THE ONLY CHRISTIAN CENTURY

**How Christianity Morphed From Jesus to the Mega-Church Down the Street**

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For Joyce

who has taught me to love

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## FOREWORD

**What Are You Eating?**

**Murray Weinstein**

11/10/2014

In The Garden there are two trees: the Tree of Life, and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

The Tree of Life is made out of, well, Life.  And what is Life?  In my experience Life is a stream made of the current moment presenting itself over and over again as the current moment.  It includes shape and form, color, aroma and sound, and touch. All of its modes are full of texture.  This texture is made of the finest most subtle substance.

The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is made of verbal commentary which moves like a second stream alongside the Stream of Life. This stream of verbal commentary judges, evaluates, applauds, condemns, measures, and rejects the stream of Life.

Divine Wisdom has suggested that we only eat from the Tree of Life.  For me this is an invitation to imbibe (pretty close to eating) the current moment as it presents itself over and over again as the current moment. To imbibe the current moment without eating from the Tree of Knowledge means to imbibe the Stream of Life without touching the stream of commentary which is so often, but not always, present alongside the Stream of Life—not touching the verbal thought to push it away, and not touching the verbal thought to hold it and use it as a tool to manipulate the Stream of Life.

In those moments when I imbibe the Stream of Life (eat from the Tree of Life) without touching (eating from) the Tree of Knowledge, I sense the possibility that I am ingesting That finest and subtlest substance which makes up everything in the current moment, and I sense the possibility that That substance is the Best Medicine I could ever take into my body.

And when I touch (eat from) the Tree of Knowledge, I sense the possibility that I am ingesting something toxic, something which leads to suffering.

And so lately as I move through the moments of my Life, and the moments of my Life move through Me, at the earliest sign of suffering I find myself asking the question: "What are you eating, Murray?"

## INTRODUCTION

Faithful Christians may find that this is a hard book to read. It was a hard book for me to write because it ventured into places in my heart which I had never dared go before. As I wrote, I asked questions innocently and honestly, and the answers which came are disturbing. You may find it likewise disturbing. Nonetheless, I invite you to join me in this difficult process of discovery.

Christians for twenty centuries have faithfully believed in Jesus, and sworn allegiance to him, and prayed to him, and studied the ancient documents about him. They carry scripture verses with them in their hearts and often allow these verses to govern how they live their daily lives. They live in conscious relationship with Jesus, and the possession of Jesus in their hearts is in itself satisfying. This is what Christians mean by *faith*, this cherished personal and interpersonal possession.

This possession exists and is held sacred in faithful hearts, beyond the purview of religion and churches, although it is almost always the case that Jesus comes into a person’s life through a Christian assembly. Nourished in Christian assemblies and churches, this faith of individual Christians has remained strong for twenty centuries, withstanding the ravages of time.

And yet, I will contend in this book that over these same centuries, Christianity itself has lost its way. Though the Christian churches have always proclaimed Jesus as the way to Life, they have lost the memory of the motive and the ways of Jesus. And so, when televangelists scandalize the “poor in spirit” way of Jesus by sporting diamond rings and by making worship into rock-concert spectacles, or when famous preachers stain their call to ministry by adultery and other acts considered to be immoral by Christians, or when priests, as the anointed servants of God, are discovered to be engaging in cruel and foul acts with children, with the knowledge and support of their bishops, thinking Christians—as well as all thoughtful people of good will—have to ask, How can these abuses of the Christian teachings be happening? What is going on in the Christian churches?

These are not quite the right questions, however. They are similar to parents who say, “You were such a nice boy when you were young. Why are you so wild now?” The parents’ question ignores that the child has changed over time. He was not the same person at two years old that he is at twenty-two. Human beings grow and develop as time passes, and so, over time, people change.

It is the same with communities, organizations, and societies. Over time, they grow from one form into another. And so, the more appropriate questions to ask about the Christian people and the Christian churches is, How did they grow from one kind of community into another, and what forces influenced those changes?

These questions highlight the lack of knowledge which most Christians have about the history and growth of Christianity. Christians generally know their Bible and have some familiarity with the social conditions in which Jesus lived in the first century. And they know their own churches and the way their churches live out the Christian life at the present time. But most Christians do not know the history in between, except perhaps for major historical moments in their denomination, such as the sixteenth century Reformation for mainline Protestants, or the twentieth century Second Vatican Council for Roman Catholics.

Those who *do* know the changes which the Christian church endured during those intervening two thousand years are not surprised by the condition of the Christian churches in our age, though they might find it unjustified in scripture and repulsive in fact. I’m referring in particular to the hardened politicization of the Christian churches in the United States at the current time, when Christians are being commandeered by their bishops and pastors into armies of voters, just as in the eleventh century they were commandeered by their political/religious leaders into armies of crusaders, sent forth to crush the “devil-allied” enemy. And I’m referring to the Catholic priest-predation scandal, which followed the discovery that the priest-clergy of the Catholic Church have knowingly and pitilessly carried on a generations-long program of child sexual abuse, which has been held secret among the involved priests, bishops, and popes, and which is just now—over the last twenty years—being revealed in its extent and numbers, and in its incomprehensible horror.

To bridge this gap in knowledge, I offer this book to all interested readers of any belief-set. It identifies the work that Jesus saw himself as doing, which came out of his own experience of ecstatic union with the God of Israel. It describes the legacy community which Jesus of Nazareth left behind him after his execution in about 35 CE, as well as the spiritual principles on which this community was apparently founded. Then, it traces the growth of that community from a small group of devotees of Jesus of Nazareth into the structured institution which became the imperial Roman Church of the Middle Ages (6th-16th centuries), endowed with immense power and bent by the corruption which such power brings. We watch how it treats those whom it sees as its enemies, particularly Jews and Muslims. We watch the Roman Church splinter into the many Christian churches of the Reformation, with whom it went to war, resulting in millions of deaths in the name of true Christianity. We watch as these same churches justified the enslavement and degradation of Black Africans and justified ignoring the plight of the Jews oppressed by the twentieth century Nazis. and most recently, slaughtered by the (Christian) White Supremacists of our own time.

In the light shed by this history, we try to understand the Christian churches of the present time. We try to fathom the willing participation of Christian people in the hate-filled politics of the current moment, and indeed for some, in the unwarranted violence against the innocent, such as this nation observed in the slaughter in the synagogue on Squirrel Hill. And whatever light is shed by this brief examination is offered to people of all belief-sets who are interested in the question. It is not necessary, nor even desirable perhaps, that readers of this work be Christians. The only prerequisite is intelligent curiosity.

But to professed Christians, this book is a summons to you individually and to the Christian churches to reflect on the Christian life, understanding the ways in which the followers of Jesus lived it in the years following Jesus’ death in the first century, and understanding the very different ways in which Christians have lived it in virtually all the Christian churches of Europe and the United States in the two thousand years following the first century. May this reflection on what Christianity has done to itself and to others in the past, despite its clearly conceived mission, lead to Church-wide repentance and rebirth.

One of the most notable examples in Christian history of how later leaders of the Church changed and re-focused the original beliefs of the first-century community of followers of Jesus occurred in the city of Nicaea in Turkey in the fourth century. Here is the story, looking first at the outcome and then at the origins of that outcome.

Devout church-going Christians now assert, as they have since Jesus preached in the first century, that they know Jesus. They study their Bibles and find there the image of Jesus. They worship sincerely and find Jesus in their hearts. And in our time, they believe the doctrines they hear preached to them week after week, by which they feel they understand Jesus.

Among these doctrines are:

* that Jesus is the divine “Son of God,” equal in every way to the Father. Jesus himself asserts that he is “son of God” in the Gospel of John.
* that Jesus is a unique blending of a complete human being and of the living God.
* that Jesus’ death on a cross was a sacrifice of his human life to God to earn God’s forgiveness of all human sin.
* that Jesus, once dead, returned to life with increased powers, showed himself alive to his disciples, and then ascended into heaven.
* that the human soul/spirit/personal identity lives on after death, and that after death every person will be judged on their faithfulness to God and sent either to heaven or to hell as the result of that judgment.
* that absolute reliance on Jesus is the fundamental necessity to achieve eternal salvation in heaven with God after death.
* that the unnamed “holy spirit of God” is the third member of the three-person Godhead.
* that this holy spirit fills Christians with love for Jesus and guides them on their journey of faith in Jesus into the endless afterlife of heaven.
* that this “good news” of Jesus must be preached throughout the world so that all humanity might be saved from hell and live the glorious life with God for all eternity. This is God’s eternal plan for universal salvation.

On this foundation, today’s Christians read selected Christian and Jewish writings, gathered together in the Christian *Bible*, as “the Word of God.” From their reading of the Bible, which they often consider to be “literally inerrant.”[[1]](#endnote-2) and perhaps of other early texts, today’s Christians produce understandings of the nature of God, of God’s plan for creation, of the need to spread the word of God to others, of how the End-Times will play out, and of how to live rightly so that they will “go to heaven” after death.

And finally, these Christians believe that they are living in a long tradition of universally true teachings begun by Jesus himself, of which the doctrines listed above are a part, and that this tradition, in one way or another, has preserved these teachings undefiled over the centuries.

In this book I take the position that the belief-statements listed above are not universally true nor a part of the belief-set of the original first-century Christian community. Rather, these statements, like all thought and writing, are embedded in the historical and cultural circumstances in which they were formulated. They must be recognized as responses to the issues of the times in which they were articulated. And the terms in which they were written—terms such as “son of God” and “eternal life”—must be read as carrying the meanings they had at the times that these statements were composed. That is, we must read these terms with the meanings that the ancients of the early centuries understood them to have, meanings which are often substantially different from the meanings we give to these terms.

In historical fact, few, if any, of these teachings were considered to be absolutely true by the earliest Christian communities. They were considered to be *possible* and even *desirable* ways to understand Jesus. But they were all basically irrelevant to the earliest members of the communities (except perhaps the fourth and eighth items in the list), for they had nothing to do with the *experience* of Jesus as these communities experienced him. Likewise, the Jesus who is portrayed in the earliest gospels would have had no interest in the truth-value of any of them, for he was interested solely in teaching others the Way to Life which he knew—through open-heartedness, to enter into enraptured union with God, and to meet the needs of those around him to the same extent he would meet his own needs.

And so, these “inerrant” beliefs were not the foundational beliefs of the first century Christian community. Rather, all but the sixth article are in fact doctrines constructed by the fourth century Council of Nicaea, a meeting of the leaders of the Christian church, none of whom had ever known Jesus, nor heard either him or his disciples preach. Yet, the political pressures of the era required that the Christian Church have a clear, unchangeable code of beliefs. And so, the bishops of the fourth century constructed the Nicene Creed, which contains most of the doctrines listed here, and which—with amendments made later—constitute the foundational Christian belief-set on which all mainline churches agree, even to this day.

This little book is not a scholarly examination of the history of Christian beliefs. It is far too brief and uncomplicated to hope to do that. Besides, many others who were or are more capable than I am have already put whole lives of research and labor into compiling and documenting this history. Rather, on the basis of my study of the dedicated work of some of them, and on the basis of my personal thought and experience as an ordained Roman Catholic deacon, I try here to sketch an overview of the changing beliefs of Western Christianity, from their inception in the teachings of Jesus, through the intervening years, and to their place in the cultural ebb and tide of our own era. What I found in writing this sketch, and what I offer to you, is the realization that the religion which Christian leaders and preachers are teaching now and have been teaching in various forms throughout the past twenty centuries is not about the message of Jesus which he himself lived and taught others how to live. Instead, that message of Jesus has been warped and twisted by these same leaders and preachers into justifications for every horrendous deed of Un-Love which the hardened human heart can conceive.

The facts of history show that Jesus taught a particular and focused set of teachings, but those teachings, within just a few decades, began to lose their central place in the belief-system of the Jesus-communities, as historical forces placed new pressures on those communities. So over a rather brief time, Christian communities and their leaders began to add to the fundamental teachings and to change them subtly into different teachings which proved to be more relevant and more applicable to the issues of the time.

In particular, during his lifetime, Jesus offered his disciples a set of teachings about how to find spiritual joy by entering into the presence of God, and social harmony by living their lives with love, compassion and generosity of spirit. These teachings nourished the original Jesus communities for forty years after his death. But by the end of the first century, his teachings had begun to be interpreted, re-framed, and expanded (“This is what Jesus would have said if he had faced these current situations”), so that a different set of teachings, which I am calling *Christian teachings*, began to arise and eventually to replace the original set of *Jesus-teachings*.

Some of the most important of these replacement teachings are the doctrinal statements I have listed above. Jesus, as the teacher of the way of love and compassion, had no interest in the contents of any of these doctrinal statements, since none of them contributes at all to the understanding of the *life* which he expected his followers to recognize in themselves and to lead in community with one another. Yet most of these doctrines found their way into the Nicene Creed, and thus became the sources of mainstream Christian belief.

Furthermore, these Christian teachings, as they were developed by successive generations of Christian leaders and thinkers, came to be used as the justifications for the Christians’ often cruel and morally reprehensible treatment, in ever varying ways, of people who held other-than-Christian beliefs, and of native peoples who were naïve to the slyly imposed Christian tyranny, and indeed of other Christians who belonged to different Christian denominations.

With each atrocity, the Christian churches over time moved farther and farther away from their origins in the life of Jesus, though throughout this inglorious history, the churches continued to proclaim their own versions of the Christian gospel and to cast themselves as living in the glories of the gospel promises, said to have been made by Jesus.

By the end of our survey, recognizing the ignominy of the Christian Church in its day-to-day, century-to-century life, Christian readers will be invited to confront the “overwhelming question” which our overview of the history of the Christian Church’s beliefs and actions raises.

A question ? . . . What is it? What is the question?

Oh, do not ask “What is it?” Let us go and make our visit--back to the beginning of the story, back to the first century—which, it turns out, was the only Christian century.

1.

The First Christian Century

### A. Jesus of Nazareth

The first century of our Common Era witnessed the ministry of an itinerant spiritual teacher and faith-healer known as Jesus of Nazareth (c. 4 BCE – c. 35 CE). That century heard his teachings in the villages and towns of Israel, and occasionally elsewhere, and gave birth to his legacy, namely, the communities dedicated to imitating the way of life which Jesus taught them and which he lived in their presence. This way of life meant, most particularly, that the members of these communities received and reverenced the gift of intimate union with the God of the Jews, whom he called “The Father,” treated with love and respect each person they encountered, and served the needs of those whom they found to be needy.

During his lifetime, Jesus chose ministry rather than scholarship. He knew by instinct that he had to be among the Jewish people, addressing their needs, rather than in a synagogue, studying the scriptures. He had a deep knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures. But his life experience taught him that although the Jewish Scriptures made clear the will of the Father in general for all his people, an individual person could know the *presence of God* only by living the life of openly sharing oneself with others. A person could find *oneness* with God simply by living with generosity of spirit.

Jesus’ passion was to teach the life of love in discourses and engaging stories as a way of inviting other Jews into oneness with Divinity, and also to exemplify the actual living out of the life of love by offering to the suffering and despised people around him the consolation of his ability as a faith healer. In this way, in what is generally believed to be a period of one to three years of ministry, Jesus attempted to pass on to his students and followers his vision of what the Father’s will is and of what it means to be in the presence of Divinity. He taught them that together, as a community of people dedicated to loving and serving each other and those others around them, they were *with* the Father and *in* the Father, as the Father’s love flowed out *through* them.

This was Jesus’ essential reduction of the complex cultic practices and moral demands made on the Jewish community by their scriptures, which they believed to be the word of YHWH, their God. Jesus taught that above all, the Father was to be glorified, and that this glorification was accomplished when the Jewish worshiper became a vessel of the Father’s love, which pours out from the worshiper onto the distressed and needy and despised, as it did from Jesus himself as he healed and consoled and spoke words of wisdom to them.

The vision that Jesus instilled in his legacy community was not a new teaching. Rather, it was the core teaching of the Law of Moses—that the intentions of the Supreme One in giving his people the precepts of the Law were that by faithfully obeying them, his people would come to live in peace and harmony within the Jewish community, and would individually recognize in themselves the freedom simply to live in the presence of God. When that free and devout community would come to be realized, Israel would become a brilliant example of living in the presence of YHWH to the rest of humankind, as the prophets had foretold.[[2]](#endnote-3)

### The Kingdom of God in This Present Life

Jesus taught that life in the immediate presence of God was obtainable as a gift from God, and that this mystical presence within God could be achieved during this present human life. This teaching was built on, but is substantially different from, the *expectation* of the coming of the Kingdom of God—a hope shared by many, many Jews in first-century Israel, who found themselves shackled by taxes and in their just freedom, oppressed by the armies of the Roman Imperial Government.

Let us examine the origins of these teachings, for doing this will give us some clarity about the social context in which Jesus was working.

The year 323 BCE saw the death of Alexander the Great, the Macedonian Greek general, who had conquered and brought Greek civilization to a large portion of the eastern Mediterranean area, as well as to the lands stretching eastward through the Levant and into India, and, of course, including Israel. Alexander had *Hellenized* these lands—*Hellas* being the Greek name for Greece and its culture. New ideas and institutions flowed from Greece into this huge region, among them Greek pantheism and public religious celebrations with their athletic contests, the Greek philosophical tradition, the Greek dualist view of human nature, the festival orgies, and the Greek *gymnasia,* which were established as training camps for the athletes who competed in the religious festivals, but which, by the first century CE, had become no more than male brothels for the rich.

Many Jews in Israel adopted these Greek ways to some extent or another, and integrated them more or less successfully into their Jewish way of life. Among those who were more inclined to compromise with their occupiers in this way was the rich and powerful sect of the Sadducees—the priestly class who oversaw the Jerusalem Temple, which had been renovated and expanded in the first century CE by the king, Herod the Great, into a huge, ornate, and very beautiful multi-leveled building, renowned throughout the region. Jews who adopted or at least imitated this mixed Greco-Jewish culture came to be called *Hellenizers*.

Jewish traditionalists, called *Judaizers*, objected to the Hellenistic life and condemned it for its hedonism and thus, its violation of the Law of God. These conservative Jewish nationalists grew strident in their resistance to the Greek way of life and to the overlordship of the Hellenized Seleucid dynasty of kings, who ruled the lands of the Levant, including Israel, after Alexander died. Inevitably, rebellion broke out and battles ensued. The Jewish generals (called, Hasmoneans, a family name), using the unfamiliar tactic of guerilla warfare, defeated the Seleucid king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes. At his defeat, Israel became—in its own eyes—an independent nation, and was allowed to be so by both superpowers of the time, Rome and Ptolemaic Egypt. Israel’s acquisition of relative independence was called the Maccabean Revolt (167-160 BCE.) It resulted in a dynasty of Hasmonean rulers, who led the independent Israel for 100 years, until the Romans occupied Israel in 63 BCE.

 During this period of Jewish independence, a new world-view emerged among the traditionalist Jews of Israel, and was broadcast most effectively by the sect of the Pharisees—a group of laymen (non-priests) who studied the Jewish scriptures from a conservative viewpoint, and then took it upon themselves to insist that every Jew imitate them in observing the Law to the letter. This new view was this: Just as Israel had recently overthrown its foreign oppressors by the help of God, they believed that God would finally send them at some point in time a *Messiah*—that is, one appointed by God to accomplish a certain task. The task of this expected Messiah was that he would lead the Jews to the final and lasting conquest of all their enemies. Then all Israel would live out fully the commands of God in the Law, and peace and harmonious life would descend upon the Jewish nation, which would be blessed with abundance and prosperity. The “kingdom of Heaven” would finally be joined with the earth. The intentions of God’s heart would finally be fulfilled for his people.

This “messianic movement” offered hope to the Jews of Israel in the first century BCE and in the first century of our Common Era, oppressed as they were first by Alexander’s Greeks, then by the Seleucids, and then by the Roman Imperial power. This Jewish messianic expectation strengthened Jewish nationalism. It inspired Jewish hope for relief from Roman taxes and persecution. It continually energized Jewish resistance activities and rebellion. It foresaw the coming of the new age of the Law of God, which the Jewish messianists called “the kingdom of Heaven,” and the punishment of God’s enemies in the new Apocalyptic style of literature, which bolstered this hope. And it prompted a constant watchfulness among the Jews of Israel for the appearance of this Messiah who would save them, hopeful that the renewed nation of Israel—the “Kingdom of God” and “Paradise”—would reveal itself soon in their midst.

This ***messianism*** penetrated the lives of many of the Jews of Jesus’ time. It was in their shared thoughts and in the air they breathed. It was full of visions of Hasmonean conquest, to balance their experience of defeat and powerlessness at the hands of the Romans.

Jesus seems to have absorbed into his world view much of this Jewish messianism, and especially its approach to human nature and to the coming of the time when the Law of Moses would settle on the earth, bringing with it peace and prosperity. He understood, as did other Jews, that the Law was the Will of God for the good of the people of God. He recognized that those who followed the Law were serene in their lives of devotion, regardless of external circumstances, whereas those who disregarded the Law were beset by troubles which distracted them from God. For example, this is the point of Mt. 6:25-33, the well-known “birds of the air” passage. Jesus taught his fellow Jews to relax into their devotion, their righteousness, and to accept what comes to them. For, those who worry and who attempt to change their situation accomplish nothing.

Jesus understood that the central activity in human life was devotion to God, just as the credal prayer of Israel, the *Shemah*, commanded: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” (Mk. 12:29.) This understanding of the fundamental purpose of human life meant for Jesus that devotion to God is not an action to be performed, but an interior state of heart. Repeatedly, he taught that the disposition of the heart toward the goodness of God was to be preferred to outward performances of worship activities. Thus, for example, he proclaimed prophetically, “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.” (Mt. 12:7.) That is, God’s desire is the devout heart, not the external actions of worship, which may or may not be performed genuinely.[[3]](#endnote-4)

Jesus made this distinction between inauthentic worship and interior devotion clear in a passage from Matthew 15. His opponents attacked his disciples for ignoring the tradition of washing one’s hands before eating the food which God provided, as a sign of purification and respect for God’s gift. Jesus counter-attacked by criticizing this same tradition for allowing the wealthy to dedicate their money to God and thus to avoid having to support their own parents in their parents’ old age. In other words, these people used God as an excuse for leaving their parents destitute. This abuse of devotion to God sent Jesus into a fury, in which Jesus made their duplicity clear:

 You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said:

 “This people honors me with their lips,

 But their heart is far from me;

 In vain do they worship me,

 Teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.” (15:7-9.)

Then Jesus went on to clarify his understanding of interior devotion:

Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and so passes on? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man. (15:16-20.)[[4]](#endnote-5)

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This devotional interiority which Jesus taught was the “container,” if you will, or the “gateway,” of Jesus’ mystical life in union with the Father. For union with the Father was for him the “substance” which is contained in interior devotion. It was the “intimate knowledge” which comes through covenant relationship. That is, Jesus allowed his whole being to open to the Father and subsequently experienced living in and of the Father: no subject and object, no observed and observer, no speaking and no listening, no Father and Son. What was, was one, timeless, silent, immediate, gentle, completely enveloping.

Jesus, as a character in the four gospel narratives, expressed this experience of union in various ways. Most frequently, he referred to union with the Father as “the kingdom of God.” In calling the experience of union by this title, Jesus borrowed the Jewish messianic expectation of the kingdom of Heaven as the perfected world living the Law after the Messiah defeated all the foes of God. And by stressing the interiorization of this unifying experience, Jesus made the kingdom of God not a hope for the future, but an event in the present.

And so, he says in another circumstance, “Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” (Mk. 10:14-15. A partial parallel is Mt.19:13-14.)

Consider this passage from Mark 10 in light of the following passage from Matthew 18, to perceive the mystical implications of entering the kingdom of God as humbly as a child: “See that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven.” (Mt 18:10.) The image that Jesus depicts here is that the spirit of God, which chooses to settle on the heart of the humble devotee, brings the devotee’s enraptured heart into mystic union with God.

Some other expressions of union are: “[N]o one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him..” (Mt. 11:27); “And he took a child, and put him in the midst of them; and taking him in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.’” (Mk 9:36-37), where Jesus identifies himself in terms of his union with the Father; and most simply, “I and the Father are one.” (Jn 10:30.)

Finally, we turn to the story of Simon Peter and Cornelius in *The Acts of the Apostles*, Chapter 10—a story about the inversion of the Jesus-community’s expectations of the ways of God, but nonetheless, a depiction of the Jesus-community’s experience of mystical union with God after the death of Jesus. Here is the story.

Immediately after Jesus’ execution, Simon Peter became the uncontested spokesperson for Jesus’ legacy community in Jerusalem. (See Acts 4.) In the capacity of leader, then, Peter was called to Joppa, a city on the Mediterranean coast of Israel, for the funeral of a member of the community there. While Peter was in Joppa, the regional centurion, Cornelius, who lived in Caesarea Marittima, a Roman port city 40 miles north of Joppa, was having a vision from God. Cornelius, outwardly a Roman polytheist, had a reputation in the local Jewish community as a kind and generous man who cared for the poor liberally, and who was himself a “God-fearer,” a Gentile who knew about, honored and worshiped the God of Abraham, and who was respectful of the Jewish social and religious order.

The experience of Cornelius happened like this. Cornelius, though neither a Jew nor a member of the Jesus-community, experienced the mystical presence of God, in which he was prompted to feel that he had found favor with God for his virtue, and which urged him to summon Peter from Joppa. Cornelius immediately dispatched a delegation to Joppa, with orders to locate Peter and to call him to the house of Cornelius in Caesarea Marittima.

The next day, near midday, Peter went up on the rooftop of his host’s house in Joppa and prayed, as was the usual practice. He fell into a trance, which brought him into union with God, who gave him a prophetic vision. In this vision, the heavens opened and a very large sheet of cloth, filled, and with the four ends drawn together at the middle, descended through the opening. The sheet was filled with unclean animals—that is, animal types which Jews were forbidden to eat by the kosher regulations in the Law of Moses. A voice ordered him to kill and eat the unclean food. He refused, on the basis of his obedience to the kosher laws. Three times the voice gave the order, and three times Peter refused. Then the vision ended.

