public rites performed and occasions observed."²⁹
- **Wesleyan Spirituality** – "A traditional Wesleyan spirituality has the virtue of being both deliberate and methodical as well as extremely broad and generous in scope and practice. Insofar as it emphasizes "inward religion" and the necessity of a vital, personal appropriation of faith, it is an *evangelical* and *experiential* spirituality...it is deeply *scriptural* as well as *sacramental*...it is best known today as an *activist* or reforming spirituality... and finally Wesleyan spirituality will honor the *rational* component..."³⁰

As seen above, some branches on the Christian tree approach 'spirituality' & 'religion' as being nearly synonymous. Others draw a distinction between the two and thus the pursuit of either is different from the other. For those branches on the Christian tree that view spirituality and religion as being *different*, spirituality is the search for a (re)connection to God, to others, to nature / creation, and to a personal sense of meaning and purpose through inward, interior, personal, and subjective means and is often/usually called **spiritual formation**³¹ and it is pursued through the practice of **spiritual disciplines**³².

Conclusion: There are some further considerations regarding spirituality we should discuss.

- First, spirituality is not a 'one-size-fits-all' proposition. Rohr says that what spirituality looks like for a black single mother may look nothing like what spirituality looks like for an old white man. Different spiritual expressions and practices appeal to different personalities. Furthermore, what appealed to you as a young person may not appeal to you as you age. "It is not a matter

²⁸ Ibid pg 202

²⁹ Ibid pg 269-70

³⁰ Maas, Robin & Gabriel O'Donnell. **Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church** (1990) pg 303

³¹ My favorite definition of 'spiritual formation' is "***Our intentional participation in the Holy Spirit's work of transforming us into the image of Christ for the sake of others.***" We can't unpack that here but suffice it to say that every word in that definition is loaded with meaning and implication.

³² Spiritual disciplines are many and include (but are not limited to) activities such as fasting, lectio divina, visio divina, meditation, silence, centering prayer, journaling, the Ignatian Examen, breath prayer, keeping sabbath, labyrinth prayer, Liturgical prayer, and more. See Adele Ahlberg Calhoun's **Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us**. (2005) IVP Books or Richard Foster's **Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth** (1978) Harper Collins

of finding the true or right way to relate to God, but finding the way that is most helpful to you at this time.”³³

- Next, many believe that you can separate spirituality from religion and theology. But in reality, you can’t and shouldn’t. “Yes, religious institutions can be irritating, and doctrinal statements dull, but they do point us in some directions and away from others. They point us toward what is important, valuable, and beautiful – that is toward God. Spirituality is what we see in a person moving toward God...For a spirituality that moves one toward God and not down some blind alley or dead end, religion and theology are helpful, perhaps even essential.”³⁴
- Lastly, spirituality is paradoxical in this regard: it requires *individual* engagement and effort, but it is done for and in the context of *community*. “For most of Christian history, and certainly during the first few centuries, to be a Christian was to be part of the Christian community...Individual behaviors and beliefs were not overlooked or discounted, but they mattered less than taking one’s place in the community.”³⁵

IX. Discussion:

- Have you wondered before about the seeming dichotomy between religion and spirituality?
- Would you categorize yourself as being “spiritual but not religious?”
- Where do you feel more at ‘home’: with religion? Or spirituality?
- Clearly, many people recognize a spiritual hunger but find religion an unwelcoming host for their pursuit of spirituality. Why is this? What can be done about it? Can spirituality be pursued apart from religion?
- What do you want to know more about spirituality?

³³ Schmidt, Richard. **God Seekers: Twenty Centuries of Christian Spiritualities** (2008) Eerdmans. Pg xvi

³⁴ Ibid, pg. xiv-xv

³⁵ Ibid, pg. xviii

THEOLOGY ON TAP

Gig Harbor, Washington – March 21st, 2024

The Kingdom of God

“...Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven...”

“For Jesus, the word “kingdom” meant “God’s dream for this world come true.” Scot McKnight

- X. **The Issue:** One scholar of theology said that the relationship between the kingdom of God and the church of God is “one of four special problems that has to be addressed by church doctrine.”³⁶ Jesus talked more about the Kingdom of God (82x) than he ever spoke of the church (3x).³⁷ Most of us have grown up with only a vague idea what the ‘Kingdom of God’ is or means. This is due partly because the vast majority of us as Americans have never lived under a king – only under a democratic form of government – and we struggle with imagining what a ‘king’ or ‘kingdom’ is like. It was not so for Jesus’ hearers 2000 years ago or for most of humanity since, except in the last 250 years or so.

Some of us were taught (or caught) that Church and Kingdom of God are synonyms (views still explicitly taught by the Orthodox church and the Catholic church.)³⁸ Saint Augustine muddies the water by identifying the ‘reign of God’ with the “church triumphant” (is that the church here and now? Or later? It doesn’t seem especially triumphant just now). Still other medieval theologians identified the kingdom of God with the (past) historical church.³⁹ Another way to slice and dice these two is to say (as Lutherans do) that the “Kingdom of God is God’s rule over the universe, in particular through the church. Millennialists look for a political rule of Christ on earth. Amillennialists associate the kingdom of God with the Church.”⁴⁰

We can boil the various views down into basic ideas of what the Kingdom of God is: (1) a future spiritual/political kingdom, coming at the end of time and the post-judgement Kingdom of righteousness ruled by Christ in Majesty; (2) a “present” Kingdom that can be established now (at least in nascent form), in this life, within both individuals and communities, by faith or by the sacraments and that will also be realized more fully in the future (i.e. the “already but not yet kingdom”); and (3) the Kingdom of God as the Christian Church as it developed in history.⁴¹

³⁶ Erickson, Millard. **Christian Theology** (1994) Baker Books. pg 1041. The other three ‘special problems’ are the relationship between the church and Israel, the relationship between the visible and invisible church, and lastly, the time of the beginning of the church.

³⁷ For our purposes, I have used **Kingdom of God** and **Kingdom of Heaven** as synonyms. Another synonym that scholars sometimes use is “Reign of God.” Between these three terms, the NT records more than 150 uses of the idea. In all four Gospels, Jesus used these terms 82 times. (31 Kingdom of God and 53 Kingdom of Heaven) The Greek word for *church* is “ekklesia” (an assembly of people) and Jesus used it just three times: once in Matt. 16:18 and 2x in Matt 18:17

³⁸ <https://www.orthodoxphotos.com/readings/kingdom/kingdom.shtml#:~:text=The%20Holy%20Scripture%20speaks%20about,Colossians%201%3A12%2D22>. Retrieved online 2/20/24

³⁹ Komonchak, Joseph, Ed. **The New Dictionary of Theology** (1987) The Liturgical Press. pg 861

⁴⁰ Engelbrecht, Edward. **The Lutheran Difference: An Explanation & Comparison of Christian Beliefs** (2014) Concordia Publishing House. pg. 686

⁴¹ Benedict, Gerald. **The Watkins Dictionary of Religious and Secular Faiths** (2008) Watkins Publishing. Pg 300

There are many that argue that the Church and the Kingdom of God are **not** synonymous. And clearly (at least I think so) they are not synonymous: in the Lord's prayer we are taught by Jesus to pray these words: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done" not "Thy church come." Nor did Jesus say "repent for the church is at hand." Reggie McNeal says *"The Church is a subset of Kingdom activity. The Kingdom is not a subset of church activity...The purpose of the church is to further God's Kingdom...Though the church plays a vital role in the Kingdom, it is not the point of the Kingdom."*⁴² But what then exactly is the Kingdom of God? Its precise meaning is the subject of much debate among Biblical scholars and theologians.

XI. Background: Like many things that the Bible is supposed to "clearly say," the definition of the Kingdom of God (or Reign of God) is superficially & unfortunately, *unclear*. Jesus never actually defines what he means by the phrase Kingdom of God (or of Heaven). We are left to read between the lines by extrapolating from what he taught us in the 'Lord's Prayer' and what he actually focused his attention and activities on. There's something of an equation here – i.e., 'the transitive property': if A = B, and B = C, then A = C. If 'A' is the Kingdom of God where what the King/God wants done gets done.⁴³ And 'B' Jesus only did what God wanted done (i.e. what he saw the Father doing and only did the works of his Father – John 5:19 and others), such as preaching good news to the poor, freeing captives, recovery of sight to the blind, setting free the oppressed, and proclaiming God's favor (Luke 4:18 & 7:22) etc., then 'C' God's kingdom = preaching good news to the poor, freeing captives, recovery of sight to the blind, setting free the oppressed, and proclaiming God's favor. We could, using this transitive property, say that "Jesus taught a straightforward concept of the Kingdom: people living the life that God intends and helping others enjoy the same opportunity."⁴⁴

For me, the best definition of the kingdom is something like this:

The kingdom of God is that place and time when an order of perfect peace, righteousness, justice, and love that God gives to the world are realized in present human experience.

There is always, to be sure, an "already but not yet" aspect of the kingdom. We are to experience it now, in part, however fleetingly, and we will experience it in full later when God returns and sets all things right. So the coming kingdom "...breaks into our present from the future."⁴⁵ Another way of defining the kingdom of God is articulated by Reggie McNeal when he says the kingdom of God is just ***"helping people experience life as God intends it."***⁴⁶ He articulates this further by saying that "life as God intends it" is a ***full life*** and an ***abundant life***. Another way of defining it is to simply say that the purpose of the Kingdom of God is ***human flourishing*** in his presence in whatever array of means that affords. McNeal, using the definition that the kingdom is "life as God intends it,"

⁴² McNeal, Reggie. **Kingdom Come: Why We Must Give Up On Our Obsession With Fixing The Church-And What To Do Instead.** (2015) Tyndale. Pg 8 and xxi-xxii

⁴³ Montgomery, Daniel and Cosper, Mike. **Faithmapping: A Gospel Atlas for Your Spiritual Journey** (2013) Crossway, pg 34

⁴⁴ McNeal, Reggie. **Kingdom Come: Why We Must Give Up On Our Obsession With Fixing The Church-And What To Do Instead.** (2015) Tyndale. Pg 34

⁴⁵ Stanley J. Grenz, **Theology for the Community of God.** (1994) Eerdmans. Pg 22

⁴⁶ McNeal, Reggie. **Kingdom Come: Why We Must Give Up On Our Obsession With Fixing The Church-And What To Do Instead.** (2015) Tyndale. Pg 41

imagines the broadest possible application of this definition, extending it to the entire created order:

“Humanity is only part of the spectrum of life contained in the kingdom. The angelic hosts, as well as nonhuman organisms that populate the ecosystems on our planet and everywhere in the universe, constitute part of the Kingdom. All life and everything that supports life have their origin in God, who alone is the giver of life. There is no other source. Wherever you find life, you find God, for life is his signature, his fingerprint.”⁴⁷
This means that “the entire breadth of activities that improve human and planetary conditions can qualify as Kingdom exploration and expression.”⁴⁸

That’s a pretty broad swath of human activities: it would include art; advances in science; education; efforts at economic equality; providing healthcare to everyone and eradicating disease; providing clean drinking water; protecting the environment; addressing discrimination and prejudice; challenging systems and institutions that perpetuate inequality, familial dysfunction, and violence; caring for the “least of these”; and promoting peace.

“Simply put, every good deed and expression of goodwill points to the Kingdom. The pervasive presence of good reflects the breaking-in of the Kingdom of God, advancing against the kingdom of antilife.”⁴⁹ “...whenever and wherever God’s character and will are displayed, the Kingdom is made evident. Goodness is an outcropping of God’s Kingdom, as is faithfulness, mercy, compassion, love, justice, righteousness, and sanctity. Whoever is involved [*Christian or not*] in whatever activity [*church-related or not*] that reflects these elements participates in the Kingdom, whether consciously and intentionally or not.”⁵⁰ [my emphasis added]

It sounds good, doesn’t it? And it seems relatively simple (though not necessarily *easy* however). What’s the church’s role in advancing the Kingdom of God?