Just as Peter was re-orienting to the physical world and pondering this perplexing vision, the men of Cornelius arrived, asking for Peter. Again, Peter sensed the presence of the spirit of God, which prompted him to accompany Cornelius’s men. Peter followed this impulse.

Two days later, Peter arrived at the home of Cornelius, who had gathered his family and friends to greet Peter and his companions. Cornelius prostrated himself before Peter, his spiritual master, but Peter called him to stand up, insisting that he (Peter) was just a man. Then Peter said, in effect, to the assembly, “It’s unlawful for a Jew to be in a Gentile’s house, but God has shown me that no one is unclean. And so I willingly come to you.” In this speech, Peter rightly interpreted the mystical vision that he had received. He understood that the kosher laws were not themselves the issue, but that the social stratification of God’s nation, especially when it resulted in the marginalization or enemization of people, **was** the issue. In his moment of union with God, the truth came clear to him.

Cornelius then asked Peter to preach the way of Jesus to them all. Peter obliged, saying that he saw clearly now that God shows no partiality to Gentile or Jew, but accepts anyone who worships God in their hearts and does good for others. (10:34-35.) Peter proclaimed Jesus and asserted that “God was with him” (v. 38), which I read as an assertion that Jesus taught and acted from within the mystical presence of God. Shortly afterward, Peter asserted Jesus’ resurrection from death.

While Peter was speaking, the group of Gentiles fell into mystical identification with the spirit of God, speaking in glossolalia and extolling God. They seemed clearly to be in the presence of Divinity. This baffled the Jesus-people in the room because they had never before seen such power given to uncircumcised and unbaptized people in the same way as it had been given to the companions of Peter. So Peter ordered that Cornelius and his household be baptized—the first Gentiles to enter the Jesus-community.

This is a fascinating story for the wonders it depicts, and especially for the image of the power of God unleashed unpredictably in a room full of people who were absolutely open to receiving such gifts without in the least trying to force them to occur.

In this story we see clearly the active, God-perceiving sustenance which nourished the lives of the members of the earliest Jesus-communities. These experiences appear to have been understood by the Jesus-people who were present as normal occurrences in their communal life. What surprised them was that these experiences of mystical presence were given to men and women who were neither Jews nor yet baptized as Jesus-people.

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The claim that I am making here—that Jesus taught the here-and-now mystical union with the Supreme One, and offered this same experience to his disciples, to be the primary focus of their hearts—advances an alternative to the two weak approaches to the term *Kingdom of God* which Christian preachers have taught for two millennia, namely, that that term refers to (1) the earthly Christian community, and (2) the experience of reward “at the banquet table of the Lord” and in the presence of the Most High God after death for the just and righteous—the hope of Christians. (This experience of Paradise was considered by some to be “eternal,” either immediately after death or following a period of “sleep,” from which the devout soul was to be awakened at the coming of the Kingdom, brought when Jesus returned to earth in glory. By others—“Millennialists”—the Paradise experience was to be realized for a period of one thousand years at some point in the restoration of the heavenly kingdom, as God extends his mercy and invitation to sinners one last time.)

As for the claim that the term refers to the earthly Christian community, I have no doubt that Jesus had no intention of restricting access to the experience of union with the Father to selected disciples. He said in effect, *Whoever* has ears, let him or her hear. (See Mt. 13:9.) Jesus saw his mission as to preach the way of interior devotion, and thus to nurture those who sought that way in order to grow and mature in interiority. And then, when the time was right, God would guide them to enter into the experience of union. In other words, Jesus’ job was to announce that interior union was there for them, and to encourage them to open themselves to this growth. The rest of the process was God’s job.

It follows from this that Jesus may have envisioned his legacy community as experiencing together, as a community, the here-and-now union with the Father. Nowhere does Jesus suggest that the Kingdom of Heaven experience was intended as a solely individual experience. He may very well have expected his disciples in the legacy community to experience group-inclusive union in the heart of the Father—something like a mystical symphony of different spiritualities, uniting in a divine harmony. We will never know what that experience might have entailed, I suppose, because the legacy community allowed itself to be drawn in a different direction, into worldly organizational and constitutional issues, as we will discuss in the next sections of this chapter.

When we turn to the thirteenth chapter of Matthew’s gospel, we find seven parables, which we might assume to be authentic Jesus-sayings, if only because they were so poorly understood by the (later?) writers of the flaccid and lifeless interpretations attached to them.

We notice overall that all but one of the seven parables, namely, the parable of the sower—as well as their unenlightened interpretations—are composed in the present tense—not in the future tense.[[5]](#endnote-6) This means that we can eliminate right away the possibility that these parables taught about what was believed to be the future eternal afterlife for the just and righteous—what the Messianic Jews called Heaven. If these stories *were* about the afterlife, the writer would have to have said, “The kingdom of heaven will be like a grain of mustard seed. . .”

Since these parables are not about the blissful heavenly future which Christians anticipated, we should expect them to be about the earthly Christian community. And it appears that they are, although we will be careful to notice that the active, life-giving impulse of the original Jesus-community has shrunken and faded by the last decade or two of the first century, when the interpretations of these stories were written. What gave vitality to the early Jesus-community, namely, the *experience* of the presence of God, by the end of the century was dimming and being replaced by the *hope*, pale in comparison, of a future joy in the presence of God after death. And so, here in Matthew 13, we will see in these parables the sparkle of Jesus’ original stories muddied by drudgerous, one-for-one allegorical interpretations, where each item in the story represents a character in the Christ the Conqueror-Last Judgment scenario, which became the only hope of the reviled and ill-treated Christians at century’s end.

 The first of these parables is not a “Kingdom of Heaven” parable at all. It is a parable about the community life at the end of the first century. In fact, this “parable of the sower” is interpreted as little more than an introductory guide for preachers, Preachers’ Psych 101, teaching Christian evangelizers what reactions to expect to their preaching—with a final warning that they too should be receivers of the Word that they preach.

 This parable is quite possibly authentic although the explanation (vv. 18-23) is clearly not, since the writer refers to the era of persecutions which beset the Christian communities at least thirty years after the death of Jesus.

We also notice that the parable of the sower is the first of four “growth” stories in this chapter. Please recall that individual spiritual growth was a hallmark of Jesus’ way: When a person heard the invitation to union with God, he or she chose to accept it or to reject it. If the disciple chose to go on, then he or she simply had to wait openly for the experience to come. This waiting time was not empty. In it occurred a process of spiritual growth, during which the person came to make his or her desire for union with God all the more permanent and watched expectantly for any hint of growth in depth of understanding and in generosity of spirit.

And so, we might expect that this is the authentic point of the story. The best way, Jesus presumably said, is to find the good soil of your heart and to let grow there what God gives you, until you have grown to be tall and sturdy. The overarching idea is simply to let spiritual growth happen, for, in Jesus’ understanding, spiritual growth is at least as much passively receptive as it is aggressively active.

The same is true for the second parable, the parable of the weeds among the wheat. Assuming that this story is authentic, Jesus was saying what we all know: that there is good in the world, as well as evil. God has made it so, here via an “enemy.” Granting this, the issue is to let everything grow as it is destined to do. For the seekers after the Way of Jesus, this meant—as in the preceding parable—that one had to simply let God grow the person in his or her destined direction—the evil along with the good. In other words, there was no one to be but yourself, as God had destined you. So let the growth happen, as it must happen. Become what you are to be.

These points of here-and-now spirituality are missed in the lifeless interpretations that are supplied. The interpretation of the parable of the sower (13:18-23) tells the already tired story of punishment of the faithless which the later faithful had to tell one another in order to build up their own worthiness. The unworthy were to be left behind in order to highlight the glory of the worthy.

Likewise with the parable of the weeds and the wheat. The good were allowed to grow among the evil, and they were separated out for reward only at the end, when the evil were burned to cinders. Again, I believe, we have what is interpreted to be a parable of needed self-vindication—a communal “ego boost.”

Then the organizational grandstanding begins. The parable of the mustard seed hails the quick growth of Christianity and the wide reach of its communities. Likewise, the parable of the leaven tells the story of the growth of the Christian community from its humble beginnings to its current size.

The next three parables—the “kingdom parables”—are a cause for disappointment. For there is much of Jesus in the first two, but they have all been twisted into good-news reports. Jesus would have agreed that the mystical union with the Father is worth more than any other thing, so get it and then give everything you have to keep it. Give your whole self to it alone.

That much is Jesus, in both the treasure in a field parable and the fine pearl parable. But in view of the net of fish parable which follows these two, the two value parables become stories of “look how valuable what we have is.” The stories are the Christians again clapping themselves on their own backs, set in the context of the end-times angels who toss out as carelessly as chewing gum wrappers those human beings who do not qualify for heaven. Again, the end-times vision of conquest of the unworthy prevails over what I interpret as Jesus’ invitation to the unworthy to prepare themselves here and now to experience the presence of God—an invitation missed, and misunderstood, by the more practical community members of the late first and early second centuries.

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These stories and Jesus’ other words, as well as the force of his example, sustained these original “Jesus people,” who were his disciples and disciples of his disciples, for forty years after his death in their attempt to be faithful in their hearts and in their actions to the way of life he had taught them. But as that time went on, strong historical forces were playing out in the Jewish-Roman society in which Jesus’ legacy community was set, and these forces, together with other impulses, generated from within the community itself, distorted Jesus’ original community, endowed it with an altered purpose and destiny, and thereby changed it from a community dedicated to generosity and concern for others into something else—the *Christian Church*.

And so, this first century witnessed the realization of Jesus’ teachings in the early *Jesus-communities* which lived on after him as his legacy. And this first century also saw the distortion and re-direction of these communities into “Christian” communities which were characterized by attitudes, beliefs, and actions quite different from the mindset of the earlier Jesus-communities, as well as by a completely different constituency. In fact, these changes signaled the virtual disappearance of the Jewish Jesus-communities and their replacement by the Gentile Christian Church.

As the title of this work suggests, then, in all history, Jesus’ teachings and his legacy lived and flowered in just a brief forty-year span of time. Then from it was born the institutional Christian Church, which proved to be far more enduring but far less committed to, and less capable of, living out the authentic teachings of Jesus.

For these reasons, then, we can justly divide the history of Jesus’ teachings into two major segments: the *Jesus Era* teachings, and the later *Christian Era* teachings. It is important to make this distinction because over the centuries of the Christian era, the Christian churches have led their followers—or perhaps better, have failed to lead their followers correctly—so that even the Christian churches of today, and the preachers in these churches, propound as right Christian action the most abominable treatment of their fellow human beings, in disregard of the second great command of Jesus: “Love your neighbors as you love yourselves.” We will observe this to be the case in virtually every era of Christian Church history, up to and including the current era of politicized Christian churches.

Let us move on more deeply into the first century, to observe Jesus’ legacy community as it began to recognize itself and to wonder what it was and where it would go from there.

## B. The Jesus Era

Let us examine the Jesus Era more fully to discover how the genuine teachings of Jesus survived after his death and how they were slowly distorted. Scholars of this era will remind us to keep in mind that Jesus, throughout his life, was a faithful, practicing Jew, even to the last days of his life. And so, it is impossible that Jesus saw his mission as to begin a new religion. Rather, all his efforts were expended on restoring—revitalizing—Judaism. And his scope of vision was restricted to the nation of Israel, for two reasons: first, because the soil of Israel was the motherland of the Jewish religion; and more importantly, because the current condition of the Jewish religion, as he saw it practiced in Israel during his time, was far from spiritually adequate, and its most influential and most vocal practitioners were far from the righteousness that they proclaimed.

In response, as an army of one, like the many Jewish prophets before him, Jesus set out to refresh the people’s desire for an authentic Jewish religion. He wanted to restore the “spirit” of the Mosaic Law (*Torah*), which was centered, first, simply on worthy worship of the God of the Jewish nation, YHWH, the One who was believed to be peerless and inexplicable, and second, on justice and respect for the human dignity of all people, Jewish and Gentile.[[6]](#endnote-7) He condemned the emphasis in his time on adherence to empty ritual words and gestures. He condemned obedience to the *words* of the commands of Torah and of the many traditions that had built up around it, when this obedience was not accompanied by a corresponding dedication of *heart*. He condemned the religious leaders for making a mockery of their positions before YHWH by their greed and vanity, and by their ignorance of real spiritual values. In brief, he desired conversion of every Jewish heart to YHWH.

Jesus respected this conception of Judaism immensely, for in it he found a way into the *presence* of YHWH. His personal way was through prayer—not the repeating of temple-prayers or psalms or, indeed, of any words at all. Jesus did not seem to pray “outwardly” toward a Father who was distant from him, except when, as in Jn. 17, he engaged in group prayer as a way of teaching. Rather, he seems to have prayed personally to The Father with whom he was intimately conjoined. His personal prayer seems always to have begun in a place within him of union with The Father.

 Jesus seems to have prayed in three ways: healing prayer, enthusiastic prayer “in tongues,” and meditative prayer.

 Most often, the gospels tell us simply that Jesus went off by himself to pray, but the nature or manner of his prayer is not mentioned. (See Mark 1:35, for example.) However, when he healed, the gospels sometimes portray Jesus in the act of personal prayer—that is, communicating in words or gestures appropriate to the moment directly with The Father, or speaking prophetically (in the voice of God) the commands of God which are required by the situation.

The gospel of Mark begins immediately with the ministry of Jesus and is a rich source of examples of Jesus’ various ways of praying. So we will begin by examining several episodes from the opening of Mark’s gospel.

In Mk 1:21, Jesus was confronted by a demon or unclean spirit which had enthralled its victim, a man. The spirit taunted Jesus in the man’s voice. Jesus responded sharply and authoritatively, giving the demon commands: “Be silent, and come out of him!” In spite, the demon convulsed the man and then obeyed Jesus’ command and left the man.

This is an example of Jesus’ typical way of handling unclean spirits. He gave them authoritative commands against which they were powerless. This is best understood, I think, as Jesus acting prophetically. Feeling filled with the spirit of God, he spoke prophetically the authoritative words of The Father, and it was done.

Immediately afterward, he entered the house of Simon and his brother, Andrew, and found Simon’s mother-in-law abed, stricken with a fever. Anyone in Jesus’ time would have believed that the fever was caused by a malicious spirit, because literally everything was the result of the action of some spirit or god who had authority over that situation. So what Jesus found was another person victimized by an unclean spirit. His healing response was wordless. He simply went (gently) to her side and offered her his hand. She took it (perhaps weakly), and he guided her up until she was standing, feverless.[[7]](#endnote-8)

In this same vein, the dialogue in Mk 1:40-45 is interesting because unless we understand who is speaking to whom, the story is confused and portrays Jesus as strikingly gruff. A man suffering from leprosy came to Jesus, asking to be healed, saying, “If you will, you can make me clean.”. Bear in mind that Jesus understood the man’s condition to be the work of an evil spirit. Jesus responded kindly, “I will; be clean.” Here, Jesus’ first words were directed to the stricken man. Jesus told him that he was glad to comply with the man’s humble request, which deferred to Jesus’ discretion. But Jesus’ second words, “be clean,” were directed not *to* the man, but *through* the man to the spirit of disease which Jesus believed to be afflicting him. Here again, we have another case of Jesus speaking prophetically to the spirit, which obeyed and left its victim.

Then verse 43 reports that Jesus “sternly charged him and sent him away at once.” To whom was Jesus speaking here? Is this verse referring to the newly cleansed man? Why would Jesus speak to him “sternly”? Did the man do something to offend? Or was Jesus making an unwarranted assumption that the man would return home and spread the news that he had been healed by the Messiah? There’s nothing to lead Jesus to assume that.

Imagine the position that this poor man found himself in. Jesus healed him in kindness one moment, and one moment later, Jesus was making up accusations against him! Is this really Jesus?

The correct reading of this passage can only be that the “him” refers to the demon of disease. In such a more rational reading, Jesus first commanded, “Be clean.” That is, “Spirit, come out of the man so that he will no longer be stained by your uncleanness.” Then Jesus *rebuked* the spirit sternly and sent it away. And *then*, Jesus returned his attention to the man and said peacefully to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone.” Here Jesus, quite in character, simply asked the man not to reveal Jesus’ powers to others.[[8]](#endnote-9)

As for Jesus’ personal prayer to The Father, in the form of his praying in tongues, and of his meditative prayer, evidence is thin in the gospels for identifying how Jesus prayed in these ways, but it is not entirely lacking. And what there is in the gospels makes some tantalizing suggestions.

Let us consider Luke 10:1-24. In the preceding chapters (6-9) of Luke’s gospel, Jesus had been conducting his healing and teaching ministry in Galilee with a good deal of success, especially after the feeding of the five thousand (9:10-17.) So, in order to increase the number of people who might come to hear him, he sent out 35 teams of two men each, as advance men to every town he intended to visit. He gave the teams certain instructions about how to behave and also delegated to them the power to heal prophetically. Then he sent them on their way.

In verse 17, the seventy advance men return to Jesus, exuberant because they were able to heal people in Jesus’ name by casting out the afflicting demons, just as he had told them to do. Jesus joined them in their exuberance and excitedly said, in effect, “Yes, I know! I saw Satan fall from the sky! So I knew that the power I had given you was working! But don’t rejoice in your mastery of demons. That’s not the point. The point is that you are in the presence of God and his power is working through you! You are truly children of God!”

Then Luke says that during their rejoicing, Jesus “rejoiced *in the Holy Spirit* and said . . . .” (10:21; the verb here means literally “rejoiced exceedingly.”) What do the Christian writers mean by “rejoicing in the Holy Spirit”? They mean praying in tongues, a characteristic which marked out the Christians from most other Mediterranean religious adherents. Luke uses similar wording in describing the falling of the holy spirit on Cornelius and his household in Acts 10:44-47.[[9]](#endnote-10)

The passage above from the tenth chapter of Luke clearly seems to depict Jesus breaking into prayer in tongues, extolling The Father, though Luke does not quote this glossolalia but offers his readers an interpretation of it.

Having finished his praying in tongues, which was apparently quite audible and public, Jesus turns to his disciples and privately tells them to appreciate their having been called into the presence of The Father.

As for Jesus’ meditative prayer, it is not surprising that the gospels give us so little since this type of prayer is silent. We hear Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount extolling God’s provision for all creatures (Mt.6:25-33.) In these words, among many others, we understand that for Jesus, God was not a remote deity. Rather, God’s presence *was* everything, everywhere.

And that brings to our minds the *Way of Silence*, which has been practiced since before time by those of every religion who yearn to be with the Supreme One, by whatever name they call the Supreme One. In this form of prayer, one opens oneself to the silencing of all the interior voices within oneself. When that silence comes, it brings with it the recognition of the immediacy of God as “the stuff of creation.” Whatever creation is—whatever created things are—is God. God manifests himself (or herself, or itself) as all the variety of creation. There is nothing that is not God. And when one recognizes that everything is God, personal isolation disappears. There is no sense of being separated from any other entity—no sense of being the observer of a thing you are not interacting with. Everything interacts with everything else, because everything is God.

Entering that state of union with God in the silence of one’s heart is what Jesus meant by *praying*. And prayer was the way one worshipped God, who is The One—the interactive unity of all things.

That state of prayer in silence of heart and unity with God is what Jesus meant when he taught, “Love God with all your heart, with all your will, with all your mind, with all your being.” God is the only One worthy of such dedication.

Second only to the worship of God, in Jesus’ mind, was caring love for the people around you, for your “neighbor.” This is a constant theme throughout the four gospels, from his first two compassionate healings in Mark (1:21-26; 1:29-31) to his final command in John’s account of Jesus’ Last Supper: “This I command you, to love one another” (15:17.)

These two “great” commands of Jesus—to love God, and to love those in your environment—are not Jesus’ invention. They come directly from Torah. The command to love God recalls to the devout Jewish mind the foremost scriptural expression of devotion to God, the *Shema*, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut. 6:4.)

The command to love one another is taken from Leviticus: “You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (19:18.) Jesus uses only the final clause of this command in his teaching: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mk. 12:31.)

This command is surely the more difficult of the two to conform oneself with, though praying meditatively as Jesus did makes openness to everyone else’s humanity clearer and more achievable.

The final two words of this command, “as yourself,” are often overlooked. But they are important in showing the extent to which Jesus expects his disciples to go: *just as you take care of your own needs*, take care of the needs of those around you—no less than that. They are not strangers, the people around you; they are neighbors to you, people you know and have always known. – In Jesus’ time, there was little upward social mobility. The common people didn’t “move into a larger place” as we do when we land that prestigious job or get a promotion. Most first-century families lived in the same house or on the same land for generations. Sons built their own family homes near the homes of their fathers and their brothers.

And so, for generations, especially in times of oppression, such as the Roman Occupation of Israel in Jesus’ time, neighbors shared their life experiences closely with each other. They celebrated weddings, births, and deaths together. They resisted the oppressors together. And they certainly feuded with one another. Neighbors were extended family; they were one’s brothers and sisters, as it were. That was especially true for Jews living in the out-lands, such as Galilee. So when Jesus mentions “neighbors,” he’s not talking about “the people down the street whom I hardly know.” He’s talking about “Ben, my friend, whom I grew up with, and who has been in my life since before I can remember.” In that way, Jews shared a “brotherly” familiarity, a familial bond, with one another—and often still do.

It is in that social context that Jesus teaches his two great commandments. The Jews who heard him were familiar with the scriptures he was quoting. Giving themselves to God, in the ways the Pharisees taught, they saw as no problem. The difficult part was loving your brother, who, like sibling brothers, can easily earn your scorn, ire, vengeance, even hatred. In teaching that the second most important thing, after loving God, is to take care of the needs of those around you with the same care with which you care for yourself, Jesus was simply making clear what the Jews he taught already knew. And that is that “we are an oppressed people; we should not oppress each other. Rather, we should join together as a family to resist the oppression.” And for Jesus, who saw himself as a religious reformer, that oppression was the teachers’ misrepresentation of the word of God, the hypocrisy of the Jewish religious leaders, and the triviality of the approaches to God offered by the Pharisees.

To Jesus, the answer to the question, “What does God want us to do?”, is to be found in the notion of *neighbor*, as he teaches in his presentation of the two great commandments, and consummately, in his parable of the Caring Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37.) Jesus’ understanding is that people and their needs come first, the commandments of Torah come second. And so, for example, Jesus refuses the priests’ demand that he agree to the stoning to death of the woman caught in the act of adultery, as the Law prescribed (Jn. 8:2-11.). Rather, Jesus treats the woman respectfully as a weak human being, and he causes her condemners to retreat by pointing toward their own weak humanity.

This impulse to care for one’s neighbors is the driving force behind Jesus forming his close followers into a community of love. This community of love, if any part of the early chapters of Luke’s idealized *Acts of the Apostles* is to be believed, persisted after Jesus’ execution, and its members lived out the second great commandment by giving from their need in order lovingly to meet the needs of those around them.

What propelled these people to act in such generous and compassionate ways?[[10]](#endnote-11) There are at least three reasons. First, they *knew* Jesus. Many of them had followed Jesus in his company, and they had heard his teachings and seen the examples of compassion in his ministry. But more importantly, they believed that Jesus was **resurrected** from death and that his spirit drew them together to perform acts of generosity. That is, they felt the presence of Jesus among them as they went about their works of generosity of spirit.

Second, they knew themselves to be members of communities founded by—and in the early days of the communities, actually led by—members of the inner circle of Jesus himself. These were people who had been trained by Jesus in the way of life he taught (though, as we will see, they often misunderstood and/or embellished what they had learned.) They were just, decent, and open-hearted people. And they possessed, according to the scriptural accounts, the healing power which Jesus possessed. These communities, then, were living memorials to Jesus’ own ministry of compassion.

And third, the members of these communities knew themselves to comprise “the body of the Messiah.” They believed that Jesus was the Messiah, who had been promised by God in the Jewish scriptures to free Israel from its bondage and to enter into a new covenant with God. And as I said above, Jesus taught repeatedly that the source of the oppression he was opposing was the priests, the scribes, and the Pharisees—the whole Jewish religious establishment of his time.

These religious leaders exemplified superficial religion, Jesus taught. They were conscientious that every Jew fulfill every obligation of Torah and of the customs that had grown up around Torah. But they ignored, even countermanded, the *spirit* of Torah—the spirit of compassion for one’s neighbor, and of willingness to relieve the burdens of those in need.

To his devoted followers Jesus gave a legacy, to help them remember their purpose. It was the custom in Jesus’ time that each week, usually as the Sabbath began on Friday evening, Jewish religious groups met in the home of a member for a “fellowship” meal, to offer thanks to God for all God’s blessings and to share the company of co-believers. The Last Supper of Jesus was a fellowship meal of this sort, to which Jesus called together all his faithful followers.[[11]](#endnote-12)

These Jewish fellowship meals included a ceremony in which the members renewed their dedication to God by offering God bread and wine, and then by breaking the bread and eating it, and by drinking the wine, in the presence of God.

After Jesus’ execution, this Breaking of the Bread ceremony, in the context of a fellowship meal, continued in the Jesus communities. Each community was small, and met in a member’s home for the dinner. During the ceremony, when the people offered themselves and the bread and wine to God, they also remembered Jesus (as he requested, according to the gospels). With that remembrance came for them a powerful sense that they were united intensely with one another as members of the body of the Messiah—the body of the Christ.[[12]](#endnote-13) And with that realization came the powerful experience of the presence of the living Jesus among them, as one of them, offering himself to God just as they were offering themselves to God. This experience of the living Jesus was the sustenance on which the community thrived.

These Jesus-communities functioned admirably, it seems, for forty years after Jesus’ death. They remained closed, closely-guarded communities which accepted new members only after prolonged testing and training. They were secretive about their practices, including, most importantly, the Breaking of the Bread ceremony. Nonetheless, the members of these early communities were well-regarded as peaceful, generous people, though suspicion grew up around their reluctance to speak about their practices. In essence, it appears that the Jesus-people were sincerely devoted to living the life which Jesus had taught them.