XII. Considerations: Sadly, one of the biggest impediments to the furthering of the Kingdom of God tends to be the Church itself. Ouch. Here’s why: when the church and its leaders believe that the church is the expression of the kingdom of God on earth, though meaning well, they have misdirected resources, gobbling up time, talent, and treasure to support, maintain, and perpetuate *church* programs.⁵¹ McNeal proposes that the church suffers from missional amnesia. “When the church decided the mission was about growing the church, doing church better, or even fixing the church, it went off mission, and became misguided, even idolatrous.”⁵² He continues: “Until we get the relationship between Kingdom and church rightly sorted, we will continue to practice a church-centered Christianity that is detrimental to the Kingdom.”⁵³ When Jesus said “I will give you (the church) the keys of the kingdom”, that meant he was placing the church in the role and

⁴⁷ Ibid pg 24

⁴⁸ Ibid pg 46

⁴⁹ Ibid pg 44

⁵⁰ McNeal, Reggie. **Kingdom Come: Why We Must Give Up On Our Obsession With Fixing The Church-And What To Do Instead.** (2015) Tyndale. Pg 25

⁵¹ Ibid. pg xx

⁵² Ibid pg 7

⁵³ Ibid pg 62

responsibility of caretaker and steward of the kingdom and its agenda – i.e. the advancing of ‘life as God intends it.’ For some of its history, the church *has* done that. Some examples:

- The early church condemned infanticide and exposure⁵⁴ and were renowned for rescuing infants treated thusly.
- The Roman Catholic Church established orphanages, hospitals, and homes for the blind and aged during the Middle Ages. Some of these exist to this day.
- ‘Sunday School’ was established by churches in England in the 18th century as a way of teaching poor child laborers to read, write, do arithmetic, and be catechized so they could eventually lead more abundant lives as God intended.

With the rise of fundamentalism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and much of the church’s subsequent withdrawal from society/culture, many of these ‘kingdom’ functions historically practiced by the church have been taken over by governments and/or secular institutions. (To be honest, some of that was caused by the church’s advocacy for fair laws that protected the poor.) But now, after some time, many churches believe their *only* role is evangelization and they’ve stepped away from the kingdom agenda of creating a ‘life as God intends it’ for all. This view that evangelism is more important than anything else is epitomized in the writings of Oswald Chambers when he said, *“The central point of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ is personal relationship with him, not public usefulness to men.”*⁵⁵ Thus, a congregation in the *church* business instead of the *people* (life) business is on slippery ground.⁵⁶

McNeal has identified some ‘Signs of Church-Centeredness’ – see if you have experienced any of these:

- The prevailing concept of the church as a *place* associated with a particular set of activities such as worship, Bible study, etc. – that is, as an *it*, and not a *who*.
- A scorecard for success based largely on church activities by church people for church people on church property.
- A pervasive consumer mentality whereby a church congregation is evaluated on the strength and quality of its church-focused programming.
- A misguided sense of purpose that sees building the church as God’s primary mission in the world.
- A deliberate and detailed focus on the mechanics of “doing church” (e.g. *What kind of worship services will we offer? How will we attract people to our activities? How are we different or better than other churches?*)
- A church membership trained to “give to the church” their time, spiritual gifts, talents, and treasure, and whose spirituality is measured according to their participation in church activities.

⁵⁴ In ancient Rome, infanticide was common throughout the empire. Parents would leave their infants to die from dehydration or from the attack of wild animals. Unwanted children might be given away to friends or family members, or adopted by infertile couples, but according to Roman historians Cicero, Seneca, and Philo, infants could be drowned, thrown out with the rubbish, smothered, exposed to the elements, eaten by stray dogs, or sold to slave traffickers.

⁵⁵ Beach, Lee. **The Church in Exile: Living in Hope After Christendom** (2015) IVP Academic. Pg. 165

⁵⁶ McNeal, Reggie. **Kingdom Come: Why We Must Give Up On Our Obsession With Fixing The Church-And What To Do Instead.** (2015) Tyndale. Pg 63

- Church resources spent primarily on buildings, staff, and church-based programming with a much lower priority given to alleviating human need and suffering.
- The use of the word *parachurch* as a pejorative which implies that only what happens in an institutional church context counts as real church or real service.

XIII. Conclusion:

McNeal proposes three kingdom ‘correctives’ that might help us sort this out⁵⁷:

1. **We must recognize that God established the church to point to the Kingdom, not the other way around.** The church represents only a portion of what God is up to in the world – God is already out there, outside the walls of the church, working in all arenas of human endeavor to advance his kingdom.
2. **We must acknowledge that the Kingdom, not the church, is the destination.** McNeal provides this analogy: An airport is not designed to be a destination. No one plans a vacation to hang out at an airport. The airport’s job is to get people *somewhere else* as quickly and efficiently as possible. The church is supposed to function as an airport to get folks to the destination of the Kingdom. The church isn’t the point of the journey. It’s the life of the Kingdom that we’re trying to get to.
3. **We must realize that the Kingdom saga focuses primarily on the welfare of the community, not on the church.** The church’s role is to train people to better serve their *communities* in order that people experience life as God intends it. Jeremiah 29:7 says “Work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare.”

XIV. Discussion:

- How have you conceptualized the kingdom of God previously? Does conceptualizing it as “Life as God intends it” make sense to you? If not, what is your preferred definition of the Kingdom of God?
- Have you ever experienced any of McNeal’s list of “Signs of Church-Centeredness?”
- What might God be calling you to do to bring about “life as God intends” on earth as in heaven?

⁵⁷ Ibid. pgs 67 to 83

THEOLOGY ON TAP

Gig Harbor, Washington – April 18th, 2024

Christian Contemplation & Mysticism

“The devout Christian of the future will either be a ‘mystic’...or he will cease to be anything at all.” -- Karl Rahner, S.J.

XV. The Issue: In Christian circles, some folks use the terms ‘mysticism’ & ‘contemplation’ synonymously. Some use them pejoratively, e.g. “she’s so heavenly minded, she’s no earthly good.” But are the terms synonymous? And how are we to think of activities associated with mysticism and/or contemplation? Are they a distraction to the real work of Christianity? Are they core to Christian living? This one-pager will consider these questions.

XVI. Background:

What is mysticism? As a religious experience, it is not limited to just Christianity. Most (if not all) religions have a mystical component. Carl McColman says “mysticism concerns a higher reality. Different religions and philosophies call this by different names; the traditional Christian name for this reality is “God.” **Mysticism involves an experience or conscious awareness of this higher reality**...Since religion concerns values, beliefs, ethics, and dogma, these things all have an impact on mysticism in its religious forms.”⁵⁸ Interestingly enough, McColman describes that mysticism is like tofu. “When you cook with tofu, it has a fascinating tendency to adopt the flavor of whatever you cook with it...Likewise, mysticism thoroughly and completely adopts the flavor and identity of whatever wisdom tradition it inhabits. Thus, Christian mysticism has an entirely different cultural and religious identity from, say, Vedanta [Hinduism] or Zen [Buddhism].”⁵⁹

⁵⁸ McColman, Carl. *The Big Book of Christian Mysticism: The Essential Guide to Contemplative Spirituality* (2010) Hampton Roads. pg. 30.

⁵⁹ Ibid. pg. 60

Christian mysticism is rooted in the concept from the New Testament of *secrets* or *mysteries* that are *revealed* by God in/through Christ. (In this regard, Christianity differs from ancient mystery religions which were mostly about secrets and mysteries kept *hidden*.) The English word ‘mysticism’ isn’t in the Bible – it wasn’t coined until the 1730s but it is based on the Greek word *mueo*. In the New Testament the words often used for secrets and/or mysteries is *mueo* or *musterion*.⁶⁰ “There’s more to Christianity than just words, ideas, thoughts, teachings, and concepts...As a mystical faith, Christianity is not in the business of merely thinking and talking about Christ. Rather, it’s all about *relating* to Christ, and making that relationship real in people’s lives...It’s no surprise, therefore, that, in the early centuries of the church, Christianity developed not only mystical doctrines, but also mystical rites – liturgical events played out in the lives of believers that anchored their mystical faith in down-to-earth ceremonies and actions, using material objects to signify and convey spiritual realities. Baptism and the Eucharist are two of these rites.” In the Latin/Western church these rites are called ‘sacraments’ – a word that means “consecrated act.” But in the Orthodox Church in the East, however, these sacraments are called by a different name: *mysteries*. When ancient Christians spoke of the mystical dimension of their faith, they not only acknowledged that the secrets of God had been revealed...but also proclaimed that the presence of God was experienced and manifest through these things. This led to the fullest flowering of the Christian understanding of mysticism – **that it involves a conscious experience of the presence of God.**⁶¹ (emphasis added) By the Middle Ages, mystical experiences and the recording of those experiences were widely known. These were mostly written down exclusively by nuns and monks such as Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen, Francis of Assisi, and Meister Eckhart. These were Christians that – contrary to most ordinary people – were literate and more or less ‘professional’ Christians. In the Eastern Church, Symeon the New Theologian and Gregory of Palamas were notable mystics. As the Middle Ages gave way to the Renaissance, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross wrote extensively about their contemplative experiences and the mystical life. But around about the Reformation, both sides – Protestant and Catholic – began to promote a *behavioral* rather than an *experiential* approach to spirituality. For Catholics, obedience to the church became the standard by which faithfulness was measured; in the Protestant world, obedience to the Bible played a similar role. Consequently, among both Catholics and Protestants, a culture of suspicion developed against the idea of a personal/mystical experience of God. Instead of fostering a spirituality based on encountering the presence God, Christianity (at least in the West) became increasingly focused on behavioral markers like obedience to authority and moral rectitude as the benchmarks of a “good” Christian life.⁶² This culture of suspicion of mysticism continues today on some branches of the Christian family tree. Many have decided that mysticism is dangerous – a ‘retreat from reality into

“God, it seems, cannot really be known, but only related to. Or, as the mystics would assert, we know God by loving God. God allows us to know him only by loving him. God, in that sense, cannot be “thought.” Richard Rohr (from ‘What The Mystics Know’; pg 103)

⁶⁰ A sampling of where these words are used in the N.T.: Matt. 13:11; Rom. 16:25; I Cor. 2:7, 4:1, 13:2, 15:1; Eph. 1:9; Col.1:26-27, 2:2; I Tim. 3:9

⁶¹ McColman, Carl. *The Big Book of Christian Mysticism: The Essential Guide to Contemplative Spirituality* (2010) Hampton Roads. pg. 50-51

⁶² Ibid pg. 52

fantasy.’⁶³ Kevin DeYoung, an Evangelical Christian, writing for The Gospel Coalition in a blog entry entitled “The Dangers of Mysticism”⁶⁴ criticized the basic tenets of any mysticism – i.e. that all one has to do to find God (or whatever their higher power) is this:

“...in order to find truth or life or salvation—in a word, to find God—a person need not go outside of himself but need only descend within himself. God dwells within a person, making His abode within the person either through nature or through a special, supernatural descent into the person.”

And it is this finding God within – without benefit of clergy or other authorities, without sermons and the Bible, or church-as-we-know-it – that is at the heart of DeYoung’s criticism.