But silently during that forty-year period, their communities had begun to evolve.

## C. The Transition to the Christian Era

The Jesus-communities were, essentially, religion-based social action organizations. Communally, they fed their poor and sheltered their indigent. They expected that those whom they assisted would be responsible in practicing this same generosity in whatever way they were able.

They were loosely organized groups, with a “leader” who facilitated and led the weekly fellowship meals during which the Breaking of the Bread ceremony was performed. The leader also oversaw, and perhaps coordinated, the social services work of the community. But since the Jesus-people recognized the essential dignity and equality of all the community’s members (women and men, slave and free, rich and poor; see Gal. 3:28), there was no “leadership structure” within the communities. All the decisions were made by common consent.

That was the weakness of the Jesus-communities that eventually led to their replacement by the Christian Church. The communities thrived as long as the problems they faced were internal and could be resolved by consensus, under the tutelage of the leader.

Many of these problems concerned the interpretation of the sayings of Jesus and the stories about his life. These raised what now we would call “Christological” questions: Who was Jesus? Was he human? Was he divine? If so, in what way was he divine? Did he rise from death? Was his rising physical? When will he return, as he promised? If we are dead when this occurs, will we be part of his return? Must we continue to practice the commandments of Torah?

There were, of course, many opinions about all these questions. There were no clear answers. Some of the dominant understandings of Jesus were these:

* Jesus was clearly a human being. Other people watched him bleed and die.
* Jesus was more than human in some way.[[13]](#endnote-14) Perhaps he was a human emanation from the spirit of the Supreme God. Perhaps he was the direct progeny of God (whatever that might mean, given the uniqueness of God—“our God is One”—thus having no equal to mate with, as well as the incorporeality of God—"God is spirit” (Jn 4:24) and “It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail.” (Jn 6:63.)) Or perhaps Jesus was rewarded for his good works in this life by being elevated to Godhood—*made* divine. Or perhaps, “You are [all] gods” (Jn. 10:34), as Jesus taught, surely including himself.
* Jesus continued to live although he was executed. The Jesus-people knew this from their experience, because they and Jesus joined together in fellowship at every Breaking of the Bread. The stories said that he had appeared physically at the Breaking of the Bread ceremonies shortly after his death, but it was unclear whether these were to be taken literally or as representations of his spiritual presence at the Breaking of the Bread.
* The Jesus-people seemed to expect Jesus to return to earth, perhaps in a glorified state. They did not know the time, but they expected an imminent return. They believed that when he returned, all those who had died faithful to him would return to life to join him.
* In addition, these Jewish followers of Jesus understood that the moral strictures of Torah were the everlasting will of God, written on the hearts of all people. However, the customs by which Jews proudly distinguished themselves from other people: their irreversible dedication to YHWH, marked by circumcision; their denial to themselves of many foods eaten by other nations; and their scrupulosity in how foods were to be served purely had to fall by the wayside as the Jesus-people missionized in Gentile lands. – Such was the verdict of the “First Council of Jerusalem” (Acts 15.)

We must understand that these opinions and interpretations were just that. “Doctrine,” as such, did not exist in these early communities. The stories and sayings of Jesus were told, but they did not form the foundation of the communities. What *was* central to the Jesus-people were two parts of the same way of life: the *experience* of Jesus in the Breaking of the Bread, and the Jesus-people’s dedication to living out the life of prayer and generosity that he had taught them. This is what they meant by “believing in Jesus.”

However, political conditions deteriorated in Israel (which the Romans called *Judea*) in the second half of the first century, and pressing external forces undermined the simplicity of the Jesus communities. Some of these forces were:

**Jewish armed rebellion against the Roman occupation of Jerusalem**

In 66 CE, Jewish rebels overran the Roman military garrison in Jerusalem. Soon afterward, a larger force of rebels defeated the Twelfth Roman Legion, killing 6,000 Roman soldiers and capturing the Legion standard. This was a humiliation to the Roman military and a challenge to its authority. Tension between Rome and the Jews of Israel grew as Rome prepared its response. However, the Jesus-people, although they were originally allied with the Jewish *sicarii* (“dagger assassins”), remained pacifists during this conflict, earning them the hatred of the Jewish nationalist fighters.

**Exemption from Emperor-Worship**

In the Roman Empire, the official state religion was worship of the Roman pantheon, including worship of the divinized Roman Emperor. When the Romans conquered a new land, their general policy was to make whatever reasonable concessions were necessary to keep peace, for peaceful occupation was less costly than outright martial law. When the Romans occupied Judea, they allowed the Jews an exemption from celebrating the Roman pantheon, and especially from emperor worship. Faithful Jews continued to worship YHWH. The Jesus-people, considered by both Romans and mainline Jews to be an odd sect of Jews, also received this exemption.

However, this exemption was not a right. It was simply an expedient arrangement between the Romans and the Jews, which the Romans could withdraw at any time. As relations between the Jews and the Jesus-people worsened during the last third of the first century, this exemption for the Jesus-people became an issue.

**Competition with other religious movements**

 The Jesus-people were not a large sect; they numbered perhaps in the hundreds in Jerusalem during this period. But they continued to attract greater interest and more adherents as time went on.

This increasing interest seems to have been due to their main method of recruitment. They were not street-corner preachers, and they held no large rallies. Rather, they spread their message by word-of-mouth, simply by beginning passing conversations with people as they came into contact with them. “Social networking,” as we now call it, was the principal method by which the Christian message spread—right from the time of Jesus’ ministry.[[14]](#endnote-15)

Recall Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4:1-42). When the woman was convinced that Jesus was trustworthy, she returned to her town and told everyone in town about this man, until the whole town came out to see him and decide for themselves the worth of his message. – This was not an unusual story in the life experience of John’s readers. It was an interesting depiction of how Christian evangelization occurred in their ordinary lives.

The second evangelization technique used by the early Christians was to attend the *Shabbat* service at the Jewish synagogue in whatever town they visited. At a point just before the reading from scripture, the presider would typically invite any visiting Jew from outside the area to read the scripture for the day and to comment on it. The Christian missionaries took full advantage of this invitation, to the point that they were ejected from many of the synagogues.[[15]](#endnote-16)

The large-scale religious situation in Israel was that both of the “mainline” religions—Roman polytheism and Judaism—“competed” for the attention of the people with other philosophical and religious movements popular at the time—movements such as Mithraism, Zoroastrianism, the Cult of Aphrodite, the Cult of Bacchus, and the widely popular Cult of Isis. To this list, the Jesus-people added themselves, not only in Jerusalem, but wherever in the Roman Empire the Jesus-missionaries spoke and gained adherents.

I’ve put the word “competed” in quotes above because in fact there can be no competition among polytheistic sects or organizations. The polytheists believed in many gods who each had authority over a certain work of the universe. And so, the crucial difference between all these polytheistic groups and the beliefs of the Jesus-people was that the polytheists were not *religiously exclusive*. Polytheists did not believe that if you worshiped one certain god as above the others, you had to give up worshiping your other favorite gods, or that if your worshiped one god this week, you would be betraying that god by choosing another god as the focus of your worship next week. Polytheists took for granted that they were free to worship whatever gods they wished at any time, without insulting any of the other gods.

To the Jesus-people, on the other hand—indeed to all Jews in general—the polytheistic approach to religion was foolish at best, blasphemous at worst. Both orthodox Jews and Jesus-people were religious exclusivists. Both groups, since they were Jewish in origin, believed and taught that YHWH was the One and Only God. All other “gods” were simply disembodied spirits or demons, not to be attended to.

In other words, the Jesus-people believed that if you choose YHWH as the focus of your worship, you must give up worship of all other gods. That is the essence of Jewish and Christian monotheism. To worship the Supreme One, you must unsubscribe to all other gods. Whatever holds power over you other than the Supreme One is simply a creature like you. Whatever inhabits the spirit-world and may come into your presence at night or in other spiritually powerful moments are demons, to be admonished and sent away. There is only One who is Supreme.

Such aggressive, evangelistic monotheism was a novelty in the first-century, practiced only by the Jesus-people, since the Jews were in general not evangelistic. Polytheists had no need or desire for such religious exclusivity, in large part because polytheism was not an inwardly focused way of life. Polytheism was about the necessity of worship in order to appease and satisfy and win the favor of the gods. It was intended mainly to celebrate and call down the protection of a town’s patron god or a household’s family idols. And so, polytheists exercised their religion in public displays of worship and in cultic observances and celebrations. Surely, polytheism was a religious style which was centered on *liturgy*, that is, on public engagement in cultic practices. It is not the private, inward-looking experience of divinity as present and palpable, as was the meditative component of Christianity.

Because polytheists were “mix and match” worshipers, and because there were so many gods to choose from and so many polytheistic expressions of worship (the “mystery religions” and the cults of various gods), it is natural to expect that some of the religious practices and beliefs of one polytheistic cult would accrete to others as well. And that was in fact what happened. Various approaches to worship accreted to other religions from the source religion. And this process of accretion was one of the major ways in which various practices and teachings which were originally not a part of the thinking of the Jesus-people were adopted by them, because these ways and beliefs were components of the religious thinking and discourse surrounding them at the time. We’ll discuss some of these alterations in their appropriate places, including the one following.

**The Early Christian** **Purity Movement**

One example of the influence by accretion of one religion on another was a movement toward the end of the first century in which Christians sought to purify themselves before God. This determination to be perfect was not an original teaching of Jesus, for “One there is who is good.” (Mt. 19:17.) For Jesus, goodness was simply turning one’s heart toward doing good works for others. It had nothing to do with being perfect.

But later in the first century, many Christians tended to extend the Jewish purity laws (which applied mainly to kosher foods, to the serving of foods, and to female reproductive issues) also to sexual continence and virginity. Lifelong virginity came to be considered a high state of perfection. And abstinence from sexual behaviors, especially, abstinent married couples, began to be exalted among the Christians of the late first and the second centuries.

Another of the influences that encouraged this positive attitude toward sexual abstinence was the exaltation of sexual continence in the very popular Cults of Isis and of Cybele.

**The Destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE**

The date, 70 CE, is central in my view of the rise of the Christian Era. In that year, the Romans made their response to the earlier humiliation of their Twelfth Legion by Jewish rebels. Titus, the son of the Emperor Vespasian, besieged Jerusalem with four Roman legions (20,000 soldiers). Within weeks, his army broke through the rebel resistance and ravaged the city, destroying the massive Second Temple of Jerusalem, leaving only a portion of the Western Wall (the “Wailing Wall”) standing.[[16]](#endnote-17) The Pharisees (the *rabbis* of modern Judaism) and other devout Jews fled to the city of Jamnia, where over the course of decades they transformed Judaism into a religion of the book rather than of blood sacrifice. [[17]](#endnote-18)

Many Jesus-people fled elsewhere in the Mediterranean East, to continue and to spread their communal practice, while a smaller number remained in Jerusalem. These post-70 CE followers of Jesus saw themselves as separated from the Jewish religion, as did the Jews who opposed them. And so, I will distinguish the post-70 CE followers of Jesus from the earlier, pre-70 CE ***Jesus-people*** by referring to the post-70 CE followers of Jesus as ***Christians*.** This designation comes from the Greek *Christianoi* and the Latin *Christiani*, both meaning “followers of the Anointed One.” It became the popular name for the followers of Jesus in the last third of the first century.

**The Separation of the Christians from Judaism**

Exactly how the Christians and Jews separated is disputed among scholars. At some point in the later first century, the Christians stopped attending the Jewish worship services. In place of these, the Christians used their own Bread-Breaking ceremony, which they enhanced by joining to it a previously separate Jewish ceremony, called the Morning Prayer Service. The morning service included prayers, scripture readings, a preached commentary on the readings or an exhortation, and a collection for the poor.[[18]](#endnote-19)

The Christians seem to have separated themselves publicly from Judaism by the time that the Emperor imposed the punishment tax, known as the *fiscus iudaicus*. After the Temple was destroyed, the Emperor Valerian imposed this punishment tax on all Jews, to replace the “temple tax” which Jews paid to their priests for the upkeep of the Temple. Only practicing Jews were charged this tax. To avoid the tax, the Christian communities claimed to Rome that they were a separate religion, and Rome allowed it.

However, this claim also took from the Christians the Jewish exemption from Emperor-worship. This created a centuries-long problem of how individual Christians might avoid worshiping the Emperor and still keep their lives and their places in their Christian communities.

**The Persecutions**

Even before the Jewish-Christian separation, the Christians were treated with disdain by much of the Jewish population, as well as by the Romans. The Emperor Nero’s persecution of the Jesus-people who lived in Rome in 64 CE was just the first sign of Rome’s disregard for the Christians. In post-70 Judea, the Romans became increasingly disturbed at the Christians’ unwillingness to take part in the ceremonies for the Roman pantheon and particularly, in the worship of the Emperor’s divinity.

In addition, the theological conflict between the Jews and the Christians heated up, with the Christians accusing the Jews of overlooking the advent of God’s promised Messiah, and worse yet, of killing him, while the Jews mocked the Christians, accusing them of blasphemy for making an executed criminal into God’s Messiah. This animosity should be seen against the background of the Jews’ considering the Christians’ pacifism during the rebellion in 70 to be treasonous.

And as above, both Romans and Jews were suspicious of the Christians for the secrecy of their celebrations.

The Christians kept to themselves and divulged nothing about their practices to their antagonists. They vetted incoming neophytes extensively to determine the sincerity of their commitment, sometimes for as long as ten years. Out of this secrecy grew rumors which fed the Jews’ suspicion of them and their scorn for them. Among the most scathing accusations were these two: that Christians were cannibals because they ate the flesh and drank the blood of dead people, and that they practiced some form of sexual incest because they referred to one another as “brothers” and “sisters.”

Daily life, then, was difficult for the Christians. When the Emperor ratified that the Christians were exempt from paying the punishment tax which Valerian had imposed on practicing Jews, the Roman authorities were able to stop Christians on the street and demand the documentary evidence that they were not practicing Jews, although they were circumcised. Harassment and arrest became frequent, and some were executed.

The persecutions of the first and second centuries had begun. These persecutions were local, sporadic, and at the whim of the local Roman governor and of the local population. The problem increased immensely when in 250 CE, the Emperor Decius commanded that *all* citizens sacrifice to the Roman gods, one of which was the deified Emperor. No exemptions were granted. Torture and execution were the punishments for refusal. This decree was the trigger of a severe, 60-year Empire-wide persecution of Christians, in particular, though all people were subject to the decree.

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Because the Christian movement of the late first century was being put to the test by all of these pressures, the dedication of many members of the communities began to dwindle, and the stability of the communities was in jeopardy. The community leaders seem to have decided that they had to devise responses to these individual pressures in order to strengthen the dedication of the members to the communities and to their faith, and thereby to foster community well-being and to continue to spread the teachings of Jesus.

The persecutions were the Christian community’s most problematic practical challenge. They brought with them a host of problems. One major problem was that there was no satisfactory way for individual Christians to escape the distasteful outcomes of being arrested. Arrest produced one of three results. If arrested Christians could produce the official documents which affirmed that they had publicly worshipped the Emperor and had publicly renounced Jesus, they were set free. But freedom—or sometimes escape—did not heal the Christians’ shame: they had betrayed Jesus, as well as their fidelity to the community. Such people were termed ***apostates***. These apostates presented a major problem to the Christian communities when they sought to be taken back into the communities.

The second alternative was to buy the official documents on the black market. Christians who paid for their release also disgraced themselves and their standing in their communities, though they avoided betraying Jesus publicly.

The third alternative was the heroic way. These Christians at their trials affirmed Jesus and bravely rejected worship of the Emperor. The punishment for such obstinacy was always death, either by crucifixion or by burning or by facing big cats, wild boars, elephants, or hyenas. To die in these ways for one’s faith in Jesus, they believed, was the noblest death a Christian could suffer. It meant immediate memorialization within the community and, according to community belief, immediate entry into heaven. Some Christians chose this path; others had it chosen for them by their judges.

In response to the persecutions, the Christian communities went underground. Some of them in and around Rome went literally underground into tunnels, called *catacombs*, dug into the earth. These tunnels served two purposes. They served as worship spaces in which members could pray and preach undisturbed. The Breaking of the Bread ceremonies were held there.

The catacombs also served as the burial places of Christians who died honorably. So, within these catacombs, the Christians ate the bread they offered to God among their honored dead, and they experienced the felt presence of the risen Jesus during these celebrations, as they always had. In addition, they had the opportunity during these sacred meals of sensing the presence also of their honored dead around them. This was their opportunity to experience the unification with God for which Jesus prayed in John 17, praying “that they might become one.” Drawn together here, these Christians believed, were the Loving Father, Jesus the risen Messiah, the spirits of the blissful dead, and the living Christians who were enduring pain and disgrace in the expectation of the heavenly life. Here heaven met earth in a palpable way. The Christians later came to call this experience *The Communion of Saints***.**

A major problem arising for the Christian communities from the persecutions was what to do about the apostates who desired re-admittance to their community—those who had publicly foresworn Jesus during their arrests, because of fear of death or because of not wanting to leave their families without a breadwinner or for other personal, often legitimate reasons.

Some communities, still holding to the authentic teachings of Jesus, forgave the apostates and welcomed them back into their midst, now mindful of the weakness of these people, but not resentful.

Other communities accepted the apostates back into their ranks, but as lesser members, whom they made suffer various punishments for their betrayal of their faith in Jesus. Full members of these communities refused to accept apostates with the same level of trust as they had before their apostasy.

And other, harsher communities refused to re-admit the apostates. They cast the apostates out from among them with the judgmental self-righteousness of people who had not yet had to face the choices that the apostates had to face.

In addition to the problems associated with the persecutions, the communities faced an altogether different challenge during this period: the potential fracturing of the Christian unity because of conflicting belief-sets among the local communities. In general, two versions of Christianity seem to have been developing: a Southern version, and a Northern version.

The Southern version was the Christianity of Israel, centered in the Christian communities in Jerusalem, and later in Antioch of Syria, a Gentile city. This Southern version was, of course, quite Jewish in its outlook. Torah and the Jewish scriptures were for the Jewish Christians still the “Sacred Scriptures,” and this Word of God governed their day-to-day lives with one another and with God. Their respect for the teachings of Jesus took the form of understanding Jesus’ words as “commandments,” on a par with the commandments of Torah. They expected strict obedience to those commandments from themselves and from their communities, and as above, they “went beyond the call of duty” by inventing for themselves new “purities” with which to discipline themselves, namely, the sexual abstinence movement.

The advantage that the Southern communities had in receiving Jesus as the Messiah of Israel was that the reforms he introduced and the ways of understanding which he taught were viewed by the Jewish Christians through the lens of their long and revered tradition of monotheism and of their understanding of God and his expectations.

In contrast, the Northern version of the Jesus-communities developed in the Gentile lands toward which many Christian missionaries headed after Jesus’ death. Although these missionaries headed in all directions (the Apostle Thomas, for example, entered and missionized in India), one of the main Gentile influences on early Christianity came from the Christian communities which Paul of Tarsus and others had established in the regions of Syria, “Asia” (what is today central and western Turkey), Egypt, Greece, and Rome.

As we discussed above, the Gentile religious traditions were very different from the Jewish traditions. They were polytheistic, though usually one god from the pantheon was chosen for special recognition. (Hence, the Cult of Aphrodite and the Cult of Bacchus, for example.) All of them were ceremony-based, rather than law-bound and scripture-based. And they were religiously liberal. Since people could choose from so many gods the one to claim their devotion, it was the common practice to accept that others had different gods from one’s own. In fact, one might explore other religions without giving up one’s own. That is, one might worship two gods as central in his or her life, without a sense of incongruity or inconsistency.

It was in this polytheistic context that Paul and his company preached Christianity, as did others in the north-eastern territories of the Empire, such as Prisca and Aquila, who are mentioned in the Christian scriptures. These missionaries had to compete with the other mystery religions for Christianity’s place in the social mix. The power of the story of the central god was the chief “selling point” of any religion. The stories that the devotees told of their god’s excellence or power were intended to convince the listeners that this god was worth paying special attention to. And so, the Christian claim that Jesus rose bodily from death was the decisive point in the Christian argument. Those who accepted this claim and, with it, the promise of eternal life for themselves undertook to abandon polytheism and its openness to various gods, in order to seek to become Christians, worshiping YHWH alone and following the Way of Jesus his prophet. Those who rejected the Christian claim of bodily resurrection mocked the message and its preachers—or worse. These stories are to be found in Luke’s *Acts of the Apostles*.

Because of the proximity of so many other religions, and also because the missionaries from the “Southern” Jewish Christianity brought with them their various opinions about who Jesus was and what the relation was between the commands of Jesus and Torah (See Gal. 1:6 ff.), Northern Christianity became more flexible than was Southern Christianity and adopted policies which took the Gentile world into account.

This is the reason, for example, for the outcome of the First Council of Jerusalem, mentioned above. The Northern side won their case that male Gentile converts should not be required to undergo circumcision in order to become Christians. But in return, the Northern Christians had to concede that they would include a remnant of the Jewish dietary laws, as well as mention of the new purity movement, in their preaching: a concession to the Southern Christian mindset. (See *Acts* 15:24-29.)

Paul’s mixed reaction to this compromise agreement is interesting. In 1 Cor. 10:14-11:1, in the midst of his strong preaching against personal pride, a reference to the mandate of the Council of Jerusalem appears to occur. And Paul’s words show him to have conflicted responses to it. At first (vv.11-22), Paul takes the Council’s position against eating meat offered to idols. He intensifies his condemnation by adding that idols are evil demons, the enemies of God.

Then, in verse 23, Paul’s position seems to shift. In the passage that follows verse 23, Paul teaches from his heart and from his established theological position that Jesus has freed humans from obedience to laws so that they can be free to love—to love God and to love one another. Therefore, he says, *all* things are lawful, though they may not be beneficial to one’s growth in spirit. That, of course, would include the eating of meat sacrificed to idols. In the same passage, he says just that—that there is no offense in eating such meat, as long as you do not upset your host’s conscience in any way. What is important to Paul in this passage, then, are not the decrees of a council, but the advancement toward Christ of everyone with whom a Christian interacts. Paul’s Northern Christian love of “freedom in Christ” and concern for the “salvation” of all people wins out over the legalism of the proscriptions of the Jerusalem Council.

Paul and his group also had to concede to the conservative, Jerusalem-Jewish mindset on the key issue whether the death of Jesus was sacrificial. If Jesus truly chose to sacrifice his life, then the Breaking of the Bread was a ritual memorialization of Jesus’ sacrificial death.

That Jesus’ death was sacrificial was apparently not an element in the earliest understanding of his death in the Jesus-communities of Israel. Rather, the early communities understood his humiliating death apparently only as a necessary precursor to his resurrection. And therefore, in the Breaking of the Bread, the early Jesus-people did not celebrate anyone’s sacrificial death, but rather, they celebrated their *dedication* of themselves to God and to their works of charity, just as Jesus, resurrected, living, and present among them, had done.

In the Gentile north, however, every god was worshiped by sacrifice of one sort or another—from slaughter of animals to libations to sex acts. A religion without sacrifice was inconceivable to the Gentile view of the world. As a result, the Northern version of Christianity adopted the notion that the death of Jesus was a voluntary act of sacrifice of his own life to God, in order to earn the forgiveness of all human sinfulness.

That Paul adopted this pervasive religious attitude from the religions around him is clear in the earliest description of a Bread-Breaking ceremony, found in 1 Cor. 11:23-28, written by Paul in the mid-50s of the first century. It is an account of Jesus’ giving the Bread and Wine to his followers at his Last Supper. Paul recounts here that Jesus said over the bread: “This is my body *which is for you.*” And over the wine he said, “This chalice is the *new covenant in my blood*,” as though to say that his blood was the value exchanged between the covenanting parties as the act of actualizing the covenant. Then as a comment on Jesus’ words, Paul adds, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the chalice, you proclaim *the Lord’s death* until he comes.” (Emphasis added.)

Compare this to the parallel Southern Christian account in Matthew’s very Jewish gospel (26:26-29), written in the 80s CE. Here Jesus gives the bread, saying “Take, eat; this is my body.” Then he gives the wine, saying “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood *of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.* I tell you I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.” (Emphasis added.) It appears that by the time of the writing of Matthew’s gospel in the early 80s, the understanding that Jesus’ death was sacrificial had reached Jerusalem and been accepted. But notice that the rest of this passage not only omits further reference to a sacrifice, it overlooks the death entirely and focuses on the eternal life which was the hope of the Christian community.

I offer the following explanation of Matthew’s account. The reference to the blood “of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” is a later addition to the passage as originally written, in which Jesus gives the wine, saying just what he had said of the bread, “Drink it, all of you. This is my blood. I tell you that I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.” Seen in this way, Matthew’s character, Jesus, is simply restating the foundation of the community of love—that all of its members are joined as one with him and with the Father and with each other, as John’s equally very Jewish gospel quotes Jesus as praying in Chapter 17.

From this, we conclude that Jesus’ death was not originally thought to be sacrificial. At the time of his death, it is clear from the gospel accounts that he had no choice or part in the decision to arrest and execute him. The posse came to the Garden of Gethsemane at Judas Iscariot’s direction, and Jesus was arrested without hesitation. His trial was conducted in the middle of the night and was perfunctory. His execution was no surprise to anyone.

At no time in this process did Jesus voluntarily do anything. No one offered him a choice about anything. In fact, his Agony in the Garden before his arrest indicates clearly that he knew that his arrest was imminent, and he suffered violently the fear of dying. He was a young man with half his life ahead of him. Dying was not only a frustration of his felt mission; it was also for him, as for all of us, a fearful prospect. In its presence he confronted the possibility of the final loss of his identity and of his consciousness.

Jesus had been preparing for years to die. He knew God intimately in his silent prayer. But in Gethsemane, he could not find the silence or the peace of mind to open himself to union with God. And so, he had to pray repeatedly, perhaps for hours, for acceptance of God’s will—for surrender of his whole self to God’s will. Finally, after such intense suffering, he found his God and his peace, and he was able to surrender to God’s will that he die.

I do not see any choosing of sacrifice here on Jesus’ part. I see simple acceptance. To my understanding, the notion of sacrifice in Jesus’ death is a later invention of his followers. It arose in the Gentile north and spread to the Christian communities in Jerusalem.

## D. Orthodoxy

The Christian community of the last decade of the first century began a structural change under the burden of a large-scale problem within the community. That problem was the lack of an integrated leadership structure. The original Jesus-communities were unstructured groups, essentially makeshift in the way they worshiped, except that in one way or another, they all shared the Breaking of the Bread and the passion to serve each other.

During the second half of the first century, there was a growing feeling among the leaders of the communities that it was necessary to formalize the teachings about Jesus and about the communities themselves. This need was created by the problems we have just been discussing: the widening diversity of beliefs about Jesus and his teachings, the many interpretations and explanations of these, and the adoption by the Christian communities of various beliefs of the religions with which Christianity was competing.[[19]](#endnote-20) And although it was true that the writing of the first three gospels in the thirty-year period following the Destruction of the Temple in 70 CE expressed the *faith* of the people by recounting the teachings and the works of Jesus, such stories were always open to disputed interpretation. What these end-of-the-first-century leaders felt was necessary was some collective statement which defined what was definitely to be believed by Christians.

This impulse led to the effort of the communities to discern which teachings conformed to the true teachings of Jesus, and which did not. There was no formal mechanism in place to accomplish this task. The informal leaders of the communities were not seen as empowered to make official decrees. Moreover, though the four gospels (which were later declared canonical) had been circulating among the communities, they were not considered to be “Sacred Scripture.”[[20]](#endnote-21) Rather, they were thought to be “memoirs” by various apostles of their experience of Jesus (although, as was learned many centuries later, at least two were written by people who had never met Jesus in bodily form, and it may be that all four were so written.)

 So the communities turned to the affirmations of faith which the converts to Christianity made at their baptisms. The questions to which these neophytes responded were the model for the *Old Roman Symbol*, an ancestor of what is now called *The Apostles’ Creed*. Following is the text of the *Old Roman Symbol:*

I believe in God the Father almighty;
and in Christ Jesus His only Son, our Lord,
Who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,
Who under Pontius Pilate was crucified and buried,
on the third day rose again from the dead,
ascended to heaven,
sits at the right hand of the Father,
whence He will come to judge the living and the dead;
and in the Holy Spirit,
the holy Church,
the remission of sins,
the resurrection of the flesh
(the life everlasting).[[21]](#endnote-22)

 Many modern scholars, as well as many of the ancient writers, believe that this creed was composed in the late first century or in the second century. Indeed, the ancients believed it to have been written by the Twelve Apostles of Jesus themselves. Whatever the case, the Old Roman Symbol is the first known formal statement of Christian belief. Notice that it retains some of the problems we have discussed, without resolving them. The most critical is that the relation between the Father and the other two divine personages remains unclarified. The creed reads: “I believe in God the Father almighty, and in Christ Jesus His only Son, our Lord, . . . and in the Holy Spirit.” This statement establishes a relation among the three but says nothing about the nature of that relation nor about the divinity of Jesus or of the unnamed holy spirit, who is generally depicted in the gospels, *Acts,* and in Paul’s letters as a messenger figure, “sent” by the Father or by Jesus. The spirit, then, seems to have been conceived as like an angel-messenger, who for the Father brings the gifts of the spirit to those who accept Jesus (as in 1 Cor 12:1-11), and who for the Son brings the remembering of Jesus’ teachings, as well as charismatic prayer.

Despite its imperfections, the Old Roman Symbol was nonetheless an emblem of the fundamental beliefs—the orthodox beliefs—of the Christian Church. It put out no fires, but it brought a sense of confidence—a solid foundation—to the thinking of the current and future Christian leaders.

Still another problem beset the late first century Christian community. This was the issue of fading faith within these communities. For individual Christians at the end of the first century, the spiritual landscape had changed. Jesus had not yet returned “in glory,” and Christians were giving up their wearied expectation of an imminent beatification of their lives. Moreover, the enthusiasm and joy which accompanied that expectation of imminent beatification among the early Jesus-communities had evaporated. Life was now enduring through the day, expecting tomorrow to be filled with pain similar to today’s. The path of life was rutted, and Christianity was becoming traditional and routine. In addition, the fear of more times of persecution always loomed as a dark stressor—something like the threat of Soviet nuclear attack always looming in the background minds of Americans in the 1950s.

These persecutions, although they drew the community together again under the threat of peril, sapped the strength of the people, for when they occurred, they were filled with violence and unjustified hatred. The community leaders concluded that the faith of the people had to be revived by a new hope. Community thinkers and their leaders—the bishops, who had been the “overseers” of individual communities all along—tried to find solutions to this restlessness and loss of direction. Two resolutions were offered.

First, a new vision of Jesus as Conquering King and Judge was presented. Up to this point, the conventional understanding of Jesus was that he was a lover of compassion, forgiveness, and generosity; a man of peace and gentleness; a sincere devotee of YHWH and his Word, the Law of Moses. Now a new understanding of Jesus was needed—Jesus as inevitable conqueror of the enemies of the Christian community.

The thoughts of these leaders turned to the “Son of Man” passage in Daniel 7. They found there the image of hope in Christ that their communities needed. In this chapter, “one that was ancient of days” took his seat on his flaming throne, and from him issued “power and streaming fire.” This is clearly an image of YHWH in his glory. Then before him “there came one like a son of man,” to whom YHWH gave

dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. (v. 14.)

In this image, the Christian leaders found what they needed. They ignored the actual meaning of the passage in its context and saw a new interpretation of Jesus, who had called himself “son of man.” An objective reading of this passage finds that this “son of man” (which literally means “just an ordinary human being,” “a son of Adam”) does not refer to an individual. Rather, the individual who stands before YHWH is a symbolic representation of the *people of Israel*.

Evidence of this interpretation is not far off. Just 4 verses later, Daniel writes:

But *the saints* of the Most High shall receive the kingdom, and possess the kingdom forever, for ever and ever. (v. 18. Emphasis added.)

And nine verses after that, Daniel reiterates that the “son of man,” who receives dominion over the nations, is the people of Israel:

And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to *the people of the saints of the Most High*; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them. (v. 27. Emphasis added.)

It is clear from these passages that the “son of man” here is a representation of the whole people of Israel. However, to the Christian bishops, it was the ***image*** of the “son of man” before the throne of God being given dominion over all nations and peoples, not the correct meaning of the passage, which was needed by the members of the community in their depressed condition. In this new image of Jesus, the resurrected Jesus who was now deathless was the judge who, when he returned in glory, would render judgment on all the nations and on all the people of all nations. Each person would stand before Jesus, now the resurrected King, who would evaluate the person’s interactions with their neighbors for conformity with the Two Great Commandments, and then would render judgment: eternal hellfire for those who ignored the worship of God and care for their neighbors’ needs, and eternal bliss in the Kingdom of God, at the banquet table of Jesus, for those who loved God and cared for the needs of their neighbors. (See Mt. 25.)

As the image of Jesus the Messiah as King (Christ the King) spread through the Christian community, hope was again rekindled. It was as though the Christian community exalted, “Though Jesus has not returned within ‘this generation,’ as he promised, we are confident that when he *does* return, it will be in the majesty of the King of Heaven and Earth. And when he sits on his judgment seat, the everlasting wrath of God will fall upon our persecutors and our enemies!” This was the certitude with which the emblem of the Conquering Jesus infused the souls of the Christian faithful.[[22]](#endnote-23)

When the Apocalyptic writers got hold of this image, it fanned their imaginations into flames. With the Book of Daniel as their source, they imagined the Second Coming of Jesus as a contest between all the forces of cosmic evil and the Savior Jesus. The terrible fearsomeness of the natural and historical events foretelling Jesus’ Return would go on for years. Then stars would be cast down from the sky into the sea. Jesus, mounted on a white horse and wearing the sash of righteousness, would clear his path through his enemies by slaughtering them with the two-edged sword which would emerge tongue-like from his mouth. Satan would be cast into hell. And Jesus would then claim the victory and open the Heavenly Jerusalem to his faithful disciples. (The *Book of Revelation* contains the complete presentation. But compare also the apocalyptic passages on the end-times in Mt 24-25, Mk 13, and Lk 21.)

What hope for final victory this narrative provided! No one seemed to notice or care that the Jesus in this depiction was not the Jesus whom his first followers had known—the man of peace and forgiveness. The Jesus in this revised form is the Warrior Jesus, merciless on his enemies as he casts them into a deathless torture for all eternity. The serenity of heart which Jesus of Nazareth taught had now been replaced by a cosmic Jesus who exercised a spirit of vengeance. The hope held by the Christian community at the end of the first century was based, then, in final superiority over an enemy too powerful for the Christians in this life.

 This hope of eternal life with the loving and provident God after the Judgment and Damnation of the wicked sustained the Christians through the worst of the persecutions. But the wounds which these periodic persecutions caused to the Christians did not heal when the persecutions ended for any given community. The violence inflicted on the Christians by the majority Jewish and Gentile (that is, Roman) oppressors placed the Christians psychologically in a conflicted position. On the one hand, they were sworn to love their enemies and to forgive them. But on the other hand, the image of the Conquering Christ was an emblem for them, giving them “permission,” as it were, to nurture in their hearts the seeds of hatred, anger, and vengeance. To the Christians who suffered these afflictions, what other could the Cross of Christ mean than a representation of the sorrows which they shared with Jesus and for which their hearts yearned for retribution?

 And so, these feelings of vindictiveness festered a long while during the catacomb period (the first through the early fourth centuries), and then, as we will see, they broke into outright resentment and hatred when Christianity was legitimized in the fourth century. This resentment took the form of a rampant Christian anti-Semitism. Christian vengeance-wounds were inflicted on the Jews throughout the Middle Ages, even by later Christians who had never suffered at the hands of any Jew but who continued to persecute Jewish people who had never done any injustice to members of the Christian majority.[[23]](#endnote-24) And James Carroll makes a thought-provoking case that the ultimate expression of the Christian hope of final defeat of the enemy was not the Crusades or the building of St. Peter’s Basilica or the establishment of an independent Vatican State. Rather, it was the Nazi Holocaust.[[24]](#endnote-25)

 The second change which the bishops and philosophers offered the beleaguered Christian communities of the 90s and 100s was a substantial, organized leadership structure. This leadership structure was centered in the bishops of the individual communities, each working in collaboration with all the others, under the guidance of “an overseer of the overseers,” called a *patriarch* or a *metropolitan,* who was the bishop of the largest city in the region, to produce teachings which reflected the “true beliefs” of the Christian Church about the nature of God, the nature of Jesus, the relation between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and the nature of the Christian community and its relation with the non-Christian world.

 As simple managers and worship leaders, the bishops generally had the respect of the people. They preached. They healed hearts and souls. They proclaimed Jesus before the Roman executioners. However, in the 90s, when they began to assert that there was a hierarchical authority in their communities and that the bishops were at the highest level of this hierarchy, the people, who were committed followers of the old teaching (e.g., Gal. 3:28) on the equality of all the members of the community, appear to have contested the bishops’ declaration of authority.

 The bishops took to themselves the authority to prescribe the way the Breaking of the Bread ceremony was conducted in their areas of authority (dioceses) and the manner in which their people prayed publicly at these ceremonies. They also took to themselves the authority to make declarations about the orthodoxy of teachings brought before the community about Jesus and the Christian community. And they reserved the right to appoint lesser members of the newly established clergy: *presbyters* (“elders,” “priests”), who were originally the community elders and advisors of the overseer, and whom the bishop now ordained to clerical life as his designated proxies in the conduct of the liturgical celebrations, mainly the Bread-Breaking ceremony; and *deacons*, who were originally designated to serve the community poor and to bring the Broken Bread to the homebound, and who later also became the community treasurers. In this way, a clear administrative structure was established, authoritative teachers arose, and the belief-set of an orthodox Christian faith began to evolve.

 The ordinary members of the individual communities, at least in some percentage of the membership, objected to—and apparently, noisily resisted—the imposition of the leadership structure and the stratification of the community. They objected to the bishops’ declarations that bishops were to be revered as representatives of Jesus and honored as the leaders of the people. By asserting this privileged position, the bishops, of course, placed themselves above the ordinary devotees and made themselves “more worthy” than the common people. One way they did this was by wearing special clothing, such as sashes and liturgical headwear, which proclaimed the man’s position in the exalted clerical hierarchy. Such self-exaltation was offensive to many ordinary Christians’ memories of the teachings of Jesus on humility.

 We find repeated evidence of this rebellious attitude in the frequent reference to it by the bishops writing during this era. For example, in many of his letters, Ignatius of Antioch (d. 108), a metropolitan, admonished his flock to “Obey your bishop.” See for example his *Letter to the Magnesians*.[[25]](#endnote-26) Likewise, Clement of Rome (d. 99), the metropolitan of Rome (and considered the fourth Pope by the Roman Catholic Church) wrote an extensive letter to the community in Corinth, Greece, appealing to the leaders of the “seditious” faction who were disrespecting the authority of their young bishop to give up their resistance and join together “in harmony” with their authoritative bishop and the members who supported him.[[26]](#endnote-27)

 The upsetting by the bishops of the ways of the ancient community generated a significant amount of controversy and tension in the late first and early second century Christian communities. It surely also fueled, in part, the fragmentation of the community, which continued into the second century.

 The restructuring of the Christian communities also brought other problems with it. In earlier times, differing theological opinions were simply clashes of opinion. Now that the bishops had taken to themselves the authority to make definitive declarations, the playing field was no longer level. The bishops had authority to take decisive positions, both from those people in the communities who supported their assumption of authority, and from the council of local bishops, who, together with the metropolitan of the region, gave support to the teachings and decrees of an individual bishop.

 The opposition, on the other hand, had only their opinions. In earlier times, the debates provoked by this contest of opinions challenged the participants to think clearly and deeply. Now, at the end of the first century, the “loyal opposition,” if you will—namely, those thinkers who taught and defended minority opinions within their communities on the questions of the day—found themselves to be in a substantially less sure position. For, now their teachings were challenging the bishops’ consensus teachings: the *orthodox doctrines* of the Christian community as a whole.

 In this context of the bishops’ authoritative construction of an orthodox Christian belief-set, an opinion was either correct or incorrect, true or untrue, in line with orthodoxy or out of step with it. There was little room for negotiation. What in the past had been theological disputation could now become trials, not only of a certain viewpoint, but also of the one who taught that viewpoint. So, the empowered episcopacy used their authority within the Christian community to combat *heterodoxy*—that is, teachings which rejected or challenged the prevailing doctrines propounded by the bishops. When heterodox teachings were advanced by members of the Christian community, the teachings were called *heresies* and the teachers of these heresies were known as *heretics.*  Insistent, unrepented heresy led to excommunication and, though rare in the early centuries, to execution.[[27]](#endnote-28)

The long-term result of the bishops’ presenting themselves as authoritative was that over time, the same hierarchical power structure was established in the loyal Christian communities in each region. The structure was centered in the most authoritative regional bishop—the bishop of the major city in the area (the *metropolitan*.). His responsibility was to care for the spiritual needs of all the communities under his authority. (Ignatius of Antioch, referred to just above, was one such bishop.) The metropolitan’s region of authority was divided into smaller local areas under the final authority of their own bishops. Each of these local bishops was elected to his position by the people of his area of authority (diocese.) When the number of Christians grew locally beyond the ability of the bishop to oversee the prayer and Bread-Breaking ceremonies, he appointed clerical assistants: the presbyters or priests, to lead the community’s worship services, and the deacons, to dispense the community’s wealth to the poor and needy.

The local bishops worked in conjunction with each other and with the metropolitan to develop the rituals of worship, to establish and maintain correct doctrine, and to secure the welfare of the people. Since the Christians were at this time undergoing sporadic local persecution, all this was done more or less in secrecy.

The early outcome of this power structuring was that, in general, the noblest, most faithful, and best educated men rose to the position of bishop. As a result, the gathering of bishops within a metropolitan’s region was, in the beginning, an intelligent, spiritual, and well-intentioned meeting of minds.

I pause to reflect on this because the argument which Ignatius, the second-century Bishop of Antioch, Syria, offered to the members of his church in Magnesia for obeying their bishop was precisely this—that their bishop was a noble, honest, good man whose intention was to shepherd them in their spiritual growth.

That was the case at the end of the first century. However, all good things, all Truth itself, becomes Power. And Power kills Truth because Power seeks its own self-gratifying ends. And so, it was not far into the second century that this power structure began to tilt toward self-aggrandizement and increasing control over the lives and the thinking of the loyal Christians who accepted their authority. And to look ahead for a moment, the vanity of those bishops who were prideful men and who suffered from dubious moral character led them to dishonesty and deception in their treatment of the people, as greed, unscrupulousness, and power-hunger enticed them to wear the bishop’s robes for the wealth, influence, and acclaim they brought. Thus, the innocence of the first century Christian communities, struggling with persecution and, as we will see in a moment, with sin-guilt, became, a millennium later, the gilded horror of the Roman Catholic Church of the High Middle Ages.

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### Late First Century Concepts of Jesus

 As we have seen, the Christians of the first century struggled with profound Christological questions about the nature of Jesus and his relation to God and to the Christian community. One influential school of thought, which began in Alexandria, Egypt, and which was clearly influenced by the teachings of more ancient Eastern religions, believed that the High God, which virtually every religion on the planet knows but calls by a different name, is so transcendent and pure that this High God is beyond such considerations as human decisions and actions. However, from the High God spring “emanations,” in a descending order toward earth, each lower emanation being of a less purely spiritual and a more physical nature.

 Jesus was believed by proponents of this explanation to be such an emanation. Jesus shared the divinity of the Great God, but was of a courser nature than the one he called The Father. The Jesus-emanation was truly “God among us” and came among us to teach us to seek and to find the secret wisdom, available to all, which leads into the presence of God and which shows itself in right living. This approach to Jesus and the Christian life is called *Gnosticism*.

 Another group of Christian thinkers taught that Jesus was indeed not human by nature, but was a divine personage who walked among humans in human appearance, much as YHWH did when he visited Abram at the Terebinths of Mamre in Gen. 18. This line of thinking is called *Docetism*.

 Others thought that Jesus was simply human and achieved divinity by the excellence of his life.

 And others thought that Jesus was by nature divine, but that he took to himself human nature and was born among human beings as a human being who somehow shared in the divine nature. This last proposition is the orthodox Christian doctrine.

 All of these views, except possibly Docetism, suggest that there are at least two Gods, two Holy Ones, related to each other in some way. At least, that is the way a rational, monotheistic mind would see the problem. In polytheism, the problem evaporates. There are many gods, each related in some way to the High God. To the polytheistic mind, Jesus was simply one of those gods who, as they all did, appeared to humans in one form or another.

This was the theological setting that Paul and his group encountered in the Northern territories in the 50s and early 60s CE. And this setting may be the best way into the origin of the most ancient Christian view of the relation between God and Jesus. Paul and his Jewish missionaries were all nurtured on the Shemah (Deut. 6:4: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”) and so they were staunch monotheists. There was just One God, the Supreme One, to whom all devotion is to be given. However, as the Northern missionaries stepped out of the monotheistic Jewish homeland and became acquainted with Gentile polytheism, the notion that one could accept and worship a god which was to a lesser degree divine without dishonoring the greater god to which one had sworn allegiance opened itself to them as a way of understanding Jesus’ apparent extraordinary power over nature, without abandoning dedication to YHWH. That was perhaps as far as they could develop their explanation—Jesus was divine as The Father is, but of a lesser order of divinity. Perhaps this is also the origin and meaning of the term “Son of God” in the most primitive Christian context.

 Jesus was believed to share the nature of the Father, but was not the Father. Jesus was distinguishable from the Father while, as he claimed, being “one with the Father.” This is the way that Paul (and the evangelist John) understood the relation between Jesus and the Father. Indeed, among Paul’s thirteen letters in the Christian canon, his prayer, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” appears at the end of the introduction of twelve of them. The other, the Letter to the Colossians, mentions only the Father in the prayer.

 Of them all, only Romans mentions the “Spirit of righteousness,” capitalized by the modern editors in order to indicate a divine personage, although without the capitalization, the word “spirit” could be interpreted as “a predilection for” or “a decision to embrace.” The point is that Paul does not seem to have a Trinitarian notion of the Godhead. Rather, he seems to conceive of the Godhead as two personages: the Father, and the “Son of God.”

From other places in his letters, it seems clear that Paul recognized a spirit of enthusiasm which entered the praying hearts of the people in his communities. (See, for example, 1 Cor 12.) But that spirit is not presented by Paul as a separate member of the Godhead.

The point here is that polytheism laid the foundation for the later Christian doctrine of the Trinity, as well as for many other non-Christian divinizations, such as the divinity of the Roman Emperor. By 60 CE, at any rate, the notion that Jesus was a divine personage who was incarnated as a human being, and thus that there were two divine personages—The Father, and the “Son of God”—was being proclaimed in the Christian community.

 We have discussed, then, two central doctrinal issues (Christ the Victorious Conqueror, and a two-person Godhead) which the Christian community embraced in the second half of the first century, not according to the teachings of Jesus, but according to the needs and the thinking of the later Christian communities themselves. These teachings were accepted as a part of Christian thought, and for this reason they were inserted into the first three gospels, which had already been written and circulated.[[28]](#endnote-29) But the great statement of the doctrine of “Christ the Divine” is the Gospel of John, which scholars tell us was written in the late 90s of the first century (and perhaps as late as the 20s of the second century.)

There is one other doctrinal issue of great import which developed in the latter half of the first century and which is ripe for discussion in the next section.

## E. Christian Sin and the Emerging Fear of Guilt

The development of the mutually interactive concepts of *sin* and the *guilt* brought by sin was a pivotal process in Christian history. As the Christians’ understanding of sin and its consequences changed, the whole community changed with it.

 The Jews, of course, were long familiar with sin as a violation of the Law of Moses. They believed that on a mountain in the Sinai Desert, God gave to Moses his commandments, by which the Jews were joyfully to regulate their lives. They were to perform the actions and deeds which the Law prescribed, and they were to avoid doing what the Law prohibited, for the Law was the desire of God’s ardent heart for the well-being of them and of all creation. Those who fervently obeyed the Law in their way of life were called *righteous* and *just*. Those who did not act in accordance with the Law, either from willfulness or from ignorance of the Law’s regulations, were called *sinners*. In the Jewish understanding, then, sin was an external action performed or omitted in the course of one’s life which violated a command of the Divine Law.

God, the Jews believed, oversaw the world and the actions of human beings. Sin, as a violation of God’s Law, was inherently undesirable because it worked contrary to God’s intentions for the good of his people. God punished humans for sinning, the Jews believed, in order to guide them into the right way, as a father of that time might discipline his children in order that they grow into righteous people. God’s punishment for sin was appropriately applied during this present life, in order to accomplish its purpose. It consisted of whatever was undesirable in this life, such as poverty, famine, sickness, loss, disrespect, unsatisfying relationships, disobedient children, violence, and oppression.

Jewish tradition did not have a well-developed concept of an afterlife. They believed from ancient times that human beings were born as complete physical beings, and that diffused throughout the human body was the essence of psychic reality. They called this entity—physical and mental/spiritual reality interlaced—a *nephesh* or *nepesh*. God originally created this *nepesh*/human from the clay from which all things came. The *nepesh*/human contained within itself everything that human beings are—a physical body with all the organs of life, and a mind and “heart,” with all their strengths and weaknesses, and with all their potential. The one thing that the *nepesh*/human lacked was the breath of life, the animating principle. At its birth, then, God began to blow individually into each *nepesh*/human the breath of life, directly from the mouth of God. God blew into the *nepesh*/human every breath of its life, until the day when God stopped blowing life into the *nepesh*/human. At that point, the *nepesh*/human died. What was left was a “dead *nepesh*.” Some believed that at that point, nothing remained. The *nepesh*/human returned to clay. Others believed that the psychic self-identity of the *nepesh* descended into a shadowy place of existence beneath the earth, called *Sheol*, to live there, not participating in the actions of humans nor worshiping God, into the future.

As for Jesus’ viewpoint, since the inward disposition of heart toward the worship of God was the main theme of his thinking, he was not concerned with sin as the violation of the Law, liable to God’s punishment. Rather, he saw the human situation as an opportunity to receive this gift of inward devotion from God. Some people feel the urging in their hearts to turn and seek God, and they respond with open-heartedness and acceptance. Others feel God’s call and turn away from it to pursue less precious, more worldly goals.

For Jesus, the latter was a cause for sorrow, not for punishment. Jesus understood that people lose their way in the world and end up in hopeless situations, far from the comfort of God and doing cruel things to one another. And these vicious behaviors not only damage the perpetrator of them and the victim of them, but they also undercut the personal relationships (those intimate covenant relationships) which are the foundation of the whole society.

This was how sin manifested in the world Jesus surveyed. Sin was an occasion of sadness, and the misdirected actions of sinners were not to be punished, but to be forgiven in love.

Jesus saw his Jewish brothers and sisters as having blindly fallen into ditches and cisterns, the traps of the world, along the way. He did not blame them, and he helped them when he could.

 Jesus reserved his rage and his blame for those who had taken on themselves the crucial work of freeing the ordinary people from their blindness by teaching them the way of life given by God in the Law, a way which, he believed, resulted in mutual respect and social harmony. He repeatedly asserted that the teachers of the law and the leaders of public worship in his time had taken as their obligation to raise up the hearts of the whole Jewish nation to the genuine worship of God, and they had failed completely in doing so. The people remained immersed in ignorance of the ways of God while their teachers trained them in the externals of worship but ignored the growth of their hearts toward God—and fed their own greed on the profits of their spiritually profitless work. To Jesus, if anyone was to be condemned for turning their backs on the way of the Law of God, it was those who *knew* the Law but who had failed to teach its goodness to God’s people. His condemnation:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.” (Mt. 23:25-26.)