But what of ‘contemplation?’ McColman is our source again:

When it comes to mysticism, contemplation is pretty much a core concept. It’s a concept that shows up in a variety of ways: there is contemplative prayer, the contemplative life (and contemplative living), and people who engage in these activities are called, simply enough, contemplatives. This is clearly parallel to the language of mysticism, which encompasses mystical prayer, the mystical life, and persons who are recognized as mystics.

So are contemplation and mysticism essentially interchangeable concepts? In other words, would it be a redundancy to talk about contemplative mysticism or mystical contemplation? No, I don’t think they’re completely interchangeable — even though there is clearly some overlap between the terms. I think the distinctions between contemplation and mysticism are subtle, but real.

‘Contemplation’ – in a non-religious sense – is the action of beholding or looking at something with attention and thought – and doing that continuously – as in continuously thinking about something. But in a religious sense (and specifically Christian) contemplation is more than thinking – or perhaps better, *beyond* thinking – to include a form of wordless prayer in which the mind and heart focus on God’s greatness and goodness in affective, loving adoration. “The monastics described the way of contemplation as holy simplicity (*sancta simplicitas*) – the steady focus of the heart in the pursuit of a changeless good. Followers of the contemplative approach make the love of God their supreme and unrivaled object in life. This hunger and thirst for righteousness is the soul’s love affair with its *summum bonum*, the highest good for which it was created. This involves both contrition (broken-heartedness) and cherishing (worshipful attention).”⁶⁵

Perhaps the best way to explain the relationship of mysticism and contemplation is to say it’s like the difference between a rectangle and a square. All squares are rectangles. But not all rectangles are squares. All Christian contemplation is a form of mysticism. But not

⁶³ Ibid pg. 68

⁶⁴ Retrieved online 4/8/24; <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/dangers-of-mysticism/>

⁶⁵ Boa, Kenneth. *Conformed to His Image: Biblical and Practical Approaches to Spiritual Formation* (2001) Zondervan. pg. 166

all of Christian mysticism is limited to contemplation. Mysticism (or mystical experience of God) is the goal and contemplation is a tool to get there. But there are also a wide variety of other practices and spiritual disciplines, in addition to contemplation, that the mystic can practice in their pursuit of experience of the divine.

III. **Considerations:**

McColman says mysticism is all about **paradox**. Physicist Neils Bohr, regarding paradox, tell us ***“The opposite of a correct statement is a false statement. But the opposite of a profound truth may be another profound truth.”*** Very often our faith is like this: we feel pulled in opposing directions and this tension cannot be overcome by our rational thought. Mysticism requires us to take a step back and look at the truths of our faith from a larger, more inclusive perspective. “Orthodox” is a compound word from two Greek words: “ortho” meaning ‘straight, right, or correct’ and “dox” means ‘opinion, belief, or teaching.’ Thus, an orthodox statement is simply something that is settled and generally accepted by the Christian community: e.g. God is love; we are called to repentance; the Holy Spirit is always with us. But “paradox” is likewise a Greek compound word: “para” means ‘beside or alongside’ and “dox” means ‘opinion, belief, or teaching.’ “A paradox does not negate orthodoxy, but rather exists ‘alongside’ it. Paradox represents the breathing room in which the ongoing guidance of the Holy Spirit occurs. The paradoxes of faith and mysticism invite you into a deep unknowing – that place beyond the reach of human reason, not pre-rational but trans-rational – where God wishes to meet you without the pomp and noise of your finite, gotta-be-in-control mind getting in the way.”⁶⁶ Here are a few paradoxes that we need to embrace if we’re going to go deeper in mysticism:⁶⁷

Profound Truth	<i>Profound Truth</i>
Mysticism is the quest for God.	<i>You cannot seek God unless God has found you.</i>
Mysticism is about experience.	<i>Mysticism cannot be limited to experience.</i>
You can do nothing to “earn” the mystical life.	<i>If you are passive, you will be thwarting the action of the Holy Spirit.</i>
Seek the light.	<i>Embrace the dark.</i>
Seek holiness.	<i>Practice hospitality.</i>
Plumb deeply the Christian tradition.	<i>Embrace all positive wisdom.</i>
Love God’s creation.	<i>Do not love the world.</i>
Humankind is sinful.	<i>Humankind is invited to participate in union with God</i>
The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.	<i>Perfect love casts out fear.</i>
Place your hope in the future when you will find conscious union with God.	<i>Live in the present moment; that’s the only place you’ll ever find God.</i>
Authentic Christian mysticism conforms to Biblical and church teaching.	<i>Mysticism is following spiritual vision to greater freedom.</i>
Pray methodically.	<i>Prayer cannot be reduced to a method.</i>

⁶⁶ McColman, Carl. ***The Big Book of Christian Mysticism: The Essential Guide to Contemplative Spirituality*** (2010) Hampton Roads. pg. 76-78

⁶⁷ Ibid, pgs 78 - 118

The Ultimate Mystery is silent.	<i>Part of being a mystic is trying to express the ineffable through words.</i>
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IV. Conclusion:

The Christians who have spoken the language of paradox, transformation, growth and spirituality are the mystics, and their marginalization within our religious traditions has been to our loss. Where mystics talk about a journey toward union with God, the church has often reduced this to a journey of sin avoidance, faithfulness in religious practices, and personal piety. Christian mystics talk about taking on the mind and heart of Christ, but the church talks about adopting certain beliefs and practices. Mystics understand that the heart of transformation is the heart, but the church has too often been content to focus on behavior. If we are to recover this broader understanding of growth, transformation, and spirituality, then we must look to the Christian mystics.⁶⁸

V. Discussion:

- Does Christian mysticism and/or contemplation hold any attraction for you?
- Have you seen mysticism and contemplation as being the same? (or at least so similar as to be indistinguishable?)
- Does one of the two (either mysticism or contemplation) seem more achievable/doable?
- Have you felt any sense of reticence or holding back because of the apparent marginalization of mysticism within most Christian religious traditions?

VI. Resources: *The following are some resources I have found useful in exploring mysticism & contemplation in addition to those found in the footnotes:*

Barton, Ruth Haley. ***Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation*** (2006) InterVarsity Press

Barton, Ruth Haley. ***Invitation to Solitude and Silence: Experiencing God's Transforming Presence*** (2012) InterVarsity Press

Benner, David. ***Presence & Encounter: The Sacramental Possibilities of Everyday Life*** (2014) Brazos Press

Cepero, Helen. ***Journaling as a Spiritual Practice: Encountering God Through Attentive Writing*** (2008) InterVarsity Press

Ford, Leighton. ***The Attentive Life: Discerning God's Presence in All Things*** (2008) InterVarsity Press

Laird, Martin. ***Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation*** (2006) Oxford University Press

McColman, Carl. ***Answering the Contemplative Call: First Steps on the Mystical Path*** (2013) Hampton Roads Press

Mulholland, M. Robert. ***Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation*** (1993) InterVarsity Press

Mulholland, M. Robert. ***Shaped by The Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation*** (2000) Upper Room Books

Mulholland, M. Robert. ***The Deeper Journey: The Spirituality of Discovering your True Self*** (2008) InterVarsity Press

⁶⁸ Benner, David. ***Spirituality and the Awakening Self: The Sacred Journey of Transformation*** (2012) Brazos Press. pg. 72

THEOLOGY ON TAP

Gig Harbor, Washington – May 16, 2024

Designing God

“...God lets his children tell the story...” Dr. Peter Enns⁶⁹

XVII. The Issue:

There seems to be a disconnect between how different Christians describe God. On one extreme, to some he is an angry, warrior, and racist God of wrath and judgement – or at least racist enough to not like the people they don’t like. On the other extreme, some describe God as a personal, relational, loving, and peaceful God who doesn’t judge or harm anyone. And yet to others God is a spirit, the ground of being – not theistic or personal in terms of a relational consideration. Is there a middle ground? Or, does ‘God let his children tell the story’ as Peter Enns suggests?

XVIII. Background:

There are generally two ways to describe God and to some extent these two ways complement each other and both have their place and both are needed. They are (1) **cataphatic theology** (or “positive theology” – which is generally followed in the Latin or Western Church – sometimes called *via positiva* or the positive way) and (2) **apophatic theology** (or “negative theology” - which tends to be followed in Eastern Orthodoxy – sometimes also called *via negativa* or the negative way).

Apophatic theology is a method of describing God by negation, i.e., focusing on what *cannot* be said about God rather than making positive assertions. The core idea is that the divine essence is ultimately unknowable and ineffable, thus transcending human language and comprehension. This theological approach emphasizes the inadequacy of human concepts to fully capture the divine nature. By emphasizing what God is not, apophatic theology denies any ‘positive’ attributes that would limit or anthropomorphize the infinite and incomprehensible. Aquinas believed we could learn more about God by what he is *not* than by what he is. Some examples of Bible verses used to justify apophatic theology are:

- John 1:18 – no one has seen or can see God
- 1 Tim. 6:16 – God lives in unapproachable light
- Job 11:7-8; Rom. 11:33-36 – God’s ways are unsearchable and unfathomable

Cataphatic theology is an approach that seeks to describe and understand God through affirmative statements and positive assertions about God's nature and attributes. It makes positive statements describing God such as "God is love" or "God is merciful." It affirms divine attributes and qualities revealed through scripture, reason, or religious experience.

Cataphatic theology is an approach that seeks to describe and understand God through affirmative statements and positive assertions about God’s nature and attributes. It makes positive statements describing God such as “God is love” or “God is merciful.” It affirms divine attributes and qualities revealed through scripture, reason, or religious experience. Aquinas also argued that while human

⁶⁹ Enns, Peter. *The Bible Tells Me So: Why Defending Scripture Has Made Us Unable to Read It* (2014) HarperOne. Pg 63

language may not be fully accurate, it can be indicative of the qualities of God. Some examples of Bible verses used to justify cataphatic theology are:

- 1 John 1:5 – God is light
- 1 John 4:16 – God is love
- Psalm 145:8-9 – God is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, loving, good to all, compassionate

Whether we use **apophatic** or **cataphatic** methods to describe God, **there seems to be a willingness on God's part to be described in a variety of ways.** For instance, in the Old Testament there are at least twelve different names used to describe God (with example scriptures):⁷⁰

- Elohim: The Eternal Creators-it's a plural noun (Gen. 1)
- Jehovah: The Self-Existent One Who Reveals Himself (Gen. 28:13)
- El-Shaddai: Almighty (Gen. 17:1-2)
- Adonai: Master (Ex. 4:10)
- Jehovah – jireh – Provider (Gen. 22:14)
- Jehovah – rophe: Healer (Ex. 15:26)
- Jehovah – nissi: Our Banner (Ex. 17:15)
- Jehovah – M'Kaddesh: Sanctifier (Lev. 20:7-8)
- Jehovah – shalom: Our Peace (Judges 6:24)
- Jehovah – tsidkenu: Our righteousness (Jer. 23:5-6)
- Jehovah – rohi: Our Shepherd (Gen. 49:24)
- Jehovah – shammah: Presence (Ezek. 48:35)

Some of these names God applies to himself; others are applied by his people. Either way, it seems that God is too big to be contained or described by one expression (or no expression) – it takes a host of names to describe him. It's important to note: nowhere in the OT does God rebuke people for naming him. ***He submits himself to being named by the humans he chooses to be in relationship with.***

In Genesis 32, Jacob wrestles with an angel (or God?) at Peniel. In verse 29 Jacob asks the wrestler his name.