 Jesus here was again trying to cause the Pharisees and the priests and all those others who proclaimed (and, in the case of the Pharisees, enforced) the Mosaic Law to look inward and see themselves as they truly were—not to condemn them, but to prompt them to accept openly the benefits to themselves and to the Jewish nation which their humility and submission to the will of God would bring about. He was trying to break through their hearts of stone to touch their hearts of flesh beneath and there to offer them the gift of living in the presence of God.

The gospels record that Jesus did convince a few Pharisees and some of the Sadducee members of the Sanhedrin (Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, for example) to learn from him. But the effective impact of such rebukes was on his followers, who heard in his words the invitation to discard the misguided demands of the Pharisees and to be guided by a sincere interiority and open-heartedness toward God, lived out in generosity of spirit toward others.

Jesus was offering to everyone, friend and foe, the opportunity to live in the Divine Presence. And it was surely the participation by the early members of the Christian community in this Divine Presence which, as I proposed above, propelled these Christians to attempt to live the life which Jesus had taught.

Thus, I suggest that Jesus himself took quite a liberal stance toward sin, in the sense that his concept of justice was not retributive—the God of Love whom Jesus worshiped did not exact punishment for misdeeds. For, these misdeeds arose not from a human intention to disobey God, but from that human desire which overtakes a person and renders him or her an addict, as it were, obsessed by the object of desire and helpless to withstand its allure. And all of this occurs within the context of the person’s recognition that he or she is displeasing God, but is unable to resist the temptation. Such helplessness, Jesus seemed to think, did not make the person liable for punishment. It was, rather, an opportunity for the offended person or Divinity to extend to the offender forgiveness and open-heartedness, as well as to articulate the person’s weakness. Such gentle, affirmative treatment made the meaning of “go and sin no more” seem within the sinner’s reach and hopes.

If this interpretation of Jesus’ merciful treatment of the ignorant and the helpless was his genuine way, then he surely transmitted it to his disciples in his legacy community. And that view, then, must have been the way the early communities responded to offenses, at least in the ideal.

The only exception to this mercifulness appears to have been hypocrisy. Deception seems to have been a tender point for Jesus, and it certainly was for Simon Peter when he confronted the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5, imposing on them the God-given punishment of death, according to Luke’s story.

And so, if we have accurately described Jesus’ approach to sin, then the New Testament Greek word used to mean “sin”, *hamartίa*, correctly suggests Jesus’ understanding. The word *hamartia* is a term from military archery meaning “to miss the mark on the target.” This word suggests that spiritual growth within a person is simply *growth*, that is, the spontaneous development of his or her skills of treating people with love and serving them in what they need. As with the archer’s hitting his target with increasing regularity, the disciple growing in spirit is inclined more and more to do the next good thing, rather than to ignore the opportunity.

### The Messiah

Accepting then that Jesus was a man of peace and open-hearted forgiveness, as he was depicted to be in the iconic story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:3-11), we cannot help but wonder how the apocalyptic passages in Mt. 24-25, Mk. 13, and Lk. 17 and 21 found their way into the gospels, or how the *Book of Revelation* found its way into the Christian scriptures. For, these passages and this book are filled with the images of “the son of man” appearing in the skies at the collapse of the current world order to wreak vengeance on the enemies of the Almighty. If we assume that Jesus, who called himself “son of man” in every gospel, was identifying himself as this mighty conqueror of evil and death and of all the enemies of God, how can we account for Jesus’ cataclysmic change in moral character—from forgiver of sin to slaughtering avenger of sin, from the Merciful One to the Avenging Justice?

When we consider this question, a possible starting point strikes us. The introduction of this hope-giving image of Jesus the Conqueror in the last third of the first century, which we discussed in the previous section, was not just a lucky find on the part of the bishops. It was not simply a “good idea.” Rather, that archetypal image reached deeply into the Jewish national identity of the early Christians—the “psychology of the people,” if you will—into the place where enemies are identified and their deeds remembered, and bitterness and hatred and anger at victimization are stored for centuries in the “collective memory” of the people.

This “cultural memory,” which spanned millennia, and about which nothing other than the hatred of these enemies was remembered, gave birth to the hope that their God, YHWH, would remain faithful to them and send them a vindicating Messiah.

From the inception of the Jewish nation in the pre-historic nomadic household of Abraham to the levelling of the city of Jerusalem by the Roman army in 70 CE—a period of about 4,000 years—the worshipers of the God of Abraham lived under the tyranny of hundreds of overlords. In the 1000-year interval, alone, between King David’s conquest of Jerusalem in about 1050 BCE to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE, it has been estimated that Jerusalem had been attacked 52 times, captured and recaptured 44 times, besieged 23 times, and destroyed twice.[[29]](#endnote-30)

For example, during the lifetimes of the patriarchs, Moses and Jacob, Egypt was the dominant empire in the western Mediterranean region. Several centuries later, the direct overlords of the Jews in their homeland were the Philistine kings, whom King David defeated, to become the ruler of what the Jews considered to be the “independent nation” of Israel. Shortly afterward, the Assyrians overwhelmed the northern half of Israel (called “the land of Israel,” distinguishing it from the “land of Judah,” the southern half) and force-marched the inhabitants of the region back to Assyria. The Assyrians then filled this fruitful region with the villas of the Assyrian ruling class, and with slaves from the tribes they conquered. (From this mixed Gentile and returning Jewish population grew the culture of Samaria, which still existed undiminished in Jesus’ day.)

Shortly afterward, in the 6th century BCE, the Babylonians conquered the Assyrian king, and forcibly removed all the inhabitants of Israel to Babylon, leaving behind only the subsistence farmers. Forty years later, King Cyrus the Great of Persia added Babylon to his immense empire, and at the request of the Jewish leaders, released the Jews from their exile, to return to Israel and rebuild their Temple (the “Second Temple.”)

Israel remained subject to Persia until the Egyptians grew again in strength and regained dominance of the western Mediterranean region, including Israel. The Egyptian Ptolemaic kings faded over time, and their empire fell to the strategic mastery of the Macedonian Greek king, Alexander the Great. It was at that point in the late 4th century BCE that Alexander’s Greek culture began to change the Jewish way of life permanently, as we will discuss shortly.

When Alexander died, his empire was divided among the Seleucid dynasty of king, based in Mesopotamia. Israel was enthralled to the merciless Seleucid king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Over time, as the authority of the Seleucid kings flagged, Israel rebelled (the “Maccabean Revolt” led by Judas Maccabeus) and for 100 years, Israel lived as what it declared to be an independent nation (with the tacit permission of Egypt and Rome.)

It was this taste of freedom which inspired the Jews, Hellenized as the culture was, to return to the Torah unimpeded by outside forces (which means that all their battling was turned toward each other) and to lay the foundation for the messianism which arose in Israel when Rome conquered the Jewish nation in 63 BCE, renaming it *Judea*.

As is apparent from the narrative above, the Jews of Israel for most of their history had little choice about who the receiver of their tribute was or who quartered their armies in the Jewish nation. One conqueror after another came and stayed and then was ousted by its successor.

Finally, in 134 of our Common Era, after the battle of the Masada which ended the bar Kochba Rebellion, the Romans drove all Jews from Jerusalem and renamed the ruins of that city Aelia Capitolina. At that point the Jewish nation disappeared from the earth. After that, the land was occupied first by the Romans, then by the Eastern Roman Empire with its capital in Constantinople, then by invading Muslim kings, then for a brief period by the armies of the Crusaders of the Holy Roman Empire, and then by various Muslim princes, until 1948, when the current Nation of Israel was re-established by the United Nations.

In the thousand years of its first existence as a monotheistic Jewish state under King David, who died c. 1000 BCE, the Nation of Israel enjoyed independence, free of vassalage to a foreign power, for a total of about 180 years. The first 80 years of its independence occurred in the reigns of King David and his son, Solomon. And the second period, of 100 years, followed the Maccabean Revolt in 167 BCE.

This swift summary of Israel’s overlords is intended to show you the extent to which Israel was a vassal state to some foreign power or other throughout its history. It is no wonder, then, that very early on, in fact, following the reign of King David, in whom they had placed their hopes, the Jewish people felt a desire for a leader, designated by God, who would free the Jewish nation from internal strife and from external oppression, an anointed one who would free the people from everything that bound them—from military oppression to sin—so that the Paradise of the Kingdom of God would settle on the earth. That leader, that anointed one, was called (in Anglicized Hebrew), *Messiah*.

During this 1000-year period, many men bore the messianic hopes of the Jewish people. Among them were:

* King David himself
* Zerubbabel, the Jewish governor of Persian Judah under King Cyrus. Zerubbabel led the first group of returnees from Babylonia back to Israel
* King Cyrus, the only Gentile on this list, who was called *Messiah* in Isaiah.
* the Jewish King Hezekiah
* In or after Jesus’ time: - Theudas
* Judah ha ﮿ nasi
* Judas the Galilean
* Jesus of Nazareth
* Simon bar Kochba

Over time, the prophets—particularly Isaiah and Daniel—wrote much about this liberating Messiah. When in 167 BCE Judas Maccabeus led his successful revolt against the Seleucid kings and set Israel free from occupation, the messianic hopes of the Jewish people were re-invigorated, only to be crushed again by the Roman occupation of their homeland in 63 BCE.

Nonetheless, by this time, because of the work of the prophets, the people knew well what to expect. The Messiah would be simply a human being, known as “son of man”—a term which emphasized his humanity—and “son of David,” identifying his mission as to complete the establishment of the independent and theocratic Nation of Israel. This Messiah would not be a savior, for God alone would save his people, using his Messiah (“anointed one,” which in Greek is χρίστος, “anointed one/Christ”) as his instrument, to lead his people to victory over all their enemies and then into the Paradise of the perfection of Torah. The result would be an era (for the Jews had no concept of *eternity* in their language) during which the Paradise of the Righteous would be separated from the *Gehenna* of the unworthy by an un-crossable chasm.[[30]](#endnote-31)

Thus, because of this messianism, there arose in the first century BCE a new conception of life after death. It was provided by the Greek philosophical and religious traditions brought into Jewish culture and indeed into the whole region by Alexander the Great and reinforced by the Seleucid kings, who were avid proponents of the Greek cultural heritage. (This importation and imitation of Greek ways is known as *Hellenization*, a term derived from the Greek name for Greece and its culture: *Hellas*.)

The ancient Jewish concept of the *nepesh*/human—an integrated psycho-corporeal being—lacking only the animating principle—the “breath of life” which God continually provided, was of no use to those trying to flesh out the “theology,” if you will, of Paradise. The problem was that for the *nepesh*, an afterlife was not possible. Once a unitary psycho-corporeal being experienced the death of the body (into which was infused the psychological faculties), the whole being died. Nothing remained.

However, Hellenistic culture brought with it a new approach to the structure of human beings. In this view, human beings were dual beings, comprising a material body and a spiritual “soul” *(psyche)*, in which were contained all the psychological faculties, including self-identity, and also the animating principle. This soul infused the material body with life, a sense of self, reason, language, aesthetics, imagination, and so on. And therefore, in death the soul was not annihilated. At death, only the material body died. The soul, being among other things the animating principle, *could not die*.

In this Hellenistic view of human structure, then, the Jews found an explanation for human nature which was fitting to the messianic hopes of the people. They conceived the Divine plan to be something like this: the Messiah would be born among the people. Having extraordinary powers, he would be discovered by the people to be the long-awaited one, sent from God. The people would gather as his army and defeat their oppressors and all enemies of God. Moreover, the Messiah would lead the people to live in complete accord with Torah. Then the presence of the Almighty would descend to earth, and the Kingdom of Heaven/Paradise would be established on earth. Finally, the deathless souls of the Righteous would enjoy the peaceful and harmonious life ordained for them by God for a very long time.

The extent to which Jesus thought or taught this Messiah/Paradise scenario is not clear at all to scholars. In my view, Jesus would immediately have rejected it because it is closed-hearted, vengeful, inconsiderate of the weaknesses of human nature, legalistic, inhumane, and unforgiving. The Jesus we have been considering in this book could not in conscience have embraced the role of slaughtering conqueror. His primary moral instinct was to care for other people, and I believe that he went to his death morally unchanged.

That is not to say, though, that after his death, the Jesus-communities were not influenced by the magnetic allure of the Messiah/Paradise expectations that coursed through the Jewish “subconscious.” Many Jesus-people apparently saw the great value of this “Savior scenario.” Jesus had given them the life of generosity of heart in the presence of God. And so, they wanted to exalt him to the highest extent possible.

It is certainly clear that by the time of the writing of the gospels (beginning in the late 50s), the Jesus communities had embraced the Hellenistic notion of the dualistic human structure (body and soul) and the consequent vision of the Kingdom of God. If Jesus did not in fact appear to his followers in the Upper Room after his execution, then his followers made certain that the story of his ministry included this essential fact—both in their writing of the gospels and in their preaching to the people.

His followers *believed* that Jesus was the promised Messiah of God, and that the conquest of evil and the universal living out of the Law of God would indeed occur through the Jesus-communities. And so, some of them “remembered” and over time, built on, the stories of his Messiahship, and the others, younger, accepted the teaching. None of this was nefarious or deceitful. No Christians plotted the proclamation of Jesus as Messiah. The stories arose as inventions of minds that remembered the earlier times unclearly, adding what they thought they remembered as actual occurrences and conflating details of the memories they carried with them and repeated often. The “hero-ization” of Jesus, especially by witnesses telling their stories two and three decades after their experiences to the gospel writers, is easily understood as the normal transformations which human memory performs on every memory of the “old days” which is circumscribed by heart-felt belief. This process is an understandable effect of the power of belief to re-shape an older memory so that the factual details are eroded by the transformation of the memory into an expression of the character and person of the narrator, and the strength of his or her belief.

 It is an old-school dictum that the gospel stories were transmitted in the community assemblies orally. In such communities, understandings of persons and interpretations of events are more easily articulated—and more easily digested—in story form rather than as logical analysis, which is more difficult to assemble and present, and to follow orally. Moreover, when all knowledge is transmitted orally, the speaker is more easily trusted as reliable than is a story-teller in a literate setting, where the speaker can be “fact-checked.” Nonetheless, it is the weakness of oral reporting that transmission from one individual to another of an incident or saying may, quite without intention or even notice, accrete to the original facts details and emendations added in or omitted by the limits of the speaker’s abilities to understand and interpret, affected as these are by individual preferences and pre-suppositions.

 In the beginning, those in the Jesus-communities who witnessed first-hand the actual events of Jesus’ life told what they had seen and heard to the rest of the community. Later, those who had heard the witnesses told their own communities what they had heard. And so, these oral reports were the source of all the communities’ knowledge of Jesus for the first, say, twenty years after his death—before Mark’s gospel appeared among them, or perhaps before the Aramaic version of Matthew, if that actually existed.

My point here is that in a setting where everyone believed that they knew from the prophets what the Messiah was expected to be, and where everyone believed that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, it was easy for people, in their devotion to the Messiah and his ways, to add a detail here and a saying there, and thereby to elaborate perhaps too richly in these oral reports on the acts and sayings of Jesus, so as to make their depictions truly Messiah-like. So many sources for these stories. So many stories. So many constructions built on wonder and imagination—and belief.

The proclamation of Jesus’ Messiahship by the communities had several, apparently beneficial effects on the Jesus-communities. One of these was that the Christian missionaries had a powerful recruitment tool. In the Gentile lands, it was difficult for the proponents of any small religion to capture the attention of an audience. (See Paul’s failure to do so at Athens in Acts 17:16-33.) The preacher had to have something interesting to say, and the god he presented had to be remarkable in some way. Now the Christian preachers had the Messiahship of Jesus to get their audience’s attention.

Moreover, those who preached in the homeland could easily proclaim Jesus by virtue of his fulfillment of the people’s messianic expectations—though the response of the scoffers was that Jesus was a legally convicted and executed criminal. Would the Messiah of the Holy God be such a disreputable person?

The second outcome of proclaiming the Messiahship of Jesus was that it dramatically raised Christian morale just at a time when Christianity had become normalized and routine in the daily lives of the people, and in Jerusalem and other hotspots, Roman and Jewish persecution of the Christians had begun in earnest. However, this boost in morale was not of the “peaceful conversation” variety. In contrast to the early days of the communities, by the end of the first century, the various types or factions of Christianity had hardened their positions around the ways in which they understood Jesus. The Jewish Christians saw him in terms of their messianic expectations. And the majority of Christians—the Gentile Christians—saw Jesus in the various ways which we discussed earlier—that is, through the lenses of Gnosticism, Docetism, Montanism, Marcionism, and the other -isms that existed at the time.

And these folks, as Clement of Rome suggests in his letter to the Corinthians, were not sedentary letter-writers. They were bold and forthright men of action. They were pacifist warriors. In brief, they were hot-headed. Debates often turned physical. And in these matters of doctrine, the toughs on the various sides felt justified in being so, for these were matters of the true teachings about Jesus and about the communities which were founded in dedication to him. What was being argued was the “treasury of the faith,” as the bishops later styled it, and no one was going to let others push aside his version of the correct views.

## Sin-Guilt

However, the third and most enduring outcome of the Jesus as Conqueror scenario was its impact on the psychology of Christians seeking to be righteous in the sight of God. As we said above, Judaism understood sin to be an external action which violated the Law of God. The Greco-Roman polytheists and their followers had a different view of sin: Since polytheistic religions depended for their meaning on the appeasement of the patron god of a city or nation or mystery religion or other cult, sin as the violation of some code or regimen had no place in polytheism. For them, the world worked simply, like this: Everything, literally everything, from the movement of the planets to the tides and storms of the sea, to the anger of your spouse, to the growth of violets unnoticed beneath your sandals, was controlled by a god. If you didn’t appease the gods, and especially your patron god, or if your god was too ineffective to protect you in the way you required, then the worst happened to you. If, on the other hand, you performed the correct displays of worship and honor before that god, then the god would bring about the completion of the necessary work.

In contrast, among Christians, sin was not external action. It was visceral. It was an interior disposition toward, or a weakness for, something un-Godly. Sin was not necessarily the display of the weakness in public. Rather, it was the indulgence of the heart—the turning of the heart away from righteousness and toward self-fulfillment. Whether a selfish desire ever became action or not was beside the point, for the point was whether or not the heart had relinquished its commitment to God.

That much was the teaching of Jesus, as we have seen. But then this consciousness of the interior self took a wide and devastating turn, from which Euro-American culture has not yet recovered after two thousand years. Into the hearts of Christians in the second half of the first century crept the soul-destroying worm of ***sin-guilt***.

Sin-guilt is not from Jesus, if we understand Jesus to have been liberal with regard to sin, whose motto could have been, “Neither do I condemn you. Go, and do not sin again.” (Jn 8:11.) If this understanding of the Way of Jesus is correct, then it must be that Jesus could not have seen himself as a slaughtering Messiah. And if Jesus did not project himself in this way as the expected Messiah, the administrator of bloody justice, then it must be the case that all the gospel passages which depict Jesus as such are fabricated interpolations, inserted by the writers of Mark’s gospel or by later editors after Mark’s gospel was written,[[31]](#endnote-32) in order to enhance the depiction of Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel’s messianic expectations and its desire for the Kingdom of God to descend to earth.

Certainly, Israel’s hopes were in God’s sending his Messiah to free his people from oppression. And the image of Jesus as that Messiah was valuable for the reasons given above. However, hidden in the shadows of the Conquering Messiah icon is the worm of sin-guilt. For over time, reflective Christians, living the life of interior worship of the presence of the Almighty, always confront at some point or another the dark truths about themselves which are hidden away in the shadows of the self: I do not love everyone; I lust; I crave wealth; I hate; I have bitterness and desire for revenge in my heart toward specific people; I have floating rage; I want to throw off the shackles of Christian moral discipline.

These reflective Christians look on themselves and see their weaknesses, which, however forcefully they try, they cannot eradicate from their hearts. They feel helpless and stand ashamed before God, wondering whether they will be accepted into the Kingdom. The specter of guilt grows darkly in their hearts. Some of them tumble into despair. Others begin to pretend to be virtuous, knowing what they consider to be their true state, and trying to pall it over with disingenuous good deeds. And many of the others live on in self-hatred and the indignity of worthlessness, trusting that although they cannot be who they “should” be and have no way of freeing themselves from their sinfulness and its guilt, God will lead them to find their way to him. Unfortunately for this last group, the one who judges is a retributive judge who rewards the faithful and punishes the wicked. (See Mt. 25:31-46.)

Please remember that this psychology of sin-guilt arose in the second half of the first century. At that time, there was nothing like the “personal confession” which is available to many “high church” Christians. The sacrament of confession, which guaranteed the forgiveness of one’s sins by God, was not invented until the fifth century and not adopted officially by the Roman Church until the eleventh century. So Christians of the first century had no formal, blessed ceremony by which they could be assured that their sins were forgiven and that they were again right with God.

How, then, did this sin-guilt condition arise? The psychological conditions have been noted just above. And we can trace the development of the sin-guilt condition in the Christian community by studying the Apocalyptic passages in the synoptic gospels.

The passages we are about to examine were written in the *Apocalyptic Style*. This style was developed in the second and first centuries BCE by Jewish messianists to proclaim the exalted powers which God was presumed to give to his Messiah and to strike wonder and terror into those who desired or dreaded the coming to earth of the Kingdom of God. The imagery which was used in this style is dreamlike and fantastic, and often full of cataclysmic cosmic events, as well as of dragons and beasts and other dream-creatures. The atmosphere is either dark with tragedy and suffering, or else blinding in the glory of the Kingdom.

The style was intended to be symbolic and to refer in code to the life in the Christian community and to its beliefs. Whether in any individual piece it accomplished that intent, this style touches the deepest archetypal sensitivities of human consciousness.

We can find this powerful writing style in the Jewish scriptures, for example, in the opening chapters of Ezekiel (written in the 6th century BCE, an early and influential fore-runner of the later Messianic Period), in Daniel’s visions, beginning in Chapter 7, and in Zechariah. Both Daniel and Zechariah were written in the second to first centuries BCE.

And among the Christian scriptures we have the unique and isolated Apocalyptic passages in the synoptic gospels, as discussed above, and the *Book of Revelation*.

Now let us examine the end-times passages in the synoptic gospels, arranged chronologically by date of composition. We begin with Mark, for the reasons explained in note 31.

Mark’s gospel, as it has come down to us, contains one solitary passage of apocalyptic writing (13:3-37.) It occurs when Jesus and his close disciples are touring the Jerusalem Temple. The end-times content and the style it is articulated in come at us out of the blue, as it were. This fact, that the style is used only in this place in this gospel, causes us to suspect immediately that this might be an interpolated passage.

In this passage, the character Jesus predicts the coming of the end of time and of the Son of Man in power and glory. Jesus foretells that after a period of desolation, accompanied by cosmic catastrophes, the Son of Man will appear in glory in the heavens as they descend upon earth. He will then gather to himself his elect from everywhere on earth. Finally, Jesus cautions his apostles to stay awake, lest they be found sleeping, though the repercussions of being asleep are not expressed. We can suppose, at the least, the irritation of the master. At any rate, the passage concludes before it is roundly finished, and the reader is left wondering.

In this passage we have an early depiction of the Return of Jesus (supposing Jesus to be the “son of man” referred to there.) The main point of the passage seems to be that Jesus would gather all his faithful to himself, regardless of how or where they lived and died. The prospect of punishment of the unfaithful is an undeveloped side-note.

This passage represents what we would expect the Christian community to believe about the Return of Jesus—that he was coming back particularly to gather his followers together and bring them into the Kingdom of God. This interpretation is compatible with the joy in the Good News that characterized the early Jesus-communities, and which surely continued even after the Destruction of the Temple.[[32]](#endnote-33)

A passage similar in structure and content to Mark’s, but greatly elaborated in detail and by the addition of parables, is found in Matthew (24:3-25:46.) For all the appended detail, the only significant addition in Matthew to Mark’s version is the enhancement of the punishment meted out at the judgment. In a parable, Jesus says that when the lazy, unrighteous servant’s master arrives and finds him not doing his job, he “will punish him (an alternate version reads “cut him to pieces”), and put him with the hypocrites; there men will weep and gnash their teeth” (Mt. 24:51) and “Then he will say to [the unrighteous] at his left hand, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Mt. 25:41.) And why? “Truly I say to you, as you did [not open your hearts] to one of the least of these, you did [not open your hearts] to me.” (Mt. 25:45.)

In Matthew, then, the punishment reserved for the unrighteous is by fire. One can interpret this passage to mean that the punishment does not extend to those who are active and faithful members of the Christian community, regardless of their interior recognition of their sinfulness. Or on the other hand, one can interpret this punishment to extend to all sinners, including those who dutifully attend the community festivities. Matthew’s version, then, can appear to us to be an ambivalent resolution, so inarticulate that it may or may not suggest that individual faithful Christians are liable for punishment at the judgment. The opinion of the writer(s) in this passage is unclear.

In Luke’s gospel, the last of the synoptic gospels to be written, the whole content of the apocalyptic narrative and its parables is broken up and scattered in different chapters. The main narrative is in 21:7-38. But other portions of the narrative are found in Lk 12, 17, and 19. Now, the main narrative ends with Jesus warning his disciples to stay alert, ”praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of man.” (21:36.) In this version, then, Jesus directly warned his followers that they were also liable to hellfire if they did not strengthen themselves by virtuous conduct.

So we have found that the synoptic gospels suggest a time-line development in the awareness of Christians of their liability to damnation. In Mark’s early gospel (c. 70 CE), the emphasis of the narrative is on the salvation of the faithful members of the community. However, by the late 80s or the 90s, when Luke’s gospel was written, Christians seem to have understood that the Divine Eye which scrutinizes every heart does not close or look away when these Christians stand before it. Rather, it probes their hearts, just as it does all others’, and condemns to hell whoever it thinks is unworthy of Paradise, Christian or pagan, no matter.