*"In Jacob's question, **Tell me, I pray thee, thy name**, there is the echo of an ancient superstition, but there is also the reaching out toward everlasting truth. Men used to think there was a sort of magical potency in a name. A name was so much more than a label of identification; it belonged to the essence of a personality. Know a name and you had a way open to the secret of a person...Jacob felt himself in the grip of supernatural power. He needed above everything to know that power's name.*

*But beyond the element in Jacob's desire that reflects old superstition there is a greater truth. The Bible is a history of man's discovery, by God's revealing, of nobler names of God. **The character of religion is determined by the name and therefore the nature of the God men worship. That was so all through the O.T. and into the N.T.; and it is true now.**"⁷¹*
(emphasis added)

⁷⁰ There are of course other names such as Emmanuel, Jehovah Sabaoth, etc. The twelve names listed are from: Stone, Nathan. ***Names of God in the Old Testament*** (1944) Moody Press.

⁷¹ Buttrick, George Arthur ed. ***The Interpreter's Bible*** (1952) Pierce & Smith. Vol 1, pg. 726

I want to focus in on this highlighted phrase: ***“The character of religion is determined by the name and therefore the nature of the God men worship.”*** Words and names have meanings and create relationship characteristics all by themselves. Here are some other titles or names we use for God: Creator / King / Sovereign / Shepherd / Lover / Friend / Ruler & Law Giver / Judge / Lord / Master. For each of the ways he reveals himself (or in the ways we name him), there is a corresponding way we *image ourselves* (for good or for ill): if He is Creator, we see ourselves as Creature – and thus substantially below Him and probably to some degree distant from Him. If He is King & Sovereign, we are Subject or Vassal. If He is Shepherd, we are Sheep (or Goat). If He is Lover, we are Beloved. If He is Friend, we are Befriended. If he is Ruler & Lawgiver, we are Ruled and Governed. If He is Judge, we are the Judged. If He is Lord, we are Servant. If He is Master, we are Slave.

Some of these images are far more comfortable for us to view God and view ourselves. Some are easier for us to lapse into – we gravitate toward one or another of them because of our own background, experience, or how he was first revealed to us. Some of these images are easier for us to “see” – either of him or ourselves. Some are difficult for us to image – for instance, Shepherd may be difficult because so many of us have never been one, seen one, or known one. Our images of Shepherd are romanticized from movies, books, or old paintings – very few of us know firsthand what it means to be a shepherd or a sheep. Regardless of why, when we focus on one image, *we become like what we image*. If our image of God is inaccurate or distorted, our experience of Him will be that much less than he desired as well. If we don’t see him accurately, we won’t see ourselves accurately, and we’ll miss out aspects of relationship with him.

Next, there is an interesting verse in Exodus 19:13 when Moses had led the Israelites to Mt. Sinai to meet with God. God told Moses to tell the people to consecrate themselves in order to meet with God on the mountain. When they heard the trumpet sound a long blast, they were to go up on the mountain.⁷² Evidently it was God’s intent that not only Moses but also the priests, elders, and all the people were to go up on the mountain to hear God deliver the commandments. But somewhere in between verse 13 and 21, God changed his mind and told Moses to just bring Aaron up with him on the mountain while the people stood at the base of the mountain and listened to the thunder, lightning, smoke, and the sound of the trumpet. In chapter 20:19, the people said to Moses: *“You speak to us and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.”*

If I could summarize these passages, it would look something like this: God actually wanted to meet with everyone but all the people except Moses were afraid to meet with God (although later, in Ex. 24:9 seventy elders did go up the mountain and see God). God says in Deut. 5:28-29 that the people were probably right in not coming up on the mountain, but he nevertheless wished they *“...only had such a heart to fear me and keep all my commands, so that they and their and children will prosper forever.”* So, in a bullet here’s my takeaway from these passages: ***God wanted deeper and fuller relationship with his people, but he let them set the level of vulnerability, depth, and intimacy in their relationship – he was unwilling to force himself on them.*** Why is God so reticent to force himself on us in relationship or require relationship with us? Surely, it would be better for us in the long run if God would exercise more control and “require” relationship of us? But think about this phrase:

⁷² In the interest of full disclosure, some English translations use the phrase “...go up **to** the mountain...” but most say “...go up **on** the mountain...” I’m not sure of the Hebrew enough to aver one way or the other.

“We need to bear in mind that the most accurate word to describe the process of forcing intimate connection is rape.”⁷³

We see this pattern of the divine letting the human set the level of relationship repeated in the ministry of Jesus in Matthew 5:5-11 when a centurion asks Jesus to heal his servant. Jesus agrees to go to the centurion’s house to perform the healing but the centurion says *“I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word and my servant will be healed.”* Jesus commends the centurion for his faith and understanding. But there’s another lesson here: Jesus could have insisted upon going to the centurion’s house, but he didn’t. ***He let the centurion set the level of vulnerability, depth, and intimacy in their relationship – he was unwilling to force himself on the centurion.***

A similar instance is when a blind man is brought to Jesus (Luke 18:35-43) and Jesus asks him *“What do you want me to do for you?”* even though it was evident to everyone, including Jesus, that the man was blind and needed sight. But Jesus, out of respect for the blind man’s unseeing but inherent human dignity, was unwilling to impose his will on the man without the man’s request and consent.

Lastly, I would make this point by quoting Peter Enns extensively:

“...the ancient Israelites were an ancient tribal people. They saw the world and their God in tribal ways. They told stories of their tribal past, led into battle by a tribal warrior God who valued the same things they did – like killing enemies and taking their land. This is how they connected with their God – in their time, in their way...The Bible – from back to front – is the story of God told from the limited point of view of real people living at a certain place and time.

It's not like the Israelites were debating whether or not to go ahead and describe God as a mighty warrior. They had no choice. That's just how it was done – that was their cultural language. And if the writers had somehow been able to step outside of their culture and invent a new way of talking, their story would have made no sense to anyone else.

The Bible looks the way it does because “God lets his children tell the story, so to speak.”⁷⁴ (emphasis added)

XIX. Considerations:

Let me summarize these points:

- (1) God names himself but he also submits himself to being named by the humans he chooses to be in relationship with. He lets his people name him because “the character of religion is determined by the name and therefore the nature of the God men worship.”⁷⁵**
- (2) Our naming of God is also a naming of ourselves.**
- (3) When in relationship with humans, God lets his people set the parameters of vulnerability, depth, and intimacy in their relationship with him because it appears he is unwilling to force himself on them.**

⁷³ Myers, Joseph. *Organic Community: Creating a Place Where People Naturally Connect* (2007) Baker Books, pg 46

⁷⁴ Enns, Peter. *The Bible Tells Me So: Why Defending Scripture Has Made Us Unable to Read It* (2014) HarperOne. Pg 61-63

⁷⁵ There’s certainly a lot that could be unpacked from this statement, especially in light of Christian Nationalism or Fundamentalist Evangelicalism.

(4) God lets his children tell the story of him and their relationship to him.

XX. Conclusion:

So where am I going with this? A couple of weeks ago, Vance Morgan, a professor of philosophy at Providence College, and blogger at the Patheos Progressive Christian Channel wrote a blog called “Designing God”⁷⁶. In that blog he shares how he likes to give his freshman seminar students the assignment to read Genesis and Exodus and then describe the God they read there. Most of the students thought that the OT God described in the first two books of the bible “frequently seems insecure, petty, unfair, and arbitrary.” Then as a thought experiment he asked them to write down and describe three of the characteristics they would like their God to have. I would like you to consider doing this assignment as well and then on Thursday, May 16th, 2024 at our next Theology on Tap meeting we’ll meet to discuss this “designer God.” We’ll see if there’s any consistency across the assembled group or where the differences are – acknowledging as we do that naming God is simultaneously naming us. I’ll bring a whiteboard to write down what you all come up with.

XXI. Discussion:

Here is the assignment that Morgan gave his students and that I am giving you:

*Let’s create a ‘Designer God’—you get to create God from scratch. Write in your notebooks for ten minutes on the following topic: **Any God worth believing in will have the following characteristics.** Come up with at least three characteristics and explain why any God worth believing in would have to have them. Go.”*

⁷⁶ You can read the full article here: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/freelancechristianity/designing-god/> Source: retrieved online 4/16/24

THEOLOGY ON TAP

Fides Quaerens Intellectum – Faith Seeking Understanding

Gig Harbor, Washington – September 19, 2024

Human Nature: Evil, Good, or Neutral?

“Aristotle said we are rational animals. I say I am an angel with an incredible capacity for beer. It is the real me that God loves.”

Brennan Manning

XXII. The Issue:

We’ve talked about human nature before (see the September 2023 ToT One-Pager). The views of human nature generally fall into one of two categories. On one side are those that believe that humans are inherently wicked and evil, full of loathsome weaknesses. On the other side are those who believe humanity is basically good. But in that one-pager, we did not discuss what the consequences are of necessarily believing either way. These two views act like ditches on either side of a road and it’s easy to slide into and get stuck in one ditch or the other. This one-pager will explore these issues a little deeper and look at a *via media* – a middle way through these two opposing ditches.

XXIII. Background:

There are competing visions of what exactly human nature is like. Some Christians believe and teach that human beings are inherently wicked and evil. This comes from Adam’s Fall. The idea that humans are inherently wicked and evil is sometimes called “**Worm Theology**” and it emphasizes human sinfulness and unworthiness, portraying people as “worms” to highlight the gravity of sin and the need for divine grace. At the other end of the continuum is “**Grace Theology**” or “**Worth Theology**.” This kind of theology emphasizes the inherent dignity and worth of individuals as created in the image of God. Grace theology focuses on the positive aspects of human nature and the transformative power of grace. At the risk of cherry-picking proof texts, the Bible seems to come down on both sides of the argument:

WORM THEOLOGY	WORTH THEOLOGY
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Psl 51 – we are conceived in iniquity and born into sin• Rom. 3:23 – all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God• Isa 64:6 – our righteousness is like filthy rags• Jer 17:9 – the heart is deceitfully wicked	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Gen 1:27 – humans are made in the image of God• Psl 8:5 – humans are made a little lower than God and crowned with glory and honor• John 3:16 – humans are loved beyond all measure

XXIV. Considerations:

What are the consequences of holding to either of these views?

Consequences of Worm Theology:

- **Distorted Self-View:** It may cause individuals to view themselves (and others) as worthless, unlovable – even by God, irredeemable, thus dehumanizing both self and others. This distorted self-view can lead to hopelessness, depression, despair, and a life lived dominated by sin and shame.
- **Imbalanced Doctrine:** Focusing solely on human depravity can overshadow the message of grace and redemption, making it seem powerless and leading to despair by neglecting the transformative power of grace and the positive aspects of human nature. By identifying oneself as powerless and beyond repair, it's easy to justify sinful choices because, after all, you had no choice in the matter – what else could be expected of you? An overemphasis on human depravity will make grace powerless: *"I'm nothing more than a worm and will never amount to anything."* Go in that direction and repentance is impossible.⁷⁷
- **Scapegoating and Abuse:** This theology can lead to doctrines and harmful teaching practices that justify harsh treatment of oneself and others, aligning with scapegoating practices that are inherently unjust. It can also lead to authoritarianism, e.g. "You peon in the pew, cannot trust your deceitful heart. Here, let me, the learned reverend, prophet, pastor, and priest show you the way to knowledge."⁷⁸
- **Dysfunctional Relationships:** Jesus told us to love our neighbor as ourselves – how is that possible if we view ourselves and others as loathsome worms and maggots? It's going to be hard to love ourselves or others in any *authentic* way.⁷⁹

Consequences of Worth Theology:

- **An Expected Grace:** An overemphasis on human worth will make grace expected: *"Well, of course God sent his Son to save us. We're so worthy, after all!"* But going in this direction means repentance is unnecessary.
- **Blame Shifting:** People holding this view believe that deep down we are fundamentally good because we're made in the image of God. Selfishness, hatred, and destruction are not our natural states. To the contrary, they are symptoms of a *disruption* of our natural state.⁸⁰ This thinking shifts the blame and puts the responsibility for bad behavior "out there" somewhere such as society or culture, and not on the guilty party.
- **Pride:** If we are fundamentally good, then any shame we feel must be a lie, because shame is a feeling of being fundamentally bad. Those believing in the fundamental goodness of humans don't see pride as a necessarily bad thing. ("It ain't bragging if you can do it.")
- **Resistance to Change:** If we are fundamentally good, it's easy to believe there's no need for improvement – no place to grow, no need to change. "You've already arrived. You're great just the way you are."

⁷⁷ Source: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/both-worm-worthy/> . Retrieved online 8/28/24

⁷⁸ Source: <https://www.parrott.ink/misused-scripture-jeremiah-17-9/> retrieved online 8/28/24

⁷⁹ Kent, Dan. **Confident Humility: Becoming Your Full Self without Becoming Full of Yourself**. 2019. Fortress Press. pg. 33

⁸⁰ Ibid. pg. 14

- **False Positivity:** Worth theology pushes its adherents toward (perhaps unwarranted) positivity and self-esteem even if some claims to self-esteem are vacuous. In this theology everyone deserves a trophy because everyone is special – even though everyone being special wreaks havoc with the definition of ‘special.’ And pretending to be special and positive when we really aren’t leads to inauthenticity.

A Third View. The *via media* or middle path (the road between the two opposing ditches) - between these two extremes requires asking different questions and relying on different answers. This middle way rests on several key thoughts:

- **The Incarnation:** The incarnation tells us that Jesus became fully human (Heb. 2:17) and emptied himself of all divine advantage (Phil. 2:7). “This full humanity means that whatever we say about humans we also say about Jesus. Should we really call Jesus “a wretch, filth, far worse than nothing”? Or incapable of anything worthwhile in God’s sight? Of course not...and since he was fully human, then we humans shouldn’t think such things about ourselves either.”⁸¹
- **All Humans are Loved by God:** God, through Jesus, loved each and every specific human with a ‘maximal love.’ “It’s not possible to be loved more than how much we are loved by God. This utmost love means that we, ourselves, are lovable. And since this love for us was true while we were at our worst and while we were against God (Rom 5:8), it also means that something exists within us that God loves beyond anything we do. That is, we are inherently lovable. We have inherent worth.”⁸² An argument posed by Calvinists says that ‘God loves us because of who he is, not because of anything about us.’ But if God’s love is only about who God is, having nothing to do with us, then it’s not *us* that God loves. Rather, God is merely loving himself through us.⁸³ And that does not comport with what we know of God’s character. “The only way to really believe that God loves us, and that he doesn’t merely love himself through us, is to accept that we are lovable...Ultimately, for the good news to be true (and good), we can’t be all that bad.”⁸⁴
- **Humility:** The proper result of realizing our unsurpassable and unalterable worth to God is a profound sense of *humility*. Humility means putting the love of God, demonstrated in the Cross, at the center of our self-assessments – at the core of our hearts. With love at the center, we are able to take sin seriously without sabotaging our self-worth or our potential for good.

XXV. Conclusion:

Author Danielle Shroyer doesn’t see the need for this kind of binary view that humans are either evil or perfect (or at least perfectible):

“We aren’t forced into some “people are evil” vs “people are perfect” binary. Neither of these extremes are helpful (extremes rarely are), much less realistic, because they are deeply at odds with our own experience of the world. The most honest thing we

⁸¹ Ibid. pg. 34

⁸² Kent, Dan. **Confident Humility: Becoming Your Full Self without Becoming Full of Yourself**. 2019. Fortress Press. pg. 44

⁸³ Ibid. pg. 32

⁸⁴ Ibid. pg. 35

*can say is that people can be good and people can be evil. They can often be both in the same day, even the same hour....It's just not true that the only way to take sin seriously is to believe in a doctrine that tells us we are irrevocably flawed."*⁸⁵

She goes on to argue that

*"Sin is not the primary thing that is true about us. Before we are anything else, we are made in God's image, and we are made to reflect that image in the way we live. Before scripture tells us anything else about ourselves, it tells us we are good...When we ground ourselves in the fact that God created us good, we are capable of confronting all the other things that are true about us, even the difficult things...**Original blessing is the stubborn assertion not that we are perfect, but that we are loved.** (emphasis added) And this love has the power to transform even our shadows into light."*⁸⁶

XXVI. Discussion:

- What view of human nature was in your faith of origin? Do you still hold to that view or has your view evolved or migrated? What's your view now?
- Using the metaphor of a road with ditches on each side, what keeps you in the middle of the road? Do you have guardrails to keep you on the road? What are they?

⁸⁵ Shroyer, Danielle. *Original Blessing: Putting Sin In Its Rightful Place*. 2016. Fortress Press. pg. 30

⁸⁶ Ibid, pg. 32

THEOLOGY ON TAP

Fides Quaerens Intellectum – Faith Seeking Understanding

Gig Harbor, Washington – October 17, 2024

Jürgen Moltmann

“God weeps with us so that we may one day laugh with him.”

XXVII. The Issue:

Jürgen Moltmann was a German Reformed theologian whose life spanned the greater part of the 20th century and into the 21st century. He died just a few months ago on June 3rd, 2024. He was a professor of systematic theology at the University of Tübingen and was best known for two of his books: *The Theology of Hope* (a book focused on the hope the resurrection brings), and *The Crucified God* (a book about the suffering of God on the cross and the centrality of the theology of the cross to Christianity). Moltmann is widely regarded as one of the most important theologians since World War II.⁸⁷ This Theology on Tap one-pager looks at why Moltmann was so important.

XXVIII. Background:⁸⁸

Moltmann was born on April 8, 1926, in Hamburg, Germany just seven years after the close of hostilities in the first World War. The context of his early years was the post WWI Germany. The German Weimar Republic was laboring under the harsh punishments imposed by the Treaty of Versailles. The 1920s were a period of political and economic instability, some cultural and social progress (e.g. women were given the vote), and the rise of the far right party of the National Socialist German Workers (i.e. Nazi Party) and at least two ‘putsches’ – rebellions staged by paramilitary organizations. But even with all of that instability in society, Moltmann grew up in a relatively stable, but non-religious family. He loved science and he idolized Albert Einstein. In 1943 at the age of 16 he was drafted into the German army and served on an anti-aircraft battery in Hamburg. During an RAF bombing of Hamburg, 40,000 citizens were killed, including his friend who was immediately next to him on the anti-aircraft battery. (That had to be traumatizing!) Two years later – 1945 – he was serving on the German front lines when he surrendered in the dark to the first British soldier he met. He spent the next three years in a prisoner of war camp, first in Belgium, then in Scotland, and finally near Nottingham, England. It was in the POW camp in Scotland that his captors put up photos of what the Allies found at the Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen concentration camps. Though German prisoners initially thought the photos were propaganda, they came to see the truth in them by seeing the photos through the eyes of the Nazi victims. Like all prisoners of war, he had long periods of boredom, but it was while he was in Scotland that an American chaplain gave him a New Testament and Psalms and reading these gave him hope. Later, while in the post-war POW camp in England – which was run by the YMCA – he met many English theology students. There he read Niebuhr’s *The Nature and Destiny of Man* which had a profound impact on him. In 1947 he was repatriated to Germany – a devastated nation – and later that same year he was invited to attend a Christian conference back in England. Its

⁸⁷ Retrieved online 7/23/24:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20240605203810/https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2024/june/moltmann-obit-theology-hope.html>

⁸⁸ Retrieved online 9/19/24: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J%C3%BCrgen_Moltmann

impact on him was profound and when he returned to Germany he enrolled as a theology student at The University of Göttingen. Many of his professors were followers of Karl Barth and were engaged with the Confessing Church in Germany – the church movement that Dietrich Bonhoeffer had been a part of. He received his doctorate in 1952 and then pastored in small churches for five years before becoming a theology teacher at The Church College for Reformation Theology – the educational branch of the Confessing Church. In 1963 he joined the theological faculty at the University of Bonn. Then, in 1967, he was appointed professor of systemic theology at the University of Tübingen where he remained until he retired in 1994. For a number of years after his retirement, he continued to mentor graduate students in theology. There can be no doubt that his experiences of suffering and the challenges he faced in World War II shaped his explorations in scholarship and his resulting theology. “Moltmann remained committed to his quest for a theodicy⁸⁹. *‘The Crucified God’*, he wrote, ‘was also my attempt to find an answer for a life in Germany after Auschwitz.’”⁹⁰

XXIX. **Considerations:**

I have not read Moltmann’s *‘Theology of Hope.’* I have read much of his *‘The Crucified God’* and it is that contribution to theology that I want to focus on in this one-pager. Here is the passage that struck me the most:

There can be no theology of the incarnation which does not become a theology of the cross. ‘As soon as you say incarnation, you say cross.’ God did not become man according to the measure of our conceptions of being a man. He became the kind of man that we do not want to be: an outcast, accursed, crucified. Ecce homo! ‘Behold the man!’ is not a statement which arises from the confirmation of our humanity and is made on the basis of ‘like is known to like’; it is a confession of faith which recognizes God’s humanity in the dehumanized Christ on the cross. At the same time the confession says Ecce deus ! Behold God on the cross!

...When the crucified Jesus is called the ‘image of the invisible God’, the meaning is that this is God, and God is like this. God is not greater than he is in this humiliation. God is not more glorious than he is in this self-surrender. God is not more powerful than he is in this helplessness. God is not more divine than he is in this humanity. The nucleus of everything Christian theology says about ‘God’ is to be found in this event. The Christ event on the cross is a God event.⁹¹



The Holy Trinity by Niccolo Semitocolo, 1340CE

⁸⁹ “Theodicy is defined as a theological construct that attempts to vindicate God in response to the problem of evil that appears inconsistent with the existence of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God.” (Wikipedia.) See also the ToT one pager on Theodicy from November 2022.)

⁹⁰ Retrieved online 9/11/24, Written by Donald MacLeod: Source:

[https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the-christology-of-jurgen-moltmann/#;~:text=\(One%20is%slightly%20uneasy%about,a%20strong%20tendency%20towards%20universalism\)](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the-christology-of-jurgen-moltmann/#;~:text=(One%20is%slightly%20uneasy%about,a%20strong%20tendency%20towards%20universalism))

⁹¹ Moltman, Jurgen. *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (1974) Christian Kaiser Verlag, Munich. Pg. 205

Why were these thoughts so controversial? Why have they had such an impact on the theological world? If you recall, the 'classical' or traditional view of God is as a being who is omniscient (all knowing), omnipresent (everywhere present), immutable (unchanging), and impassible (that is, not moved by emotion, feeling, or pain). Prior to the late 19th century, most theologians held to the doctrine of divine impassibility -i.e. the idea that God cannot suffer pain or feel emotion. At the heart of **The Crucified God** is an emphatic rejection of the notion of God's impassibility.

Moltmann carefully defines his position on God's impassibility – or lack thereof. For instance, Moltmann says that God cannot suffer needlessly or helplessly. "Nor, again, can he ever be a mere victim, helplessly assailed. But he can suffer *actively*, argues Moltmann. He can go towards suffering and accept it. He can suffer in love. This does not bespeak any deficiency in his being. On the contrary, it is possible only because of 'the fullness of his being, i.e. his love.' He is affected by human actions and sufferings not because he is afflicted by some neurosis but because 'he is interested in his creation, his people and his right.'"⁹² Further, God did not die on the cross (that's the heresy of 'patipassianism') but suffered the death and loss of the Son 'in the infinite grief of love'.