This evidence, then, suggests that Christians came to believe, by the final decades of the first century, that they too were sinners before the Almighty and as helpless to heal themselves as were those who rejected the Good News of the Messiah’s coming. There was now no cause for arrogance or feelings of superiority over non-believers. In this new recognition, both believers and non-believers were sinful before God. The single advantage that the Christians believed they had with regard to their sinfulness was the corresponding recognition that the Way of Jesus, if they practiced it sincerely, would prepare them for entry into the Kingdom.

## The Purity Movement

Another kind of evidence of the recognition of sin-guilt in Christian hearts was the origination and growth at this same time of the Early Purity Movement (previously introduced on page 49.) The psychology of such a movement is not difficult. The Jews, of course, had their own purity laws, focusing in particular on food preparation and service, and on female purification matters. So the Jewish Christians were accustomed to such regulation for the sake of purity before God and for the social welfare. Moreover, many Gentile Christians were surely familiar with, if not actually practicing, the purity rites of two very well-known cults, the Cult of Isis and the Cult of Cybele.

When the desire for special purity, namely, sexual continence even in marriage, appeared in the Christian communities, it seemed to the community members to be a fruitful way of making recompense for sin-guilt. The Purity Movement seemed to offer a way to find forgiveness by being a “very extra special person” before God, one who was willing to repress the sexual desire, that most basic of human social needs. The Purity Movement, then, seemed to be a way of compensating God for one’s sinfulness by performing good actions.[[33]](#endnote-34) The movement was the polished side of the coin of sexual baseness, which became perhaps the single most feared and hated—and most practiced—group of sins in the Christian Community, even to this present day.

The development of the strict Christian norms for sexual behavior (and also for voluntary abortion[[34]](#endnote-35)) influenced the self-awareness and self-respect of every Christian. Once the movement took hold in the Christian community, it deeply affected the way Christians understood themselves. They were constricted in “this mortal coil,” as Shakespeare expressed it. A person’s body became not a place of familiar comfort, but a foreign place of dangers and lurking evils, temptations to all sorts of behaviors, from self-pleasure to homosexuality, and from ritual prostitution to the guilty joy of adulteries and consorts, to public displays of private behaviors, to the indulgence in cruel and hurtful forms of sex, to rape and the lechery of child sexual abuse. The temptations were so many and varied, the heart so weak, God so distant, habits so easily formed and broken only with great torment, that Christians found themselves in lifelong battles with themselves.

The entire Purity Movement was filled with pitfalls of impossible victory. The “way of purity” was so rigorous and set such high standards that too often it was impossible for ordinary people to attain it. Surely from the start, many faithful people’s images of self turned to self-hatred, or to self-scorn, or to psychotic episodes of self-injury and mutilation.

 The sexual purity psychology was self-divisive. One carried in oneself an astigmatic double-vision of, on one channel of the self, who he or she was “supposed to be” in conformity with what they were taught were God’s wishes and commands for sexual and reproductive purity. On another channel of the self, one saw who he or she was with honesty. And when the faithful person compared the ideal image with the realities of his or her life, defeat always surfaced as the inevitable outcome..

In this way, sin-guilt changed the Christian community by changing the individual members of the community into divided, broken people, each pursuing an impossible goal. That path of pursuit surely led then, as it does today, inevitably either to arrogant hypocrisy, or to despair, or to the self-destruction which accompanies sin-guilt, or to rejection of, and freedom from, the whole hopeless exercise.

Sin-guilt broke the spirit of the Christian community, over time turning joyfulness into self-loathing. The praise-filled assemblies of the earliest communities changed dramatically over the decades and centuries into lugubrious gatherings, where the preachers invited the baptized sinners to meditate on their disobedience of God’s commands and on their own moral hideousness. One can see the pictorial evidence of this change from joy to self-induced suffering in the history of crucifixes (crosses which carry a representation of Jesus on them.) See footnote 37 on page below.

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### The Consequences of the Destruction of Jerusalem

The political instability which resulted from the massacre by Jewish nationalists of the Twelfth Roman Legion in 68 CE, and the subsequent razing of the Jerusalem Temple in 70, cast both Jews and Jewish Christians into lives of chaos and violence.

Their common enemy—Rome—began to disassemble the Jewish nation, piece by piece. When the Temple fell, the religion of the Jews, which was based in blood sacrifice, collapsed, having no altars nor worship place where they could fulfill their scriptural obligations, since only the Jerusalem Temple could be used for this purpose. Moreover, fear and horror spread through the people as the Roman soldiers had free reign with their victims. The security of the God-protected homeland evaporated.

Observant Jews and Jewish Christians, and especially the religious leaders, were sought out, and so they fled from the city. The Pharisees (known to their followers as *rabbis*) settled in the city of Jamnia, about 50 miles west of Jerusalem, on the Mediterranean coast. At the request of the head rabbi, the Romans spared Jamnia, which became the center of Jewish cultural and intellectual life until the Roman suppression of the bar Kochba rebellion in 135 CE. Rome’s retribution for this revolt was to utterly flatten the city of Jerusalem, dispersing the Jews from the homeland into Gentile territories. As a further insult, the city was renamed as Aelia Capitolina, in honor of the current emperor, Hadrian (whose family name was Aelia), and the chief god of the Roman pantheon, Jupiter Capitolinus.

The Jewish Christians, on the other hand, had no standing with the Romans, and they dispersed throughout the region, eventually settling in the major coastal city of Antioch (in modern Syria.) Antioch was a Gentile city, of course, and so in this haven, the Jewish Christians first came into close contact with Gentile Christians. Gentiles soon came to Christianity in large numbers, overtaking the Jewish Christians as the dominant population group in the Christian community in a short time. Thus, Christianity lost much of its contact with its Jewish heritage, though it still studied the Jewish scriptures as its “sacred scripture.”

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 Within a few short decades, although forty or more communities had been established in various locales throughout the Mediterranean basin, the Christian experience and the Christian community had changed. The mystical union with God was no longer the highlight of the Christian experience. In one community after another, baptism no longer produced the “new man” who was born into the mystical presence of God. Rather, it produced a Christian person, desiring to live in goodness, who if he or she came to recognize the presence of God, did so as an individual and not as a member of the community, which had lost that experience by and large. The communities suffered essentially from starvation of spirit as the entire Christian community turned its attention to the pressing matters of the time, namely, the problems of orthodoxy, of community structure, and of the dark sinfulness which they had been discovering more and more fully within them.

## Heaven and Judgment

What is important for our discussion of the Christian understanding of the afterlife is that in this Greek view of human nature, the soul cannot die. The immortality of the soul was a “hot-button” issue in the first century. It was strongly advocated by the sect of the Pharisees, who taught it widely in Israel. And it seems to have been a constant subject of theological debate between the more progressive and idealistic Pharisees and the conservative, self-protective, politically realistic party of the Sadducees, who were the priestly class which operated the Jerusalem Temple.

Jesus himself apparently taught this view of human nature as well. At any rate, from early on, the Jesus-community held the belief that the individual soul was immortal, for this belief was compatible with Jesus’ invitation to his followers to enter union with the Father. The mystical union of love with the Father, which Jesus taught to be the union of the devotee’s soul with the spirit of the Father, endured beyond death. Since the human soul was immortal, the hope easily arose that once a person escaped the cares of the world in death, the person’s soul would continue to thrive in an on-going version of this mystical union into the future. This was “the hope of Heaven” for which all followers of Jesus longed.

To be clear, the “hope of Heaven” which the *Jesus-people* nurtured in themselves was *not* the hope that after they died, they would be found worthy to enter into the kingdom of mystical union with the Father. That is a later development, as we saw above. Rather, the situation of the early Jesus-followers was this. Every Jew knew from scripture that in the beginning, God created two realms: the realm of Earth, which human beings occupied and in which, ideally, they labored in the service of God; and the realm of Heaven (or “the heavens”), which was occupied by God and by the spirit-creatures who were created to serve God there.

What Jesus gave to the early Jesus-communities was the powerful teaching that the personal experience of union with the Father was available in this present life to those who sought it by both interior devotion and outward service of the needs of the community. And the experience of easy congress between the Realm of Heaven and the interior, immortal soul of the individual was confirmed for every follower of Jesus whenever the Bread was Broken. For, at each Bread-Breaking ceremony, the community experienced the tangible presence of Jesus, who had died and who was now come among them to offer himself, as they offered themselves, in service of the Holy One. Heaven and Earth regularly intersected at the Breaking of the Bread, and there was no reason for any early follower of Jesus to expect that this meeting of worlds would cease. For just as Jesus was now alive although he had died, a faithful follower of Jesus expected that though he or she should die bodily, their souls—the haven of their self-identities and their consciousness and their hearts—would continue to persist in the union with the Father. *This* was the “hope of Heaven”—that the union with the Father which the Jesus-community frequently experienced would not end at death, but would be furthered by the falling away of the distractions of this current world.

This line of thought led to a question among the communities, to which the missionary, Paul, proposed his own answer, What happens to the community members who die before Jesus returns in glory? In 2 Thess 4:13 ff., Paul proposes that in death, the followers of Jesus actually “fall asleep” and continue to rest in that state of comfort until the heavenly trumpets which signal the return of Jesus awaken the sleeping, so that they, as well as the currently living followers, ascend to join Jesus in the clouds, “and so we shall always be with the Lord.” (4:17.) In the context in which I am writing, this last verse means always “in ecstatic union with the Father, together with Jesus.”

This meant that when Jesus, in the future, fulfilled his promise and returned again in glory, they—his disciples—would also be raised up to join him, whether their bodies had died or not, and they would follow him into the heavenly homeland and feast at his table for eternity.[[35]](#endnote-36) There was hope and joy in their anticipation.

The persecutions which began in the last third of the first century changed the Christian expectation. Suddenly there was fear of the anti-Christian bullies in the streets, and later, especially in the next two centuries, the growing fear was of the state-sponsored repression of the Christian faith. The exuberance with which the first generation of Jesus-people greeted the teachings of Jesus had lost its potency as the message was carried from land to land, and in each place was interpreted differently—according to the ways of that land’s culture. Ideas were added to the message of Jesus, and others were re-framed, and still others, though alien, were accepted into the Jesus-community as useful. In all, the religion had become stale and difficult in its diversity of thought, and we find in many of the ancient letters which still survive that theological thinking was replacing the exaltation of the believer’s spirit as it joined in union with the Father.

The mystical spirit no doubt was accepted for a longer period of time in some communities than in others. But the elders were dying off—those who first rejoiced in the mystical union with the Father. So the original witnesses were no longer present to tell their stories, while many of the younger believers (we can imagine from our own experience of the passing on of folkways from one generation to the next) learned the form but not the substance of the community’s folkways. That is, they performed the actions without understanding their meaning, or with newly conceived explanations for their actions. And so they understood their communities toward the end of the century to have different needs and different expectations than the communities of the forties and fifties had.

In these simple and often undetectable ways, the Christian communities changed from the praise-filled and joyful communities of those inspired by the mystical union which Jesus encouraged, to the dull and frightened communities of later years, whose interests and hopes lay elsewhere.

Of interest in this regard is the *First Letter of Clement of Rome to the Corinthians*, written in the last quarter of the first century. Clement was the bishop of Rome, that is, the reigning “pope,” writing to the same congregation at Corinth to whom Paul had written two letters, perhaps twenty years earlier.

Clement’s letter gives us an insight into what the Corinthians had been spending their time on. There were apparently two issues. The first was that a group of conservative members were objecting to the equal place of women in the community, a principle established by Paul during his lifetime. (See Gal. 3:28. Paul died in 65 CE in Rome.)

The second issue to which Clement was responding was what was translated as “sedition” against the elders of the community by a group of rebellious members. No further details are given. But Clement’s response did not chastise the community for its discord, but rather he reminded the rebellious men of the virtues beloved by the first communities, warning particularly against the corrosion of values caused by jealousy. And he referred to many examples of virtuous men from “the sacred scripture,” by which he meant the Jewish scriptures. For, as yet there were no official Christian scriptures. It’s true that the synoptic gospels (Mark, Matthew, and Luke) had been written and had been being read in the community meetings for some years. It’s also true that Paul’s letters were circulating in the fifties and sixties, and indeed, Clement reminds the Corinthians of the praise which Paul gave to the first-generation of Christian Corinthians in Paul’s letters to them for their staunch faithfulness to the way of Jesus and for their pure virtue.

Interestingly, during that discourse, Clement implies that such faith and virtue had the blessing of God, and suggests that the Corinthians he was addressing should imitate their forefathers—for God’s blessing was confirmed in that an “abundant outpouring also of the Holy Spirit fell upon all.” (1 Clem. 2:2.)

One could read this verse as simply referring to the mystical union with the Father which Jesus encouraged and which the Corinthians whom Clement was addressing were still continuing to enjoy. But that interpretation is doubtful. If it had been Clement’s intention to remind these Corinthians of the mystic union they still enjoyed, then the meaning of the passage changes. Clement, in that case, would be reminding these Corinthians to be virtuous and to create peace in their community in respect for the gift of mystical union that they were still receiving. But Clement—an old man at this time, who surely remembered the mystical union and without doubt continued to practice it—did not make that point. He spoke as though these outpourings of the spirit were a thing of the past, when the Corinthian community had been open-heartedly devoted to God and uninvolved in such petty in-fighting as he was correcting in this letter.

If my reading of this passage has merit, then we have here evidence of the fading, by the end of the first century, of the original propelling impulse toward the way of Jesus in at least some of the Christian communities—that impulse was, of course, the community’s participation in mystical union with the Father.

As we discussed above, in place of the originally loose community structure, with its “overseer” who acted as facilitator of the worship and counselor to those in need, a new, firmer and more structured leadership scheme emerged toward the end of the first century, when the need for definitive orthodoxy and authoritative witness to Jesus’ struggles and promises were sorely needed. The overseers of each community declared themselves to their communities as leaders and referees. And their title, “overseer,” became official.[[36]](#endnote-37) In addition, they demanded to be treated “with all reverence,” and to be set apart from others as more “worthy.” And over all, they demanded to be obeyed.

For example, Ignatius, bishop (that is, Metropolitan) of Antioch of Syria, wrote the following to his community in the city of Magnesia, located 140 linear miles north of Athens, on the Aegean Sea, in order to support his bishop there, who was being ignored because of his youth. “[Do] not treat your bishop too familiarly on account of his youth, but . . . yield to him all reverence.” (Ch. 2) And, “It is becoming, therefore, that ye also should be obedient to your bishop, and contradict him in nothing.” (Ch. 3) And, stunningly, “As therefore the Lord did nothing without the Father, being united to Him, . . . so neither do you anything without the bishop and the elders.” (Ch 2.)

What do these words tell us about conditions in the Magnesian community at the end of the first century? There was clearly discord and revolt against the leadership scheme imposed by the overseers. This leadership scheme—bishop, with his deputized priests and deacons—makes sense in terms of structuring the authoritative work that had to be done in the community. However, as they brought themselves to power, the bishops (of course) took too much. They demanded honor and reverence. They demanded absolute obedience. And they believed that they occupied a place in the community comparable to God’s in God’s relation with Jesus!

I, for one, see no confusion here about why the conservative Christians rebelled. They watched the Christian community lose its spontaneity and freedom as the bishops usurped complete authority in the community. After this imposition of leadership structure on the community, two classes of Christians arose: the clerical class, who had all the power and who also had control of the community’s wealth; and the commoners, those who had allowed their own necessity to the community to slip away as the clergy relieved them of their status as participating Christians.

Ignatius was not the only Metropolitan to observe this restive and discontented attitude among his “flock.” The bishop of Rome, Clement (died 99 CE), a contemporary of Ignatius’s (died c. 107), also felt it necessary to deal with rebellion in his community at Corinth—the community founded by Paul of Tarsus perhaps 40 years earlier, as we have seen above.

Not only had the communities changed, but the Christians themselves had changed. The younger generation had become aggressive and vocal in their opposition to the leadership. A sense of belligerence pervaded the communities. It was during this time, as discord flared within the groups, as new and confusing ideas flooded into the communities from non-Christian sources, and as weariness set in among those faithful who were still waiting for the promised Second Coming of Jesus, to bring the Kingdom of God to earth, that morale flagged among the members of many of the communities.

This spiritual weariness drained their hopes and emptied them. And then, new hope arose for them in the image of Jesus, their Lord, as the Conquering Warrior, as we discussed in the previous section. For these devotees of Jesus, the judgment of their enemies and then their enemies’ damnation brought renewed hope and expectation. Jesus would appear gloriously in the skies with his army of saints and angels. The living Christians would rise up to meet him and enter his glory. Then he would descend ferociously upon his enemies, upon the anti-Christs, upon all who refused to worship him, and they would be destroyed in hell forever.

Justice would finally come to earth. Christian virtue would be rewarded, and the callous sinners who refused God’s grace of salvation, would be punished.

Due to this changing mindset, forgiveness changed its character. In the Jesus-communities, forgiveness was a grace which God gave to *you* so that you could exercise it to heal fractures and hurts done to you by other persons. In essence, by the grace of God, you were able to forgive those who offended you. Now, in the Christian communities, forgiveness was primarily an unearned gift from God to the sinner—a gift which sinners could never be worthy of, and could never win for themselves. Forgiveness was the gift of life bought for sinners by Jesus’ offering of his own blood to God. In essence, you thanked God for graciously forgiving your sins.

The forgiveness of others in the Christian communities after 70 CE was a sidelined virtue. It was still valued from the pulpit because, after all, it was an expression of the Second Great Commandment of Jesus. But once sin-guilt had wormed its way into the consciences of Christians, self-condemnation dominated Christian thinking from then until this day.[[37]](#endnote-38)

The consequences of slipping into the sin-guilt psychology are many and serious. First, a person’s belief that he or she is living under the burden of sin-guilt puts the person into an unresolvable psychological conflict. The moral character of what were taught as the commandments of God were states of perfection which humans rarely, if ever, achieve: states such as constant self-denying attention to fulfilling the needs of others, or again, the state of constant sexual abstinence. These “shoulds” threw the Christian into a life of tension between what the Christian knew himself or herself to be and to need, and what the Christian believed he or she “should be” in order to glorify God. What the body called for was interpreted as weakness, and so, simply in feeling these bodily demands, the Christian considered himself or herself to be weak and helpless.

Because of the presence of this feeling among their members, many communities of the Christian Church became dark, somber environments, thick with distress and fear, crushed under failure and hopelessness. The sacrament of individual confession had not yet been invented.[[38]](#endnote-39) The common way of achieving forgiveness was to confess one’s serious sins before the gathered assembly, with the overseer/bishop deciding the penance which must be completed by the penitent before he or she would be allowed to resume receiving Holy Communion. For less serious sins, the penitent’s only recourse was private prayer to God.

The second consequence of the emphasis on sin-guilt is that it crushed the person’s sense of worth and attacked his or her confidence in the love of God. Christians who faced the fear of damnation from day to day endured a burdensome, joyless existence which found no meaning in present life but aimed its hope always toward the future life of heaven. In such a view of life, there was much room for meaninglessness and despair, as well as for pretense, hypocrisy, and self-delusion.

The third consequence of indulgence in sin-guilt follows directly from the second. Because sin crushes the sinner’s sense of worth and his or her hope of salvation, the sinner casts around for a way to relieve the burden which is dragging him or her into the abyss of despair. The Christian community also presented itself to its members as giving assistance to all who are seeking forgiveness in Jesus. But for centuries that assistance was private and non-liturgical (non-sacramental.) It wasn’t until the eleventh century, when the Roman Church officially recognized and adopted the Sacrament of Penance (also known as “going to confession”), that the Christian Church could offer guaranteed forgiveness of sin—of any and all sins that a person might commit.

The internal conflict between what I “am” and what I “should be,” with all its attendant guilt, self-hatred, and fear of punishment, is Christianity’s enduring legacy to the Euro-American vision of life. Today we might call it “neurosis.” Whatever it’s called, the psychological damage caused by Christian sin-guilt is widespread in society and deeply corrosive, for it causes individual people to reject and to hate their very selves. Often this self-hatred is turned outward in acts of violence against other people. Moreover, it crushes that personal freedom from fear and regulation which Paul of Tarsus found to be a valuable outcome of commitment to Jesus.[[39]](#endnote-40)

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This change of character in the Jesus communities, brought about by all the forces we have been discussing, and resulting in their transformation into the Christian Church, is the crucial moment in Christian Church history. For, the community which Jesus founded passed away as it became the Christian Church. Whereas the Jesus community was generous, the Christian Church was self-centered. Whereas the Jesus community was joyful, the Christian Church was ridden with guilt and self-hatred. Whereas the Jesus community lived each day fully, looking forward only to the next Bread-Breaking, the Christian Church learned to despise the present life and to turn its vision toward the next life, wishing only to shake off “this mortal coil.” And whereas the Jesus community was filled with love and freedom, the Christian Church was filled with belief and obedience and, more deeply, with fear.

2.

The Medieval Roman Church:

The Power and the Degeneracy

1. In Embryo: The Nativity of the Roman Church

Out of the first century came a Christian community which was the Roman Church of the Middle Ages in embryo. All of the components, except four, which fed the growth of the early Christian Church into the mighty and universal Church of Rome of the tenth through the seventeenth centuries were in place by the end of the first century. Most important to the institution over the long haul was the architecture of the new power structure which appeared toward the end of the first century. This new structure was effective both locally and globally. As we have seen, the initial power-grab by the local overseers in each community was the first blooming of the administrative structure. These overseers announced themselves to their communities as authoritative. And after an initial liberal opposition to the power grab, the people fell into place and accepted the authority of their bishops, who claimed that as Christian community leaders, called by the people to this role, they had received from God the authority of the apostles.

Whether one sees this assumption of power as warranted or not by the political and religious circumstances of the time depends on how much faith one attributes to the Christians of the late first century. For the gospels are clear that Jesus did not expect his disciples to be power figures or decision-makers. He gave them no such charge. To him, their work was to be missionaries and preachers, teaching to the spiritually impoverished the life of Godly joy which comes with the Way of Jesus. So their decision to elect themselves to power in the communities suggests that they had little faith in letting God lead the community; rather, they felt they were “called to” leadership by God.

“How convenient for the bishops!” a skeptic might say.

Of course, to this point, I have ignored the well-known counterevidence—namely, a single episode in Mt. 16:15-20:

He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades [*or* the powers of death] shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

The Roman Catholic Church, up to and including the present day, claims that this passage is the foundation for the authority of the bishops and for the supreme authority of the Pope. This position is contradicted by Protestant Christians, who reject the supreme authority of the Pope, and their arguments against it range from reasonable presentations to semantic quibbles (for example, the size of the “rock” that the name Peter means in Greek. Is it a boulder or a pebble?)

A different analysis of this passage is based on its uniqueness. Mt 16:25-30 is the only place in the four gospels where Jesus explicitly gives these powers (in fact, they are the powers to excommunicate and to rescind excommunication, and to provide the foundation for the assembly) to his disciples and especially to the leader or spokesperson for the disciples. One would hope that if the passage were authentically from Jesus, it would also appear in Mark, especially, or less acceptably, in Luke. However, the bestowal of these powers and authority appears nowhere else in any of the four gospels.

Because of this uniqueness, this passage is better explained as a later addition to Matthew’s gospel, written after the leadership structure, both local and global, had been established and accepted. For, it is without parallel in the other gospels. And more importantly, it speaks of a structure which the Christian community did not have, either at the time of Jesus or at the time of the original writing of the gospels. The notion of the Christian Church as a widespread religious organization, with a central authority who was recognized as its leader, did not appear until the fifth century. Before then, the Christian influence extended into certain regions of the Mediterranean basin, and the bishops who were the leaders of the communities in these regions were the *patriarchs* and the *metropolitans* who governed the regional territories. So, the Church at that point was a semi-cohesive gathering of the Christian communities in many Mediterranean lands, rather than a global organization, led by one person. The authoritative wisdom of the Bishop of Rome was, it is true, accepted by the Christian communities early on—perhaps as early as the end of the first century. But papal supremacy was not formally recognized until Pope Leo I declared himself to be the supreme governor of the earthly as well as the spiritual affairs of the Church in the fifth century.

Our conclusion then is that the passage from Mt 16 cannot have been written when the original gospel was written. For, the institutional structure of the Christian community of the later centuries evolved from the embryonic local structure which the bishops fought so hard to impose on their communities during the late first and the second centuries. This passage was authored by someone who was familiar with the structured Church, and thus, was composed well after the original writing of Matthew’s gospel.

A major implication of the imposition of this authority structure on the Christian community, called “the Church” by the end of the first century, is that it created a division in the community between the *clergy*—that is, those who had been delegated by God, through the affirmation of the members of the community, to perform the sacred works, such as the Sunday liturgical assembly, which included the offering of the bread—and the *laity*—those worshipers who had no official role in the performance of the sacred works, that is, the common people.

We have seen above that when the bishops assumed authority in their communities, they also wished to be recognized as commanding that authority. The common people were instructed to show deference and reverence to their bishops, and to obey their every word. For, the bishops claimed that they were the divinely appointed representatives of the risen Jesus himself. And as we have also seen, the lay people who relished the freedom which the Way of Jesus brought with it (in such a form as it bore in the last years of the century) rebelled and rejected the bishops’ authority.

Nonetheless, the bishops became firmly implanted in their roles by the middle of the second century. They shared their liturgical prayers and acts with one another regionally, and so, the way that the Sunday “Mass” was presented varied from one area to another. These liturgical celebrations further separated the clergy from the laity. For the clergy understood themselves to be the facilitators of the prayers which the people offered to God. That is, the bishops wrote the prayers which they thought the people should be voicing at any point in the celebration, and in the words they thought the people should be using. The people had no say in these matters. And in addition, the bishops understood themselves to be the mediators of God’s responses to these prayers, the graces and favors that God was believed to be pouring out on the people. The clergy even at some points spoke in the prophetic voice of Jesus himself.