As the 20th century progressed with its genocide, world wars, the Holocaust, atomic bombs, terrible suffering in Stalinist Russia and more – the importance of feeling that God was a fellow-sufferer increased.⁹³ And Moltmann is not alone among theologians in this approach to God's suffering. Public theologian, Reggie Williams, believes Moltmann was influenced by Dietrich Bonhoeffer who once wrote in his prison cell, 'Only the suffering God can help.'⁹⁴ Moltmann also acknowledges the influence upon him of Northern Irish theologian Alistar McGrath who emphasizes that God knows and shares in human suffering. Japanese Lutheran theologian, Kazoah Kitamori, developed a theology of God's suffering in his 1946 book *Theology of the Pain of God* after witnessing the horrors of WWII at Nagasaki and Hiroshima.⁹⁵ "God's love and pain come together at the cross. Kitamori says that "love rooted in the pain of God" forms "the entire message of the Bible."⁹⁶ Some Jewish theologians of the 20th century have also argued for the suffering of God. Rabbi Abraham Heschel – who lost two sisters in concentration camps - said, "*The reality of the divine is sensed as pathos rather than power, and the most exalted idea applied to God is not infinite wisdom,[or] infinite power, but infinite concern.*"⁹⁷ Alfred Whitehead, the famous process theologian said "God is the fellow-sufferer who understands."⁹⁸ Even the English evangelical fundamentalist pastor and writer, G. Cambell Morgan, believed in the suffering of God when he said " ...therefore God came into human form and human life, to the actuality of human suffering, on the ...Cross, working out into visibility all the underlying, eternal truth of the passion of His love, that men seeing it, might understand it and put their trust in Him."⁹⁹

⁹² MacLeod, retrieved online 9/11/24

⁹³ Retrieved online, 10/10/2024, https://www.barnabasaid.org/resources/magazine/2022/bfaidmar_apr22_usa.pdf

⁹⁴ Personal online communication, 9/25/24

⁹⁵ Retrieved online, 10/10/2024, https://www.barnabasaid.org/resources/magazine/2022/bfaidmar_apr22_usa.pdf

⁹⁶ *ibid*

⁹⁷ *ibid*

⁹⁸ Retrieved online, 10/10/24, <https://www.theschooloftheology.org/posts/essay/god-emotions-suffer?rq=God%20and%20emotion>

⁹⁹ Retrieved online, 10/10/2024, https://www.barnabasaid.org/resources/magazine/2022/bfaidmar_apr22_usa.pdf

XXX. Conclusion:

In *The Crucified God*, Moltmann says “...a God who cannot suffer is poorer than any man. For a God who is incapable of suffering is a being who cannot be involved. Suffering and injustice do not affect him. And because he is so completely insensitive, he cannot be affected or shaken by anything. He cannot weep, for he has no tears. But the one who cannot suffer cannot love either.” This is the good news for us: God *is* willing to suffer both *for* us and in extreme solidarity *with* us because he wants to be involved with us, is affected by us, weeps with us, all because he loves us so deeply, so profoundly, so completely, and so unconditionally. Should this surprise us? I don’t think so. We are made in God’s image. We suffer because he suffers. We love because he loves. “The pain of grief [i.e. of suffering] is just as much part of life as the joy of love: it is perhaps the price we pay for love, the cost of commitment.”¹⁰⁰

XXXI. Discussion:

- Have you heard of Jurgen Moltmann before? Or heard of the doctrine of the suffering of God?
- Have you ever wondered if God suffered when Jesus died on the cross?
- Which do you prefer, the impassible God who sits omnipotent and unmoved in the heavens, or a God who suffers in solidarity with human suffering?
- Would you, as a human, be willing to forgo the experiences of love if doing so meant you would not be hurt?
- Does the idea of a God who suffers provide you any comfort? Or does it disturb you?

¹⁰⁰ Quote attributed to Dr. Colin Murry Parkes in his book *Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life*.

THEOLOGY ON TAP

Fides Quaerens Intellectum – Faith Seeking Understanding

Gig Harbor, Washington – November 21, 2024

Liberation Theology

A Preferential Option For The Poor.

I. The Issue:

Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Peruvian Catholic priest in the Dominican order, died recently on October 22, 2024. Gutiérrez is known as the father of 20th century Liberation Theology. In a nutshell, Liberation is a movement in Christian theology, developed mainly by Latin American Roman Catholics, that emphasizes liberation from social, political, and economic oppression as an anticipation of ultimate salvation. It engages in socio-economic analyses with a critique of structural and systemic economic inequality as well as social concern for the poor and "political liberation for oppressed peoples" and addresses other forms of perceived inequality.

But Liberation Theology has been the subject of mixed reception. Oppressed peoples outside of Latin America have built on it and extended it for their own liberation movements. But many – especially evangelicals in the US - have criticized Liberation Theology for its use of Marxist ideology in its analysis of the problems associated with economic inequality and political oppression. By linking it with Marxism they see it as a religious form of failed socialist policies. Others criticize it for making the helping of the poor a centerpiece of their theology rather than a by-product or fruit of their theology. While acknowledging an apparent "*preferential option for the poor*" (see under **Considerations** below) in the scriptural record, critics believe that such a preference is not the core of the Gospel.



Gustavo Gutiérrez in 2007

II. Background:

Victor Hugo declared that "the one thing stronger than armies is an idea whose hour has come."¹⁰¹ Following WW2 the *idea* of liberation came to many of the Europe's imperial colonies. The movement started in Africa and spread to India and then throughout the Third World. But many colonies – especially many in Latin America – though liberated 'politically', remained *economically colonized* in their dependence upon international trade and the international conglomerates of the first world nations. In many Third World countries (even those that nationalized international corporations) a ruling class evolved that benefitted from an enormous difference between the standard of living of the rich and the mass of the people. To liberation theologians it was increasingly apparent that economic development of First World nations as well as the prosperity of the elite social

¹⁰¹ *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* (1983) ed by Alan Richardson and John Bowden, Westminster Press, pg. 328

classes was developed at the expense of the less fortunate. International corporations succeed because they exploit the cheap labor in banana republics and similar places.¹⁰²

To add insult to injury, too often the institutional church was “in bed” with the ruling class. In essence, the institutional church’s theologies identified with the values, interests, and goals of those who benefit from the systemic and structural injustice of economic colonialism. It was into this post-war/liberation stirring matrix that the Catholic church instituted the modernizations associated with the Vatican II Council.¹⁰³ Vatican II was the Catholic church’s attempt to engage the modern world after a century in which it had seen itself as a bulwark against that very same world.¹⁰⁴ Vatican II pivoted the Catholicism to a more open stance to the world around it. One of the council’s mandates was for churches to be attentive to the dreams and aspirations of their people and become of service in the development of humanity. It was in this spirit of Vatican II that a group of Latin American bishops convoked the now famous Medellin Conference of 1968. “For the first time in the church’s history, the question of poverty, the structural causes of poverty, and more important still, the poor themselves as subjects of their history became the central focus of a major church assembly of bishops, religious, theologians, and pastors.”¹⁰⁵ Gustavo Gutiérrez was “the single most important person” in the making of Medellin.¹⁰⁶ In 1971, three years after the Medellin Conference, he published his landmark book: *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, Salvation*.¹⁰⁷ Gutiérrez and other theologians used Marxist concepts like “class struggle” and “exploitation” to examine how economic systems create and perpetuate inequalities and oppression. The Marxist analysis of class disparities heavily influenced Liberation Theology’s key concept of advocating for and prioritizing the needs of the poor. Because of this preference for the poor, Liberation Theology often calls for reorganization of social, governmental, and economic structures so that the poor are not merely cared for but brought into the fullness of human flourishing. These Marxist ideological criteria used in Liberation Theology formed the basis for a variety of distinct theologies that developed in the last three decades of the 20th century. These included Feminist Theology, Black Theology (addressing African Americans and black South Africans), Queer Theology, and Dalit Theology. (Dalit - meaning “broken or scattered” - is a term used for the untouchables and outcasts who represent the lowest stratum of the castes in the Indian subcontinent.) But the use of Marxist ideological criteria in developing Liberation Theology also provided fodder for the critique and pushback on Liberation Theology from the Catholic Church and North American Protestantism (especially Evangelicalism).

III. Considerations:

If orthodox Christian belief is that the origin of sin (i.e. “The Fall”) is told in the first three chapters of Genesis, the source of sin for Liberation Theology is in Exodus 1-3: the oppression of the children of Israel by their Egyptian masters and their subsequent liberation. The orthodox view sees sin as a private, individual matter – a broken relationship with God – thus sin is basically unbelief, rebellion, or something of that type. Liberation Theology sees sin, not on an individual or private scale,

¹⁰² *Christian Theology* (1985) by Millard Erickson, Baker Book House, pg. 892

¹⁰³ The Vatican 2 Council began on October 11, 1962 and ended on December 8, 1965

¹⁰⁴ *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview* (1999) ed by Gregory Baum; from chapter 13 – The Impact of Vatican II by Robert Schreiter. Orbis Books. pg 158

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, Chapter 9 – Emergence of a World Church and the Irruption of the Poor by Virgilio Elizondo, pg 107

¹⁰⁶ Retrieved online 10/25/24: <https://www.christiancentury.org/features/gustavo-guti-rrez-...>

¹⁰⁷ The Spanish version was published in 1971. An English translation wasn’t published until 1973.

but rather on a social and economic scale. The Egyptians were *corporately guilty* of oppressing the children of Israel. James Cone, the founder of Black Theology – an offshoot/expression of Liberation Theology – says “Sin is not primarily a religious impurity, but rather it is the social, political, and economic oppression of the poor. It is denial of the humanity of the neighbor through unjust political and economic arrangements.”¹⁰⁸

Criticisms of Liberation Theology usually fall into three categories. The first is the Marxist ideological base of Liberation Theology mentioned above. The second is centered around the notion of God’s “preferential option for the poor.” Lastly, Gutiérrez is accused of inciting violence as a means to an end for socio-economic justice.

I won’t address the first category beyond saying that I find it to be the weakest critique. When the church started with Jesus’ example and teachings regarding the poor and that “no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything was held in common” (Acts 4:32 NRSVue), it seems to me to be hard to criticize apparent socialist leanings within the early church.

The second area of criticism regards Liberation Theology’s ‘preferential option for the poor.’ Liberation Theology makes this priority for the poor and oppressed the core of their theology.

*The “preferential option for the poor” refers to a trend throughout the Bible, of priority being given to the well-being of the poor and powerless of society in the teachings and commands of God as well as the prophets and other righteous people. Jesus taught that on the Day of Judgment, God will ask what each person did to help the poor and needy: “Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.”*¹⁰⁹

What I view as one of the strengths of Liberation Theology is that it acknowledges that everyone reads the Bible through a particular lens or point of view. They are suspicious that there is even a possibility of reading the Bible from an ‘objective’ perspective. Personal bias in interpreting the Scriptures is virtually inescapable. Everyone comes to the text with assumptions, struggles, and priorities. “Our context – including our social location and our power interests – indelibly skews our perspective and colors our perceptions.”¹¹⁰ Liberation Theologian and Jesuit priest Juan Segundo calls it naïve to think we can apply the Bible “inside some antiseptic laboratory that is totally immune to the ideological tendencies and struggles of the present day.” Since everyone comes to the Bible with assumptions and struggles, Liberation Theologians say we should prioritize the assumptions and struggles of the poor since this mirrors God’s heart.¹¹¹

But many Christian thinkers and critics of Liberation Theology believe that the “preferential option for the poor” should not be the core of a theology, but rather the fruit of a theology. They say “Jesus said ‘The poor you have with you always...’” so there’s no sense in attempting to raise everyone out of poverty. Others believe it reckless to make ‘God’s preferential option for the poor’ the lens through which we read the Scriptures, insisting that helping the poor is just one option among many for how to spend our money/efforts. They see Liberation Theology’s emphasis on the poor as part of an

¹⁰⁸ **Christian Theology** (1985) by Millard Erickson, Baker Book House, pg. 590

¹⁰⁹ Retrieved online 11/9/24 at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Option_for_the_poor

¹¹⁰ **God -The World’s Future: Systematic Theology for a New Era** (2015) by Ted Peters, Fortress Press, pg. 28

¹¹¹ Retrieved online 11/9/24 at <https://renew.org/what-is-liberation-theology/>

unfortunate pattern where it's tempting to take some fruit of Christianity and make it the central point. This is exactly what the "name it and claim it" prosperity gospel does: it makes the material benefits of following Jesus the main point of their faith.¹¹²

The third criticism might be the most valid. Like Jürgen Moltmann, Gutiérrez opposed the "Constantinian model" of Christianity – that is, they opposed the idea that Christianity is a religiopolitical ideology that emphasizes the *unity of the church and state*, as opposed to the *separation of church and state*. (Think of "Christendom" and "The Holy Roman Empire" – that union of political and governmental authority with the church that occupied most of the history of the church from Constantine to the 20th century.) Both Moltmann and Gutiérrez preferred the concept of secular theology – that is, the world is becoming less 'religious' and that the church exists to serve the world and should take its agenda from the world. And if the masses in many nations are poor and kept poor through systemic and structural inequality, addressing these systems and structures oppressing the poor should be the church's priority. But because Liberation Theology bases so much of its analysis of the problem on Marxist ideology / methods and because Marxist ideology advocates for the violent overthrow of the ruling class as necessary, Liberation Theology has been critiqued for *potentially inciting revolutionary violence*.¹¹³ But neither Gutiérrez, nor any other founders of the movement ever advocated for violence in their pursuit of socio-economic justice for the poor. In fact, they went the other way and advocated for non-violence and the importance of addressing injustice through peaceful means. Nevertheless, it is likely true that violence is never far away when people resist oppression. Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) was critical of Liberation Theology because of its use of Marxist ideology, but he praised it for rejecting violence. (The Catholic Church in general was critical of Liberation Theology until Cardinal Bergoglio – who became Pope Francis in March 2013 and the first Pope from South America – signaled his approval of it by inviting Gustavo Gutiérrez to the Vatican in February 2014 where he reportedly received a hero's welcome.¹¹⁴ Francis has been instrumental in mainstreaming Liberation Theology in church teaching.)

IV. Conclusion:

Liberation Theology does not view God in the traditional, orthodox way, as impassive, immutable, and unknowable. They see the unchanging and unchangeable God of traditional theism as an idol, an idol developed by those with the most to lose from change. Rather, they see God as active, involved with the poor in their struggles ala Exodus 1-3. They take the incarnation as evidence that God, far from remaining aloof and secure, came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ and entered the human struggle. God is active, and actively involved in change. This means he is not neutral, but in favor of equality. And for equality to prevail, God cannot and must not work equally for all persons, but rather has a preference for the poor. If his justice is to be an equalizing justice, it must necessarily work in an unequal or compensating manner in our unequal world.¹¹⁵

Regardless of where one lands on the tenets of Liberation Theology, it must be admitted that it is an attempt to interpret Christian doctrine in a way that is responsible to the universal problem of

¹¹² *ibid*

¹¹³ Critics report that Gutierrez did advocate violence - even specifying the page in his book where he supposedly said it. But I've searched high and low in his book – even the same edition the critics specified - and I could find no reference advocating violence.

¹¹⁴ Retrieved online: 11/9/24 <https://uscatholic.org/articles/201410/what-is-liberation-theology/>

¹¹⁵ *Christian Theology* (1985) by Millard Erickson, Baker Book House, pg. 894

human suffering which is especially manifest in the inequities and social oppression of today's world. "It draws together in a new way theology and the social teachings of the church by providing the social ethics with theology and doctrinal grounding. And by uniting theology, ethics, and spirituality, it provides answers to fundamental questions of why one chooses to be a Christian in the modern world."¹¹⁶

V. Discussion:

- Have you heard of Liberation Theology before? What has been your impression of Liberation Theology in the past?
- Does Liberation Theology err in making the plight of the poor its core tenet? Does God really demonstrate a "preferential option for the poor?" Could it be that Liberation Theology simply takes a thread in the Bible and emphasizes it too much, thus swinging the pendulum too far? (c.f. Micah 6:8; James 1:27; Luke 4:18-19; Deut. 24:17; Matt. 11:5; Psl. 82:2-4; Zec. 7:9-10)
- Can you think of ways that the institutional church's theologies identified with the values, interests, and goals of those who benefit from the systemic and structural injustice of economic inequality?
 - Consider Martin Luther's rejection of the German Peasant's Revolt in 1524
 - Consider the churches in the Confederacy and their support of institutional slavery
- Would Liberation Theology have been better received if it had arisen in North America or Europe rather than in Latin America? Of if the author of the book on liberation theology had been authored by a person with a last name something like 'Walter' rather than 'Gutiérrez'?

¹¹⁶ *The New Dictionary of Theology* (1987) Ed. by Komonchak, Collins, and Lane; The Liturgical Press. pg. 576

THEOLOGY ON TAP

Fides Quaerens Intellectum – Faith Seeking Understanding

Gig Harbor, Washington – December 19th, 2024

Pietism

“Holiness...is faith gone to work.”

Frederic Dan Huntington

I. **The Issue:** *“Pietism”* is both a noun and an adjective. As a noun, it is the name given to a movement in Christianity. It began within Lutheranism in the late 17th century and consequently spread to other movements within Protestantism and has honestly formed much of the expression of Christianity in Europe and North America since. As an adjective, it describes an approach to, or an ethos of, Christianity that has come to transcend denominational and even religious labels. It’s an approach that – in its best expressions – emphasizes personal devotion and spiritual experiences. But just steps away - in its worst expressions – it emphasizes a pious, moralistic, and legalistic approach to Christianity that should be avoided at all costs. Today, four centuries later, pietism is seen by some as the only way forward in renewing Christianity, while at the same time others see in it a terrible error that devastates the lives of Christian believers.¹¹⁷ Which is it? Is there some value in pietism for the Christian believer or is it an error to be avoided? Let’s explore!

II. **Background:** A timeline is helpful here. First comes Martin Luther, 1517, and the start of the Protestant Reformation. That the Reformation took off so quickly and spread like wildfire across Europe is, I think, testament to the pent-up spiritual hunger in the people of Europe. But within 100 years, Catholicism really began to push back (ala the Counter Reformation). And then in 1616 the newly crowned Ferdinand II of the Holy Roman Empire attempted to enforce Catholicism on his Protestant subjects in Bohemia. Thus, kicked off the **30-Years-War** (1616-1648). What started as a religious conflict evolved into full-blown war for political power in Europe, pitting the Catholic Holy Roman Empire against the alliances of the Protestant princes of Germany, Denmark, Sweden, and later France. The war resulted in immense destruction and a high death toll due to not only battles, but also famine and disease. It proved to be one of the most destructive conflicts in European history.¹¹⁸ It was in the wake of the losses of the War that a general malaise settled into many churches, especially Lutheran churches that had now been doing ‘institutional Lutheran’ for over a hundred years. Many Christians were only “cultural Christians.”

It was into this sense of comfort, complacency, and disillusionment in institutional Christian that a Lutheran pastor in Frankfurt named Philip Jacob Spener (1635-1705) introduced what is now called **pietism**. In 1670 Spener initiated voluntary twice-weekly (Sunday & Wednesday evenings) meetings of devout lay people for Bible study and mutual edification; these *Collegia Pietatis*

¹¹⁷ For a positive view of pietism, see **The Pietist Option: Hope for the Renewal of Christianity** by Christopher Gehrz and Mark Pattie III, IVP Academic (2017). For a negative view of pietism, see **A Primer on Pietism: Its Characteristics and Inevitable Impact on the Christian Life** by Ryan Haskins, et al, Theocast, Inc. (2017)

¹¹⁸ Retrieved online, 12/7/24 at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thirty_Years'_War / Fought primarily in Central Europe, an estimated 4.5 to 8 million soldiers and civilians died while parts of Germany reported population declines of over 50%.

("assemblies of piety") gave the movement its name.¹¹⁹ ("*Pietism*" was originally a pejorative term of ridicule used by the Lutheran orthodoxy.) In 1675, Spener published a book called *Pia Desideria* (trans: "Devout Desires" or "Pious Wishes"). In it he critiqued the sorry state of the institutional Lutheran church. "He called for better preaching, improved education and discipline of pastors, less polemics, and more edifying sermons. He appealed to the spiritual priesthood of all believers, calling on the laity to witness to the faith by the quality of their lives. He believed the teaching of smaller groups would get closer to the people and their needs...In short, Spener desired an emphasis on *sanctification* that would balance the orthodox teaching of *justification*."¹²⁰ Spener's pietistic spirituality had a strong practical and applied side. He felt that if your Christian piety didn't result in charitable good works, it was falling short. These efforts aimed to "complete the Reformation" through "reforming our lives as well as our doctrines."¹²¹

One of Spener's disciples, August Hermann Francke, an organizational genius, established a new pietistic center in Halle, Germany. It included a program whose aim was to transform university theological studies to serve devotion rather than science. Additionally, Francke created a system of public education that included girls as well as boys (a historic breakthrough) and an orphanage that housed 3,000 orphans. Under Francke, Halle became a focal point for pietistic publishing, education, and missions. The Halle experiment was repeated at Herrnhut, a religious self-supporting commune for Bohemian and Moravian refugees that Count Ludwig von Zinzendorf created on his own estate.¹²² The Moravian Brethren from Herrnhut were the first to send out international missionaries to the European colonies around the world.¹²³

The tenets of pietism spread across Europe and found fertile ground in the already growing Separatists and Puritan streams within the English Anglican church and later in John Wesley's Methodism which, along with Lutherans and Baptists, formed the core of Christian expression in European colonies on the North American continent and led, ultimately, to broader American evangelicalism.

III. Considerations: How did pietism influence the broader Protestant Christianity? There are several practices that Spener & Francke brought into common usage that persist still:

- a. **Small groups** - for Bible study, prayer, and mutual accountability. These were based in the notion that Christians are *better together*. This doesn't mean that pietists skipped church in favor of small groups. No, they did both; they called their regular church *ecclesia* (the proper Greek term) and small groups were called *ecclesiolae* (little churches). Many Protestant and evangelical churches still use small groups as a way of building community and encouraging individual spirituality and accountability.

¹¹⁹ *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. by Alan Richardson and John Bowden, Westminster Press, (1983) pg.447

¹²⁰ *The Lutheran Difference: An Explanation & Comparison of Christian Beliefs*, ed. Edward Engelbrecht, Concordia, (2014) pg 618

¹²¹ *Exploring Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Reader*, ed. by Kenneth J. Collins. Baker Academic. (2000) pg 218

¹²² *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. by Alan Richardson and John Bowden, Westminster Press, (1983) pg.447

¹²³ John Wesley himself credits meeting with the Moravian missionary Peter Bohler as a milestone in his own conversion experience.