And the lay people? They stood on the sidelines and watched. They had no part to play. After a while, they even stopped ingesting the sacred bread at the Mass. And as time went on, the bishops continued to find new ways to make this separation clear. Please recall that the early Bread-Breaking ceremonies were conducted at ordinary eating tables, with everyone in a dignified place. When the bishops gained power, the table of offering of the sacrifice replaced the eating tables. That is, the bishops’ formally defined liturgies, with their highly ritualized offering of the bread, replaced the fellowship meals at which the bread was broken and passed as food from person to person.

At first, this special table—the “altar”—was placed openly among the people, as the table is on which the offering bread is set to this day in Russian Orthodox liturgies. And the space around the altar was considered to be “sacred space,” to be entered only by the ordained bishop or his assistants, the priests and the deacons, who were said to represent the people. But as time went on, the bishops thought it more appropriate to the sacredness of the liturgy to place a closure between the altar and the laity. As a result, what were considered the most sacred portions of the liturgy took place in this enclosed area, beyond the sight of the people, and attended only by the clergy, who occasionally prayed loudly enough for the people to hear.

The most notable of these separators which stood between the people and the altar were, in the Eastern Orthodox Churches from very early on, the *iconostases*—solid screens which stretched across the apse of the church, separating the people in the nave from the altar behind the screen in the apse. On the screen was hung a number of icons or devotional depictions of holy people. In the Western churches, see-through “rood screens” were built across the front of the apse, to separate the people in the nave from the altar in the apse. These rood screens did not go out of use until in some cases the seventeenth century.

We noted just above that when the ritualized altar tables replaced the original eating tables in the community celebrations, the “sacred space” which surrounded them was penetrated only by the celebrant/bishop and his associates—the priests, and the deacons, who were said to represent the people. Consider this for a moment. The altar table was there, placed among the people, in the midst of them. And all the sacred liturgical actions and prayers which the bishop had designed into his liturgy were performed right there, from within the sacred space around which the people stood. Who, we ask, performed these liturgical actions? The clergy, of course. The people were kept on the outside of the sacred space. *But* they had the deacon as their representative within the sacred space. The theory of diaconal representation was that a called and anointed person, more holy and acceptable to God than they, was representing them before the Lord, while they stood right next to these representatives, with no part to play in the celebration.

I see in this tiny example a representation of the core failure of the Roman Church throughout its existence. The necessity for a deacon to represent the people at the altar is caused by the fact that the clergy *chose* to keep the people out of the “sacred space.” The clergy allowed the laity to remain ignorant of the theology being played out before them, so that the clergy could enhance their prestige by appearing to be more trained and more knowledgeable

I am saying here that the Christian clergy, and most notably, the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox clergy, have in general since the beginning of the clerical state, so preened themselves over their understanding and power and authority that they, like the Pharisees before them in Jesus’ time, taught the people just enough to participate in the liturgies, but never taught them the interiorized way of Jesus—the way into the presence of God which transforms the hearts of people. If the clergy had done so from the beginning, rather than pursuing their own holiness or aggrandizement or political power, there would have been no need for deacons to represent the people. The people could, in one voice and as one pair of hands, have taken up their own roles in the liturgy.

But a consequence of teaching the people to be full participants in the liturgy would have been a loss of status for the clergy within their communities. The clergymen would have had to become humbler, recognizing that (as they preached, but did not practice) the spirit of God is in everyone and need only be trusted. The unfortunately human way is to do just the opposite: to cling to power, driven by the desire for more, and to let the people remain ignorant.

That is how it was in the second and third centuries. And that is how it remained in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—until the bishops were caught at keeping the people ignorant and were publicly exposed for their duplicity.

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### The Later Persecutions

The persecutions of the Christians in the third and early fourth centuries, were state-sponsored and quite severe. To some extent, the Christians were persecuted as political scapegoats by emperors looking for an enemy (as “Muslim terrorists” are at the present time in the United States.) This was certainly true of the Emperor Nero’s initial persecution of the Christians in Rome in 67.

But as we noted earlier on, the Romans hated the Christians mainly for refusing to honor the state religion of Rome and its gods. In response, Domitian’s persecution in 81 was cruel and vengeful, but intense only in the regions of the Roman Empire where it was intensely enforced. This was also the case with the thirty-year persecution ordered by the emperors Trajan in 108 and continued by Adrian until 138.

In 162, the philosopher-Emperor Marcus Aurelius conducted a savage persecution of the Christians because they refused to honor the Emperor as divine in the Roman pantheon. In contrast, the persecution ordered by Severus in 193 and continued by his successors until 232 was aimed not so much at religious groups as at the emperor’s political enemies. Likewise, the persecution by the Emperor Maximus in the years 235-238, though it claimed many innocent Christian lives in the Cappadocia region of what is today central Turkey, was confined to that region and to Rome.

However, the bloodiest and most severe persecutions were the third-last and the last. In 249, the Emperor Decius published a declaration that *all* non-Roman citizens must denounce their local gods (and therefore, that every Christian must renounce Jesus) and must offer sacrifice to the Roman gods. The only alternative was immediate death. The edict was aimed at wiping Christianity out of the Empire, and so, unlike all the prior persecutions, it was severely enforced empire-wide.

Following Decius’s bloody but failed attempt to suppress Christianity, the Emperor Valerian conducted a localized persecution, centered mainly on the northern coast of Africa and on his enemies in Rome.

Last came the worst—the terrible 8-year-long Diocletian persecution in the years 303-311. Again, the persecution was vengeful, bloody, and empire-wide. The Christians suffered greatly.

Then, mercifully, shortly after Diocletian’s death, the Roman Emperor of the East, Licinius, and Constantine, the Emperor of the West, jointly issued the Edict of Milan in 313. The Edict of Milan legitimized Christianity and all other religions, and ended the persecution of Christians. People of every belief set were freed to practice their religious beliefs publicly with no opposition from the government.

In the years that followed, Constantine defeated Licinius and became the Emperor of the whole Roman Empire.

These persecutions, often intense, but generally short-lived and sporadic in the empire, placed great pressure on the Christian way of life, and brought with them many difficulties for the communities, such as the problem of the apostates, and the problems of Roman spies among the assembly and of the betrayal of family members to the Romans, not to mention the complex emotional mix of the threat of death to the Christians who were arrested and the fear and terror of their families and communities. But in spite of the persecutions and all the problems they brought upon the Christian communities and their members, the theological writings which began with the letters of Paul of Tarsus and his later contemporaries in the first century continued unabated through the second and third centuries. That is, an intellectual tradition of rational analysis of the scriptures and the traditions about Jesus, in order to clarify what was believed to be the objective truth about who Jesus had been and what his relation with the Father and with the Christian community was, continued to flourish.

As a result, and in conjunction with all the other forces which led to the separation of the clergy and the laity, the meaning of the common term, “the Church,” changed. The term had previously referred inclusively to the communities of faithful common people and their leaders, viewed as a whole social and religious movement. Over time, though, the term came to refer to the *clergy*, and in particular, to the authority of the bishops and of the thinkers of the Christian community, expressed in the contributions they were making to the theological questions of the moment.

Important among these contributions was the initial determination of the books to be included in “the Bible,” that is, the collection of scriptures which were held by the Church leaders to be inspired by God and which thus revealed the truth which God was believed to have given to his people through Jesus. And of greatest importance was the determination of which doctrines about Jesus were divine truth and which were “the devil’s folly.”

For, many different views presented themselves—often with ferocity—vying for the acceptance of the bishops. Theology became politics as the proponents of the various teachings about Jesus, usually bishops or priests, gathered their allies and supporters. Often debate turned into brawling. There were plots and counter-plots as various episcopal seats were fought over, and bought and sold.

The Christian “search for the true doctrines” was anything but civil—anything but Christian. But for the Christian leaders of the era, what a person believed was important, for their beliefs marked them as friends or foes of the positions which the various leaders held.

Belief became a matter of personal passion. In the thinking of the era, people cared about what they believed, for their beliefs were what defined them before God and before his people. What was determined to be true doctrine was, in the end, a matter of every person’s salvation. And so, whether or not the armies of supporters of these thinkers and proponents *understood* the doctrinal issues addressed by their beliefs, they fought for those beliefs because the outcome of the battle was for their teachers and for them either heaven or hell.

The common people, at least in these earlier centuries, clung to the Church because they believed that the holy doctrines which their bishops taught and the sacred liturgical actions which the bishops controlled were the only path to salvation. Their sin-guilt held them helpless in its firm grasp. And their preachers underscored their unworthiness at every opportunity. There was nowhere else to turn but to Jesus, who by this time was believed to be present *in* the bread which was broken. Thus, the bread itself—originally understood to be simply what was shared in the act of eating, which itself expressed the humble fellowship between the people and God—was now being considered by many people to be valuable in itself, as the actual resurrected body of Jesus. The bread began to be understood as precious and to be venerated, and then to be worshiped as the actual physical manifestation of the living Jesus.

As a result, virtually every component was in place at the beginning of the second century for the burgeoning of the Roman Church of the High Middle Ages. The leadership structure was in place, the liturgies were fundamentally established in their lasting form, and the clergy were already busy at work, making the foundational doctrinal decisions, and leading and guiding a newborn Church through its infancy toward its mature form. The people were made vulnerable by their sin-guilt and placed in an impossible split-personality role before their God, in which who one *should be* is always defeated by the weakness of who one *actually is*. They were taught to obey and not to question, and they complied, for they had nothing else to save them.

And so, the teaching of Jesus which dominated the early communities and which might be expressed as “Love one another” was replaced in the Church of the second and third centuries by a viewpoint which might be expressed as “Save your soul!” Caring for one’s neighbor was sidelined by this new concern and this fresh priority: that the Christian must make his or her own way into heaven.

The mighty medieval Church was poised to begin its climb to supremacy, but it had to wait for four components not yet acquired: first, relief from persecution; second, a clearly defined orthodoxy; third, an authoritative and universally accepted leader at the top of the Church’s pyramidal power structure, which to that point had only risen to the level of the metropolitan’s regional synods of his bishops; and finally, personal confession with its privacy and its guarantee of God’s forgiveness.

1. The Great Councils and the Emerging Papacy

The rest of the story, now that its foundations have been exposed, can be told more briefly as we follow trends over centuries rather than over decades.

 Sometime during the second century, probably in Antioch of Syria, the Christian Church came to be called the “Catholic Church” because the word *catholicus* in Latin means “universal.” In that title the clergy saw the Christian Church’s commission, said to be from Jesus, to spread the gospel of love and generosity through the whole world.[[40]](#endnote-41) The Christian missionaries and prophets had been living out this commission assiduously, from the time of Jesus’ execution. However, over time, measured in centuries, that mission changed as the Church changed. The great thinkers of the third through the sixth centuries continued to develop the Christian orthodoxy with regard to the nature of Jesus, his relation to the Father, the nature of the Triune Godhead (the “Trinity”), the nature of the Church, and issues of Christian morality.

 But through these same centuries, the bishops became more and more taken up with practical—which is to say, political—matters. The “spreading of the gospel” then began to appear in fact to be accomplishing not the one purpose which Jesus assigned to it, namely, to “witness” to the acts and the teachings of Jesus (Acts 1:8), but two separate purposes. The first was to bring the salvation of Jesus to those not yet tutored in the gospel message. And the second was to initiate those people by baptism into the Catholic Church. This initiation had two outcomes: it opened the way of salvation through the sacramental celebrations of the Church to those who were baptized, and it made them members of the “Body of Christ,” that is, of the Catholic Church.

 At first, these outcomes were all good. The Catholic Church offered these new members the salvation and eternal life which was believed to be bestowed on them by its sacraments of baptism, the blessing of marriages, the anointing of the sick and dying, and especially of the Broken Bread (now formally called “the Eucharist,” from the Greek word for “giving thanks.”) The Eucharist had come to be regarded as the living body and blood of the crucified and resurrected Jesus. To repeat what was said above, this understanding was a more recent development in the Church. In the original Jesus-communities, the assembled worshipers gave the bread that was offered into the possession of God as an act of submission and allegiance. As they did so, they believed from their experience of it that the presence of the risen Jesus came among them and joined them at the table of offering. As they offered themselves to God, so also did Jesus offer himself to God with them. Then, in Jewish fashion, they ate the offered bread together, as a meal, in fellowship with God and with Jesus.

 As the enthusiasm for the spiritual experience of the presence of God began to be lost in the Christian communities at the end of the first century, their notion of the Eucharist changed as well. The bread and wine came to be worshiped as the very body and blood of the risen Jesus. The bishops began to take in their literal meanings the words of the gospels which record Jesus’ offering of the bread and wine at his Last Supper—namely, “This [bread] is my body” and “this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” (Mt.26:26,28.)

 When these words came to be taken literally, the Church’s understanding of itself changed in two ways. First, the Eucharist now was not the Christian’s offering of themselves to God, in the palpable symbol of the offered bread. Rather, the Eucharistic bread and wine became the Messiah’s offering of himself to God. Jesus had saved the people—all people—from the punishment due to them for their sins, and had opened for them the Kingdom of God forever. The bread and wine were no longer understood as merely symbolic. They were regarded now as the literal living Jesus, given to the Christians in a form which they could ingest and thus experience Jesus as their Savior in a deeply interior way.

 And so, the Church thinkers and bishops began to see that since the Eucharist was believed to be the *savior himself*, then salvation could come to the unsaved *only* through baptism into the Catholic Church, for, only the Church had the Eucharist, and the Eucharist itself *was salvation.* For, the Eucharist *was* the savior himself.

 Since the bishops believed that this was the truth, the words of Jesus (referred to above) were not simply an invitation to the unsaved to walk the way of Jesus. The bishops saw these words in new light. They were a mandate for the institutional Church to convert as many to the salvation in Jesus as it could. So the bishops sent out the missionaries with bold instructions: convert the people, especially the barbarians to the north and the east of the Roman Empire, doing whatever is useful to bring them to conversion. For, in the Latin language which the Church officially used, the bishops believed then that *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*—“Outside the Church there is no salvation.”[[41]](#endnote-42)

 Nine centuries later, the conversion of the non-believers would no longer be simply a mission of love and generosity. It would become increasingly a mission of political maneuvering, of empire-expansion, of conquest, of plunder and pillage, of profiteering, of desecration, of slavery, and of brutal inquisition.

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In 306, the Roman general Constantine was proclaimed emperor of the western Roman Empire. He was a Roman polytheist. But his mother, Monica, was a Christian, and under her influence, Constantine favored Christianity and supported Christian projects all his life.

In 313, with Licinius, the Emperor of the East, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, which legitimized all religions, including Christianity, throughout the Roman Empire and allowed each religion to worship in its own way undisturbed. By this edict, Christianity had been set free. It had survived the prejudice and the persecutions which had beset it for two hundred years, and it had emerged the stronger for the suffering. For, even as a religion-in-hiding, Christianity in one form or another had become the religion of most of the people in the Roman Empire.

In 324, Constantine became Emperor of the entire Roman Empire. He moved the capital of the empire from Italy, which was subject to harassment and invasion by the Germanic tribes in the northern European regions of the empire, to the ancient city of Byzantium in present-day Turkey, as a symbol of the unification of the Eastern Empire and his own Western Empire. On that site, to celebrate his hold on the power that ruled literally all of the known civilized world, he built a new capital city, Constantinople (meaning “Constantine’s city” in Greek), which was completed in 330.

Immediately thereafter, Constantine, though neither priest nor even baptized Christian, convened the First Council of Nicaea, which began meeting in 333. This council brought together Christian bishops from the eastern and the western parts of the Empire for the purpose of defining Christian doctrine and eliminating heresy. His purpose was to put an end to religious argument for the sake of peace and security.

The outcome of this council was the clear and, to this day, orthodox definition of the person of Jesus and his relation with the Father and the Holy Spirit. It consisted of these main assertions. Jesus is, uniquely, wholly divine and wholly human—two distinct natures joined in one person. The Godhead is Trinitarian, “Three in One,” consisting of three distinct but equally divine persons, joined in love so completely that all remain united in every act of will. These three are known as The Father, the Son (Jesus), and the Holy Spirit. The set of faith-statements resulting from the council is called the Nicene Creed.

In addition, Constantine appointed those bishops who held the orthodox Christian beliefs to high governmental positions, as mayors and judges, because of their character and education. This was a benefit to the institutionalized Christian churches for it was a silent endorsement of the respectability of these Christian leaders.

However, these appointments also drove the wedge of power between the people and their leaders. The people were accustomed to pay great deference to the clergy, and especially to the bishops. But now, the bishops, with the Emperor’s approval, built for themselves large and beautiful basilicas in which to set their thrones and to celebrate the Mass. In the Western Roman Empire, these buildings were called *cathedrals*, from the Latin *cathedra*, meaning “a chair with armrests.” From their thrones, the bishops—both of the West and of the East—exercised their civil powers, as well as their authority in their dioceses. And so it was that in the West, the term *The Church* no longer referred to the collective communities of Christians. Now the term came to mean “The bishops and other leaders of the Christian people, speaking and acting collectively, either in council or in the words and actions of the Pope.”

This was the Western (the Latin-speaking Roman Catholic) understanding of the term *The Church*. The same term was understood differently by the leaders of the Eastern (Greek-speaking Constantinopolitan) Orthodox church leaders. Living in the shadow of the Roman Emperor and participating more actively in the political interactions of the Empire with its constituent nations, the Greek Patriarchs and Metropolitans continued to recognize the Emperor’s absolute authority in civil matters. As regards church matters, these Eastern leaders were satisfied to meet in local councils to make appropriate definitions and decisions governing the truths of Christian faith. And so, they were reluctant to recognize the supreme authority of the Roman pontiff (pope) in spiritual matters.

The Roman Church hierarchy, in contrast, conducted business far from Constantinople. The distance between Rome and Constantinople permitted the Western Christian Church to feel an independence from the Roman Emperor, that is, from Constantine and his successors. Consequently, when Pope Leo I, unarmed, confronted Attila, the leader of the army of the Huns of central Europe, which was poised to attack and to destroy the city of Rome in 452, and convinced the Hun general to withdraw without attacking the city, the people exulted and Leo himself proclaimed that the Roman Pontiff was universal head of the Roman Church in all matters spiritual and political.

This small tear in the fabric of the Christian doctrinal uniformity which, of course, was the Emperor’s desire in hosting the Nicaean council and the several that followed, was the small crack that grew to a great fissure and finally to a complete break in relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the Greek Orthodox churches in 1054. This rupture in the unity of the Church was called the *Great East-West Schism*. It has not yet been resolved in the intervening 1000 years, although in 1965, representatives of both Christian traditions began to speak again and to celebrate annual feast days in the traditions of each. Formally, however, the two church traditions are still separated, and no real efforts at reconciliation have been made.

In the 4th and 5th centuries, then, these Eastern and Western bishops, having been tasked by the Emperor himself, defined and ritualized the Mass. The Mass thus came to be centered on the bishop/priest who was celebrating the Mass and on the “Sacred Mysteries” which occurred on the altar. No longer did the Christian people understand that they were sharing a meal with Jesus, offering their bread and wine—and themselves—to God. Now they stood silent in the immense open spaces of the naves within the cathedrals and watched from afar, observers and not participants.

Two centuries later, the Roman churches, imitating the ancient custom of the Orthodox Churches, hung cloth drapery or installed gates or walls between the altar and the people. These enclosures, called *iconostases* in the Orthodox Churches, where they are still to be seen, and *rood screens* in the West, where their use was abandoned in the seventeenth century, clearly separated the domain of the people—noisy, distracting, ill-smelling—from the sacred domain of the priests, who celebrated the Breaking of the Bread in private, amid the sweet odor of incense smoke and behind the iconostasis or the rood screen, only afterward leaving the enclosure to share with the people the bread that had been broken.

In these ways, then, the Christian communities lost their sense of community. “Going to church” became a personal effort. Mass was similar to a spectator sport in that the people in the assembly, if properly informed, could understand what occurred, but a sense of personal involvement in the spiritual transaction which was occurring was not possible. Except for the sermon, which was spoken directly to the assembly in their own language, the people received the *output* of the important parts of the Mass, but were not allowed even to observe those holiest parts which generated the output. Indeed, even into the 20th century, the words of the Consecration of the sacred bread and wine, were whispered by the priest, who hovered over the materials like a protective bird so that the people could neither see nor hear anything.

Forty-eight years after the Council of Nicaea, the Council of Constantinople was convened to continue the work of the First Council of Nicaea, and in particular, to examine and judge the orthodoxy of Arianism. Arianism was a version of the old philosophy of Gnosticism. Arianism taught that Jesus was begotten by God in time and therefore, was a divine being of lesser dignity than The Father, who existed beyond time.

Although a majority of Christians embraced the Arian explanation of Jesus, the Council declared Arianism a heresy. Thereafter, most Arian bishops accepted the orthodox Christian teaching on Jesus, as it had been clearly defined by the councils. The final creedal formulation of the orthodox teachings, officially called “The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed,” but known commonly as the Nicene Creed, is a product of the work of these councils.[[42]](#endnote-43)

It is important to observe that these definitions of Jesus and his relation to God were theological—that is, they were the conclusions of reasoned thought, based on Christian faith and scripture—and that they were made 300 years after Jesus’ death by a group of men, none of whom could have known or experienced the Galilean Jesus personally.

In essence, then, these definitions were chosen by preference, on the basis of the logic of the thinking and the background beliefs of the individual bishops. Because beliefs are not actual, lived experience but are more like “hopes,” no one knew the truth-value of the councils’ statements, since no one could ask the breathing Jesus whether or not they were accurate. The bishops simply chose their favorite explanation authored by their favorite thinker over other, equally possible explanations[[43]](#endnote-44). Thus, pure Trinitarianism was chosen over Arianism on some basis other than truth, though the Arian explanation, with its roots in Gnosticism, as we have seen, is nearer the first beliefs of the Jesus-people than is Trinitarianism.

## C. A Pause to Meditate on Truth and Its Imitators

I would like to pause here, after our discussion of the heated importance with which the thinking members of the Christian community approached matters of orthodox truth, to reflect on the nature of faith, belief, and truth. Let us begin with **truth**.

I offer this characterization of truth. **Truth** is **what actually is**. Every person is aware of the **existence** of other entities and occurrences in their environment. This experience of what actually exists to the awareness of a person is simple **truth**.

We often find it difficult to perceive what actually is, however. Other components of our psycho-physical structure often work against our being able to perceive what actually is—our fears, our emotions, our expectations, and our previously constructed understandings. For example, for the first 10 years after I left my crib and began sleeping in a normal bed, I was convinced that something dangerous to me lurked in the open space beneath my bed. I had no evidence that such an entity actually existed. But this lack of evidence did not cause my fears of being attacked as I slept to abate.

Another example appears in the saying, “Love is blind.” When a person is enamored of someone, the person may fail to grasp or to admit to themselves that the one they are attracted to has character flaws or clearly selfish intentions toward the person who is “in love” with them—faults which are obvious to the family or friends of the person in love.

This second example is instructive. The person in love has constructed in their imagination an image of the person to whom they are attracted, not on the basis of observation of the person’s actions or gestures or statements, but rather on the basis of how the person in love might find fulfillment of their needs or desires or hopes for their future. This mental construct in the imagination of the person in love admits to that person’s awareness only those behaviors which are consonant with the desires and expectations of the person in love, and the power of expectation with which the person in love has vested their image of their beloved blocks from awareness the negative or dangerous aspects of the beloved’s character.

When a person constructs in imagination or in intellect a model or representation of what actually is—a “lens” through which to categorize or understand the entity or the occurrence which they are observing, that person has ceased to recognize *what actually is* and has begun *to explain reality rather than to recognize reality*. The person has moved out of the arena of **truth** and has entered the arena of **belief**.

**Belief**, then, is a conceptualization or a characterization of one or more components of what actually is. It is an interpretation of reality. Belief reduces to this: **Belief is an *opinion* or a *guess* about what actually is.**

Here is an example which distinguishes truth from belief. You sit down to watch the weather forecaster on the 6 p.m. local news program. First she tells you “the current conditions in our area. It’s a mild 77 degrees outside, with a slight southerly breeze. The humidity is low at 38%, and there’s not a drop of rain anywhere in our viewing area.”

What she has told you is the way things actually are in the outdoor world. Her description of the weather outdoors is based on her observation of the weather: the temperature of the air, the direction and speed of the air movement, and the amount of water vapor in the air. All of these are the conditions which actually exist. What she is telling you at this point is **factual truth.**

When she moves into the realm of forecasting, however, she leaves **factual truth** behind and enters the land of **belief** or **opinion.** She may tell you that “a cold front from the northwest will be moving into our area early tomorrow morning, so it will be quite a bit cooler tomorrow with a low of 58 degrees at sunrise and 64 degrees at 8 a.m. And we’ll probably see some scattered rain also tomorrow morning, with rain chances at about 50%.”

Since her forecast is not about what is, but is about what may occur in the future, her forecast cannot be **true** at the time she utters her forecast because truth is the recognition of what actually exists. Tomorrow doesn’t actually exist at the time of her forecast. Therefore, her forecast is not **truth**. It is her **belief** or **opinion**. She believes at 6 p.m. that what she forecasts will be true tomorrow morning. (And, unremarkably, even if the rain is torrential the next morning and streets are flooding and traffic on the freeway crawls at 1 mph in the 55 degree air, even if her forecast is a mile wide of the green, she still gets paid!)

Most folks, I imagine, watch their preferred weather forecaster on the local news because she has a good deal of experience and gets it right most of the time. She might even explain the reasons, in meteorological terms, on which her predictions are based. In other words, people watch their preferred forecaster because they believe in her expertise and they trust what she says.

To summarize, then: **Truth** is **what actually is***.* Human beings are able to recognize what actually is simply by **experiencing** what actually is. This means that **truth** is recognized only in the **experience of what is**. A person must be able to sense clearly the way things actually are. No words are involved in this experience. The person simply confronts, or enters into relationship with, an entity or an occurrence openly and with a silent mind. The person ***stands in the presence of What Is***.

**Truth**, then, is the **conscious experience of what actually is**. Since words and intellectual activity are not a part of the experience of truth, **truth, as a person experiences it, is ineffable.** Since truth is entirely experiential, it cannot be expressed in words.

The statements that people who have experienced truth make about the truth they have experienced are not effective descriptions of the experience. For example, one cannot capture the experience of “falling in love” in words which would adequately teach a person who has never fallen in love the sensation of that occurrence. Likewise with the experience of loving a child, and with the experience of having sexual relations, and with the experience of being tortured, and with the experience of Divinity, which we call **faith**. The best that statements can do is point to the existence of such experiences of what actually is, so that those who have experienced what loving a person actually is, for example, will detect the truth which the statement points to, and those who have not experienced what the statement refers to will at least know that such an experience exists and awaits recognition by the hearer of the statement.

(This process of pointing to a particular experience of What Is is the fundamental process of lyric poetry.)

As I said above, **the experience of what actually is** has no intellectual content. It is wordless. However, the consciousness of most of us is completely occupied with words most of the time. Our mental activity usually consists of many different processes of word manipulation, including for example, verbalizing ideas, thinking, questioning, worrying, planning, regretting, constructing understandings, telling stories or jokes, criticizing, arguing or debating, forming judgments, explaining, and conversing.

All of these mental functions are fundamentally word-play. They all intend to build a conceptual structure in the mind of the thinker and in the minds of his or her audience—a structure which is built not of experiences but of concepts—abstract representations of categories of experienced entities or events. These conceptual structures are intended to depict the *relationships* between the components of the actual entities and events which have occurred or which are occurring. This is what we mean by *understanding*.

Although many brilliant conceptual structures have been created over historical time for the benefit of humankind (such as all theoretical biochemical models—of viruses and of the anti-viral medications used to protect us against them, for example), every conceptual structure that any human mind builds suffers from a fundamental shortcoming. Every such structure is based on assumptions (in logic, called *premises* or *first principles*) which are accepted as reasonable without further foundation. They are unfounded because a rational argument needs a starting place, a first statement on which to build the conceptual structure which is being sought. Thinkers attempt to begin their arguments in observation (which is factual and therefore factually true) or in apparently obvious propositions. For example, the Greek mathematician Euclid constructed his whole plane geometry on the principle that parallel lines never meet. This statement appears obvious, but it is nonetheless an assumption, which was challenged in modern times by the proponents of “non-Euclidian geometry,’ the geometry of curved areas.

In many other cases, perhaps in the majority of rational arguments, the starting statements are often simply accepted at face value or indeed, may be hidden within the argument and never evaluated. This was the case in the astronomer Ptolemy’s presentation of his model of the Earth-centered universe. He assumed as apparent from observation of sunrise and sunset that the Sun moved across the sky, while the Earth remained stationary.

The conclusion we draw, then, is that we cannot ever build a conceptual structure which gives us **truth**. The reason is that, no matter how clever or brilliant the reasoning or the complexity of the argument, it is always founded on statements which are assumptions, that is, their truth-value cannot be known. If a rational argument begins in uncertainty, then its conclusions remain forever uncertain.

And so, we have discovered that **truth** is an elusive thing. It is an experience, and so it is confined to the awareness of those individuals who are experiencing it. Truth can never be fully articulated, for experiences are beyond verbality. Knowledge of truth can be shared only among those who have undergone the experience of what actually is.

This kind of truth is the most profound, most human of the three varieties of truth. This first is called **experiential truth**.

The second type of **truth** is **factual truth**. This kind of truth derives from human analysis of the experienced world. For example, we have invented calendars which are a method of recording when in the on-going process of being a certain event occurred. Thus, your birthdate is a factual truth, dependent on the calendar system we currently use.

These factual truths are not experiential, though they are based in experience. Someone was present on the date and at the time you were born. That person experienced, in one way or another, your birth. And that person left behind the testimony (usually documentary in our culture) of the date and time you were born. If no one was present at your birth and left testimony to the date and time, according to the calendar in use at that time, you would not have a known birthdate.

The third type of **truth** is **tautological truth**. A *tautology* is a statement of the equivalence of two expressions. For example, if I say that “Today is Thursday,” I am stating a tautology, for the expressions on each side of the word *is* are equivalent, though different in reference. The word *today* means the ongoing period of duration between sunrise and sunset, as we are experiencing it. The word *Thursday* is the place of this particular experienced time period on the calendar we are using. Essentially, what is said is that the time period we are experiencing right now *is* the time period named *Thursday* on the calendar of this week. Both words, however, mean the same time period.

Perhaps a clearer example comes from arithmetic. The statement 2 + 2 = 4 is a tautology. It has exactly the same structure as the statement in the example above. There is an equivalency, expressed by the equal sign. And the terms on each side mean exactly the same thing, although that same meaning is expressed in two different forms.

**Tautological truth** need not have any connection with human experience Tautologies may be completely conceptual (intellectual) structures. As such, statements of tautological truth are only valid within the logical or mathematical system in which they are articulated.

The general results of this discussion are these.

* Since the perception of *what actually is* is experienced individually, and since language is incapable of fully articulating the human experience of *what actually is*, there are no possible positive statements which are *wholly* *true to the experienced reality* or which are understandable to the inexperienced.
* Two types of systematic truth, *factual truth* and *tautological truth,* are true only in the expression systems in which they are expressed.
* Since all rational thinking begins by assuming the truth or validity of its opening statements, without justifying them, the validity or truth-value of these foundational statements is always liable to challenge. Therefore, since the *truth* of its foundational statements is inherently uncertain, the truth of the whole argument is always uncertain. There are no rational arguments or reasoned thinking that are *certainly true*.
* There are no positive rational statements which are *universally true*. Even if such a statement were encountered, human beings would have no adequate way of establishing that it is universally true.

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And so, after Constantine, the Roman Emperor of the West, and Licinius, the Roman Emperor of the East, issued the Edict of Milan in 313 CE, which ended the persecution of the Christians and legitimized every religion practiced in the Empire, and after Christianity came out of hiding, Constantine, now the Emperor of the whole Roman Empire, called the Christian bishops and patriarchs together in council at Nicaea in 323, as I said above, and charged them to establish definitively the orthodox teachings of Christianity, in order to end the disruptive theological disputes which were occurring in the Christian communities of the Roman Empire.

In calling together this first ecumenical council, Constantine formally opened the way into a project which had been ongoing informally in the Christian church since at least the middle of the first century (see Paul’s *Letter to the Galatians*)—let’s call it the *Orthodoxy Project*—to identify the true and orthodox teachings of Christianity. Having formal statements of Christianity’s teachings on the nature of Jesus, on the Godhead, on the relation between God and humans, and so on, the Christian bishops would be able to promote these doctrines of the Christian faith as indisputable to neophytes of the many nations of the Empire. Moreover, the bishops would be able to condemn false teachings (*heresies*) and to prevent their spread.

The First Council of Nicaea gave the Christian communities a set of declarations about the nature of God and the relationships among the three separate but equal personages of the Triune Godhead: the Father, who is declared to be the almighty creator of all things, Jesus, the son of the Father, and the (unnamed) Holy Spirit of God. This set of declarations (later emended) is known as the *Nicene Creed* and is recited to the present day in many Christian churches.

Thus the Orthodoxy Project began. It endured in the Christian church until the thirteenth century—the millennium-long development of a comprehensive Christian theology which taught what were believed to be the universally true doctrines of the Christian church: the nature of the Triune Godhead, the relation between the Godhead and the Christian church, the relation between the Godhead and all humanity, the place of the Christian church and of its Pope in the salvation of all people, and the nature of the “Four Last Things,” namely, death, judgment, heaven, and hell.

This project culminated in the thirteenth century with the production of the Dominican monk, Thomas Aquinas’s 23-volume *Summa Theologica* (“The Highpoints of Theology”). This work became the standard explanation and justification of the teachings of the Roman division of the Christian church, the Roman Catholic Church, and is still the authoritative rendition of Catholic teachings to the present day.

Nonetheless, for all of its creative brilliance, its extensive scope, and the sheer power of Aquinas’s intellect, the *Summa Theologica* is an intellectual construct, the foundational assertions of which, as is true of all intellectual constructs, are uncertain and liable to be challenged. One foundational assertion, for example, is that the Christian bible (which for Aquinas meant the imperfect fourth century Latin translation of the original Hebrew and Greek texts by Jerome of Stridon) is truly the Word of God, written by human authors under the guidance of the Holy Spirit of God. The assumption that this assertion is true without demonstration is questionable, and evaluation of it requires careful definition of its terms and consideration of the bible’s historicity. A major question to be answered in this regard is, How are the internal inconsistencies in the various narratives in the book to be reconciled, and from what interpretive viewpoint should the various books of the bible be read?

The Roman Church has taught consistently that the truth of its doctrines is universal and timeless. But we have seen above that no rational argument, nor its starting points, nor its conclusions, can possibly be true. Rather, in this work Aquinas has speculated with great insight and penetration into the implications of the ideas which he generates.

But intellectual brilliance does not make **truth** of the type Aquinas and the Roman Church sought. They wished to have statements of **unchanging, universal truth**. The outcome was not that, however. The outcome was simple speculation which was held to be true—belief, not experiential truth.

## D. The Growth of the Imperial Roman Church

Rome during the fifth century languished in the shadow of its former greatness, as it was attacked and ravaged repeatedly by the various Germanic tribes to the north of Italy. In the late fifth century, the reigning emperor called on Leo, the Roman Bishop, to lead the resistance to these invasions. Leo negotiated a halt to the invasions and the withdrawal of the armies of the fierce fighter, Attila. Following this, Leo, as Pope (that is, as Bishop of Rome), declared himself to be the supreme leader and the worldwide authority in worldly matters and in spiritual matters in the Christian Church. The first medieval Pope had arisen.

The Christian Church continued to spread through northern and western Europe. Sometimes a king would accede to the spiritual authority of the Pope and give over not only himself but the whole population of his kingdom to Christianity. Then baptisms of hundreds or thousands of people at a time—all of whom were uneducated in the teachings of the Christian faith—were performed on them in a perfunctory way. Thus, hundreds of thousands were brought under the banner of the Roman Church, knowing little or nothing about the Church or its teachings. Many continued to practice their tribal religions in addition to attending the Christian Mass.

The Roman Church was the center of power and wealth in the Western Roman Empire, which became the *Holy Roman Empire* after the tenth century. The Catholic bishops had earlier asserted their right to appoint and to crown the political leaders of their areas. The Holy Roman Emperor, in a similar way, was crowned by the Bishop of Rome, as was every national king.

The authority of the Catholic Church pervaded every domain of European culture, not only its spiritual and political spheres, but also its art, music, and architecture. For example, so committed to the Catholic Church and to their individual bishops were the common people that from the tenth century until the seventeenth, local communities competed with each other in the building of massive, expensive, and architecturally complex cathedrals, in various styles. Best-known among these styles is the “High Gothic” style, typified by Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris and Westminster Abbey in London.

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With growing wealth and political power came increasing corruption and moral degeneracy. Periodic attempts were made at “monastic reform,” during which the Pope tried to rid the monasteries of profiteering, extortion, and sexual degeneracy, as well as to grab some of their inordinate political and economic power for himself.

However, the “boom times” for the Roman Church and its leaders began in earnest in the eleventh century, when the Church officially adopted individual confession as the ordinary way in which the Church administered the forgiveness of God. Please recall that from the first capture of Christians in the clutches of sin-guilt at the end of the first century until the eleventh century, the Church taught sin and redemption in Jesus, but it could not offer the people a liturgical (sacramental) ritual by which their sins were assuredly forgiven.

The adoption by the Roman Church in the eleventh century of individual, private confession was the answer to this problem. It closed the circle of sin-guilt: The Church taught the horror of sin in God’s eyes to the people. The people saw sin in themselves. The people went back to the Church to undergo private confession and have their sins absolved. During the whole cycle, the Church is the breast that feeds the people the milk of Divine Kindness.

The ritual of the Sacrament of Penance was this: In a private booth, partitioned into two sections by a wall into which a small, cloth-covered window opening was cut, the kneeling penitent conversed with the sitting priest. The cloth covering was intended to protect the penitent’s anonymity, and the priest was sworn by sacred oath never to reveal the contents of a confessional conversation. The penitent entered his or her section of the booth and asked for the priest’s blessing. Receiving it, the penitent confessed his or her sins to the priest, who theologically, acted *in persona Christi* (“as though he were Christ himself”.) The priest might question the penitent for more detail, or discuss the penitent’s words with him or her, or give advice or encouragement to the penitent. Then, (in the medieval Roman Church) when the confession of sins was completed, the priest would impose a penitential act (such as attending daily Mass for some period of time or contributing substantially to the poor via the church’s “poor box”) or a period of penitential humbling (such as sitting in front of the church building in sackcloth and ashes.) When the imposed penance had been completed, the penitent would return to the priest who, again acting *in persona Christi*, would absolve the penitent of the confessed sins, as well as of all the forgotten or unmentioned sins in the penitent’s life. At that point, the priest would send the penitent away forgiven and in peace IF the priest believed that the penitent was sincere in his or her desire for forgiveness. The successful penitent, now purified, was then again eligible to receive Holy Communion.

A penitent sent away unforgiven could be assigned a penance which proved his or her sincerity, including substantial offerings to the Church. Or the un-absolved penitent could be brought before Church courts for substantial disobedience or for heresy or for insurrection or for public abominations, and punished in any of the usual ways, including excommunication (leading to certain hellfire) or to execution (ditto). Such treatment was also the Church’s method of handling unrepentant disputants and others found to be enemies of the Church.

The institution of the Sacrament of Penance, then, gave enormous power to the priest-confessors. In the Christian culture of the Middle Ages, the promise of salvation and the omni-presence of sin and evil in human life were as familiar and as taken for granted as the air which the Christians breathed. Sin was a fact of life for every person. And every Christian believed that achieving his or her own salvation was impossible. So, literally *all* faithful Christians relied on the power of the Sacrament of Penance for release from the sins they carried with them always.

This reliance on the Christian Church for an individual’s spiritual well-being endowed the clergy with immense power. Rome held in its hands (as did the bishops in their individual dioceses) absolute power over the eternal destinies of every Christian in the Empire.

The popes were the leaders of the “superpower” of that age. It was not armies or wealth that gave them this power, but fear of hellfire. And so, penitent pilgrims from all over the world knelt before the popes (as they still do today). Christians of every nation paid taxes and tithes to them. Holy persons, entirely devoted to God in Jesus, such as Francis of Assisi, nonetheless asked their permission before making decisive moves. Even kings of nations and of empires knelt before them to receive their crowns.[[44]](#endnote-45)

From what source did these popes receive the power to hold such sway—for good purposes and for evil ones? Every Christian believed—or at least, accepted conventionally—that the pope was the “pontiff,” the “bridge” (from Latin *pons*, “bridge”) between this life on earth and the eternal realm of God. The popes spoke with the authority of God himself.

No other empire in human history has been so successful at holding in its grip the loyalty of the millions it dominated because it could choose their eternal destinies. And no other empire, however powerful, has abused its power so wrongfully.

E. Medieval Christian Relations with Jews

The story of the abuse and corruption of the message of Jesus cannot be completely told without an account of how the Jewish citizens of Europe and the Middle East were treated throughout the medieval and modern periods in Europe, and in the Modern era, in the Western Hemisphere as well.

As we have noted above, Jewish-Christian relations since the last third of the first century were stained by a mutual mistrust. The Jews thought of the early Jesus-people as traitors to the cause of independence for Israel because the Jesus-people chose pacifism over joining their brother Israelites in the rebellion against the Romans in 70 CE. The early Jesus-people resented the Jews for their alliance with the Romans in Jerusalem to persecute the Jesus-people, who had been banished from the Jewish Synagogue. Underlying these conflicts, of course, was that deep anti-Semitic hatred among the Christians of that era for those who had rejected the Savior and had had him executed.

After the Fall of Jerusalem, and especially when the nation of Israel was renamed *Syria Palestina* (“Palestinian Syria”) by the Romans in 135 CE, Jews and Christians alike abandoned Israel and fled to neighboring cities and nations. The Jews called this mass emigration from their homeland “the diaspora,” from the Greek meaning “to scatter about.”

The Jews in the main attempted to assimilate into the cultures of the lands they settled in. Large numbers of Jews migrated from Palestine and the Levant into Europe, settling mainly in Germany, France, and Italy. These Jews who settled in Europe called themselves *Ashkenazi* Jews.[[45]](#endnote-46) European life offered them an open path to wealth as tradesmen and as money-lenders. In the latter case, the Roman Church had declared, on the basis of biblical commands, that Christians were not permitted to loan money at interest to other Christians. The practical result of this declaration was that Christians could borrow money only from non-Christians, namely Jews.

 Like any migratory group of humans, the Ashkenazi Jews, when they settled somewhere, tended to do so in “quarters,” to cluster together and to conduct their social and cultural lives in privacy and in their own languages. These “Jewish quarters” were located in every large city in the hosting countries. The Jews there had free passage into and out of their districts, and Christians entered the Jewish districts to do business. In small towns and villages, Jews and Christians lived among one another, generally in peace.

And so, the fourth century saw the peaceful settlement of the Jews of the Diaspora in many European cities, as well as in smaller towns and villages.

 But often during the following centuries, this outward peace was undermined by Christian suspicion of the Jewish moneylenders. This suspicion was driven by the ongoing context of Christian anti-Semitism. During this period, the Christians perpetrated sudden and sporadic episodes of violence and persecution, and even slaughter, against the Jews. These episodes were the local and undisciplined expressions of anti-Semitic hatred by the laboring class of Christians, about which the Roman Church leaders were able to do nothing, or at any rate, did nothing.

Those civil administrators appointed by the Emperor’s Court who were also Christian bishops were by-and-large opposed to this mistreatment of the Jewish populations within their dioceses. If the local noblemen supported their bishop in this cause, these sporadic persecutions of the Jews were suppressed. However, the bishops had little formal control over the noblemen, or were unwilling to risk long-standing alliances with them, when they acted independently of the bishops and fomented persecutions, or stood by idle as the peasants oppressed their Jewish neighbors.

This was especially true during the First Crusade (1095-1099), initiated by Pope Urban II. The intention of this crusade, and of most of those that followed, was to re-capture Jerusalem, with all its Christian holy sites, from the Muslim Ottoman Turks who occupied Palestine. However, the peasant infantry which comprised most of the army of the First Crusade, without orders but with the strength of numbers, uncontrollably slaughtered not only Muslim non-combatants, as they encountered them, but also thousands of innocent Jews.

In 1120, the Roman Curia promulgated the *Sicut Judaeis* as the official position of the Roman Church on persecution of the Jews. The Curia took the clearly Christ-like stance that Jews should not be persecuted for the sins of their ancestors, but should be allowed to live peacefully among their neighbors.

The *Sicut Judaeis*, however, had little practical effect. It did not bring an end to Christian anti-Semitism. Day-to-day bigotry continued as Jews attempted to assimilate into the Christian population as a self-defensive measure. The Fourth Lateran Council, convened by Pope Innocent III in 1215, took up the issues of the Jewish attempts at assimilation and of these popular responses to them.

At the time of the Fourth Lateran Council, Roman Catholic theologians were—incredibly, in the context of the teachings of Jesus—calling for the enslavement of Jews. The Council, however, took a “moderated” course toward anti-Semitic bigotry, simply decreeing that Jews must wear distinctive dress, to clearly separate them from Christians. Such dress included the (humiliating) Jewish pointed hat, often yellow in color, as well as yellow six-pointed stars on the front of their clothing. The main intention, of course, was to prevent Jews from assimilating into Christian culture, and particularly, to prevent unwitting intermarriage between Jews and Christians. The decrees of this council, though on their face appearing to avert violence against Jews by preventing the complications of their being mistaken for Christians, was a major step in the deterioration of Christian-Jewish relations.

Political anti-Semitic oppression began to run rampant in the European culture. For example, in 1229, Henry VIII imposed crushing taxes on the Jews in England, forcing them to pay 50% of the value of their property to the crown. In 1290, King Louis IX (later canonized a “saint” of the Roman Church) ordered the burning of all copies of the Talmud in France. And in that same year, Edward I took the ultimate step of expelling all Jews from England. The English Jews fled to Germany.

The expulsions of the Jews from western Europe had begun. Nation after nation seized the property of Jews and banished them—nations in which many Jewish families had lived for centuries. In 1306, Philip IV drove the Jews from France. At the same time, persecuted Jews from Germany and Spain fled to Poland. In 1492, Queen Isabella formally expelled the Jews from Spain—the international center of Jewish learning at the time. By 1560, the least repressive of the western European countries to the Jews, Italy, had driven the Jews who resided there out of the nation.

Throughout these expulsions, the Jews found the most favorable, even welcoming, living conditions in the Slavic nations, especially Poland, and among the Ottoman Turks. And so, many Jews fled into those nations and started life over again.

F The Grand Degeneracy of the Roman Church

We continue now our tale of the degeneracy of the Roman Catholic Church leadership, beyond its relations with the Jewish people, during the period of time between the eleventh and the sixteenth centuries. As the Church leadership increased its power and wealth, it fell more deeply into moral depravity, of which there was an amount sufficient enough to dub this period, which is more commonly called the High Middle Ages, the period of the Great Degeneracy.

The Roman Church saw itself as a “spiritual government,” for it was regarded as the Household of God on earth. And as did every “civil” government, it had to deal continually with the problem of what to do about those who refused to obey the government or who rebelled against the devices which the government used to subjugate the people. In every such situation, there are only three alternatives: (1) wipe your enemies out by force; (2) negotiate an uneasy peace, in which each side agrees to end some of its offensive tactics—both sides knowing that the other side will secretly take advantage of the negotiated peace in any way it can get away with; and (3) accept each other’s ways and commit mutually to coexist in peace.

There is rarely an occasion in *realpolitik* when option 3 is a workable possibility.

Option 2 is a common attempt at resolution, usually suggested by the weaker side as a way of avoiding annihilation. The stronger side often accepts it either to satisfy the moral qualms of its own people or as a temporizing move, giving it time to obtain and place its war materiel. Option 2 usually ends in Option 1.

In most cases, the Roman Church in the Middle Ages did not bother to any great extent with the second and third options. It headed straight for the quick and dirty solution. Early in the eleventh century, a small religious sect in southern France, called the *Albigenses,* began to preach against the corrupt practices of the Roman clergy, both local clergy and the leaders in Rome. The Albigenses attracted many listeners, both of the peasant class and of the nobility. The movement found support from many noblemen of Provençal—for, the independence-minded medieval French nobility often conflicted with the Papal authorities in Rome—and so the Albigensian movement thrived.

In 1198, a pope ironically named Innocent III ascended the throne in Rome. In his desire to “eliminate heresy,” he called for a “Crusade against the Albigenses,” whom he had briefly tried to convert to the Roman church and failed. The crusade began in 1209. The Papal Army (please recall that the Jesus-people were pacifists), supported by the armies of noblemen from many parts of Europe, fought the Albigenses and their supporters for 20 years. During this time, the Albigensian preachers, as well as their communities, were annihilated. Southern France was devastated. But, in spite of the slaughter, the “heresy” persisted for another century.

This was not the first nor the only crusade conducted by the Roman Church. The Church had been crusading against the Muslims who had occupied the “Holy Land,” which included the ancient city of Jerusalem, since 1096, as we saw above. The crusading knights and princes and their armies, from many nations of Europe, including England, France, Germany, and Hungary, had an easy victory at first, conquering Jerusalem and the Holy Land, occupying it, slaughtering Muslims and European Jews (!) wherever they found them, and dividing the spoils of war among themselves.

But taking a city and holding it are two different things. Jerusalem was taken again by the Muslims, then again by the Christians, and finally again by the Muslims. By the end of the thirteenth century, after two hundred years of crusading (1096 -1291), the European princes, including the pope, were bankrupt; tens of thousands of lives had been extinguished; and in the end, the situation was worse than it had been in the beginning. The Muslim empire’s grip on the “Holy Land” was stronger than ever. Jewish-Christian relations plummeted. And Europe was culturally in a downward slide.

## Scandal and Schism

In the early fourteenth century, the Roman Church leadership, self-absorbed and self-indulgent, found itself engulfed in the merciless 70-year scandal of the Avignon Papacy (1309-1376), followed immediately by the 40-year Western Schism (1376-1417.) In sketch form, here is what occurred. The Church, beginning with Pope Leo I’s declaration in the fifth century, had repeatedly claimed that the pope was the final authority in secular, as well as in spiritual, matters. This often put the pope in direct conflict with the Holy Roman Emperor, who saw himself as the final authority in civil and political matters.

In the early fourteenth century, the French clergy, always seeking independence from Rome, aligned themselves with the Emperor. When the reigning Italian pope died (Benedict XI in 1304) a French cardinal was elected pope, taking the name Clement V. Clement refused to hold court in Rome, preferring to rule the Church and the Papal States in Italy from the papal compound at Avignon, France. He brought the ruling Church bureaucracy, called the Curia, to Avignon with him. The next six popes after Clement V were all French, and all ruled from Avignon. For seventy years, these popes abandoned Rome as the seat of Christianity. The cardinals and bishops who comprised the Curia in Avignon imitated the manners of the French Royal Court, and the Pope himself affected the manners of the King of France. Rome and the rest of Europe were scandalized.

Finally, in 1376, the French pope living in Avignon, Gregory XI, moved back to Rome because of political pressures and military conflicts between his allies and his enemies, bringing with him his “Frenchified” Curia. Shortly afterward, however, Gregory died. An election among the cardinals took place, as usual, and an Italian, Urban VI, was elected. Urban turned out to be a difficult man, and so the cardinals who elected Urban held a second conclave and replaced Urban VI with a French cardinal who took the name Clement VII. Clement moved the papal court back to Avignon where he competed against Urban VI for the loyalty