- b. **Personal Bible study** – while this wasn't widely possible prior to Gutenberg's 15th century invention of the movable-type press, by the late 17th century publishing had progressed to the point where Bibles and other devotional books were, though expensive, common and readily available and pietism encouraged the personal study and application to life of the scriptures.
- c. **Personal Conversion** – in an era when you were a Christian because your parents or political leader was Christian, many in the church were what we would call "cultural Christians", that is, Christian-in-name-only without any attendant life changes or evidence of a transformed life. Francke especially, who had experienced a "sudden conversion," made this personal conversion a model for Christian experience and advocated for the idea of a sudden conversion or sudden personal salvation experience for everyone.¹²⁴ If it wasn't sudden and resulting in dramatic life change, it probably wasn't really sincere and authentic. This idea led ultimately to the "revival evangelism" of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries which advocated "coming forward" and receiving Jesus as your "personal Lord and Savior" and getting "saved."¹²⁵
- d. **Pursuit of Spiritual Disciplines by the laity** – pietism took root in an era when, if a believer wanted to pursue their devotion to God, their only option was to become a member of the clergy, a monk, or a nun. Spener and Francke sought "to develop a laity as dedicated to religious knowledge and prayer as the better sort of monks and nuns." Puritan and pietist teaching encouraged the use of a personal "quiet time" each morning for scripture reading, prayer, and spiritual journaling. Puritans added graces at meals, prayer with spouses, and household devotions at the evening meal.¹²⁶ It seems odd to our 21st century sensibilities that believers in the 16th century didn't realize or expect they could be 'spiritual' without being a priest, monk, or nun.
- e. **Charitable Good Works** – Spener encouraged a spirituality that went beyond "head knowledge" to a "heart knowledge" *with a social conscience*. This included works of mercy such as orphanages, hospitals, feeding of the poor, a home for widows, education of children, and missionary efforts to bring the gospel to those who haven't heard it. Francke's motto was "God's glory, neighbor's good."
- f. **Church history as an academic discipline** – the post-reformation Protestant seminaries and universities didn't include church history as an academic discipline because Luther and Calvin had thrown out the celebration of saint days and therefore the study and emulation of the saints. By making church history a respected theological discipline, the Pietists recaptured this tradition of learning about and being inspired by the "great cloud of witnesses" who have gone before us.¹²⁷

So far, so good. But where did pietism go wrong and why do many criticize it today? As an ethos, pietism and its sister, puritanism, are something that can't effectively be passed down. What starts as a warm, rich, experience of the Lord does not survive being passed down to the next generations. Inevitably, it becomes a set of rules and a strict, moralistic, and legalistic way of life.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ **The Lutheran Difference: An Explanation & Comparison of Christian Beliefs**, ed. Edward Engelbrecht, Concordia, (2014) pg 618

¹²⁵ Though not common in Lutheran parlance, "saved", "converted", and "conversion" are of paramount importance in Evangelicalism.

¹²⁶ **Exploring Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Reader**, ed. by Kenneth J. Collins. Baker Academic. (2000) pg 219

¹²⁷ Retrieved Online 12/3/24: <https://gratefultotheend.com/2009/11/13/lived-theology-how-and-why-christian-history-was-added-to-protestant-seminaries-curricula/>

¹²⁸ Retrieved online 10/4/24 <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2018/11/pietism-hans-nielsen-hauge/>

For instance, the pietistic Puritans had rules for everything: what kind of clothes could be worn or not worn, no use of cosmetics, no participation in theater (or culture in general), no dancing, no drinking alcohol, no card playing or any games of chance or gambling, no premarital sex, no married sex except for procreation, no celebration of holidays such as Christmas, and periods of required fasting and abstinence. There are several problems that develop in/from this moralistic and legalistic version of pietism:

- a. **A Sacred vs Secular Divide.** Because of pietism's emphasis on spiritual growth and cultivating spirituality and sanctification of the believer, it slips very easily into prioritizing the sacred/spiritual over the secular/natural. This inevitably leads to a mode of separating the sacred from the secular. It is assumed that God values the spiritual and sacred and thus the natural, material, and secular can be ignored. Thus, the totality of life is often ignored in pietistic thinking and results in dire consequences.¹²⁹
- b. **A Retreat from the World.** The assumption that God only values the spiritual and sacred also results in a retreat from the external and from "the world" – i.e. society and culture, and a retreat into inside of oneself. When expressed corporately, this retreat makes a community insular. Such a retreat from the world can even create an adversarial approach to people "in the world" – they're viewed as enemies in a grand battle between good and evil.¹³⁰ (It becomes very hard to love the world when they're viewed as enemies and a source of 'contamination.') In essence, it relocates the sacred to inside the individual or group, rather than looking outward to what Christ has already done.
- c. **"Do vs Done."** Instead of looking at and emphasizing what Christ has already done, the believer's identity tends to be in what the believer does or doesn't do, and assumes we please God by what we do (or don't do). So spirituality and identity become linked to *self-denial and asceticism*.
- d. **"Erosion of Assurance."** The pursuit of spiritual disciplines in the effort at self-denial and asceticism can sometimes become the measure of identity and spirituality. Because identity and spirituality are based on what we do or don't do, any assurance of salvation from God is weakened and eroded and leaves the believer always wondering, "*Have I done enough*" to be saved? The doubt associated with "*Have I done enough?*" inevitably leads to a bad cycle of doubling down on legalism and moralism to assure that 'enough' is done.¹³¹

IV. Conclusion:

It seems to me that controversies surrounding pietism boil down to semantics – mostly how do we define what salvation is, and the "*ordo salutis*" – that is, what is the order of salvation's steps? There are also distinctions to be drawn between salvation's **events** and salvation's **processes**. Unfortunately, when we turn to the New Testament for direction, we'll find that it "does not lay out a clear, unambiguous plan of salvation in the sense of a logical or chronological ordering of how personal salvation begins and unfolds and comes to completion."¹³² In fact,

¹²⁹ Retrieved online 10/3/24 at <https://thereligionthatstartedinahat.org/2021/11/14/n/>

¹³⁰ This becomes evident in a lot of ways, e.g. how we name our organizations: The Salvation Army or Campus Crusade for Christ or Billy Graham's "Evangelistic Crusades" or hymns like "Onward Christian Soldiers" or "Marching With The Heroes"

¹³¹ Well, honestly, the other option to doubling down on legalism is to give up entirely – hence why so many evangelicals have or are deconstructing their faith.

¹³² **The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity & Diversity** by Roger E. Olson. IVP (2002) pg. 277

*"The New Testament uses terms for various events and processes such as election, predestination, repentance, faith, justification, regeneration and sanctification. It describes gifts such as forgiveness of sins, reconciliation, union with Christ, peace with God, inner renewal, being filled with the Holy Spirit, enduement with power, and glorification. **Nowhere does it provide a neat, precise, orderly description of all these facets of whole salvation and how they take place or in what order they happen.**"*¹³³

Nevertheless, there is a general Protestant consensus on a few *ordo salutis* issues. First, all Protestants (except the heretical ones) believe that **justification** is a once-for-all, momentary event of being declared righteous by God that takes place when a person repents and trusts in Christ alone by faith and that it is a gift from God.¹³⁴ Please note the underlined words in the previous sentence. At the risk of over-simplifying theological positions, the perspective of those denominations who hold to **monergism** is that even the "repents and trusts" part of that sentence is an act and gift of God. Salvation is all and only God, even the parts we think we're doing. (The word monergism comes from the Greek words *mono* and *ergon*, which mean "one" and "to work" respectively. The word translates to "the work of one" which, in this case, is God alone.)¹³⁵ Those denominations who hold to the **synergism** perspective believe that "repents and trusts" is the necessary cooperative human part of the salvation project and process.¹³⁶ (Synergism is from the Greek 'syn' and 'ergon' which mean "together" and "work" and translates to "the work of two or more"). Those who hold to synergism are usually quick to clarify that "God is the superior partner and the human person being saved is the inferior but nevertheless crucial partner."¹³⁷ One might want to say something like "The human doesn't do it, but you can't do it without the human." It is clear – at least to me – that pietism holds to the synergism perspective. I could be wrong.

Another prominent component of salvation is **sanctification** – which is distinct from **justification**. Whereas justification is an event, sanctification is usually viewed as a process of growth in repentance and righteousness. Sanctification has to do with one's inward, spiritual condition (which was the pietist's primary concern). It is the process of being conformed inwardly to that righteousness already received as a gift by faith alone at conversion and justification. With regard to sanctification, the monergistic position is that sanctification is a process that the Holy Spirit works within the believer by grace and through various means, usually by receiving/participation in the sacraments. It's the Holy Spirit's work and she will accomplish it regardless of whether the human cooperates. On the other hand, the synergistic position with regard to sanctification is that the Holy Spirit initiates, prompts, guides, and inspires the human who must then cooperate with the Spirit in some way or action, in order for sanctification to be affected. It's clear that when framed in the lens of monergism vs synergism, the historical pietists and the pietistic impulse within Christianity in general are both **synergistic**. Nevertheless, when pietism is taken too far (– and speaking from personal experience –) it

¹³³ **The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity & Diversity** by Roger E. Olson. IVP (2002) pg. 277

¹³⁴ Catholic doctrine views justification as capable of *increasing* whereas Protestant doctrine views it as complete at the moment of conversion to Christ. See Olson above, pg. 283

¹³⁵ *Monergism* is most frequently associated with Calvinistic and Reformed theologies. According to Mr. Google, most Lutherans hold to monergism even though it's clear that the early Lutheran pietists were synergists.

¹³⁶ *Synergism* is most frequently associated with Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anabaptists, and is particularly prominent in those denominations influenced by Arminian theology – i.e. Wesleyan, Nazarene, & Methodist. And some Lutherans.

¹³⁷ **The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity & Diversity** by Roger E. Olson. IVP (2002) pg. 277

can become a slippery slope into a religious legalism that effectively erodes any sense of the believer's assurance of God's grace and unlimited love.

V. Discussion

- Had you heard of pietism before reading this ToT One-Pager? What was your impression of pietism?
- Do you hold to "justification as an event accomplished by God alone"? What about "sanctification"? Is it also by God alone? If so, do you believe you have any responsibility in the sanctification process?
- Have you experienced the "slippery slope" side of pietism? Did it change your view? Where do you stand now?
- Are there some spiritual disciplines a believer can engage in that are useful for sanctification and the personal experience of God but don't approach too close to the slippery slope of legalism?
- Is there a sanctification that the Holy Spirit does in/for us *and* as well a voluntary sanctification process that the believer can do – not to *earn* salvation, but as an *expression* of salvation or as a sincere desire simply to do things that please God?
- Would a voluntary sanctification be more palatable or effective if it consisted of *not doing something* rather than *doing something*? (e.g. Gal. 5:16 – "...do not gratify the lusts of the flesh.")
- How might one keep a *voluntary* sanctification from clouding the waters of the Holy Spirit's sanctification process?
- Is sanctification a "both/and" sort of deal – that is, God does his larger, superior, and necessary part and humans must do their smaller/inferior but *also necessary* part?

VI. Appendix

The New Testament seems to be all over the place with regard to monergism & synergism. For example, consider these passages (all ripped from their context) [all NRSVue]:

Eph. 2:8-9 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

Gal. 2:16 ...yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through the faith of Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by the faith of Christ and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law.

James 2: 14, 17, 18 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Surely that faith cannot save, can it? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith apart from works, and I by my works will show you faith.

Phil. 2:12-13 Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence but much more now in my absence, work on your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

I Tim. 6:18 They [*the rich*] are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share

Titus 3:5 he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

Heb. 13:21-22 Now may the God of peace... make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, as he works among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ

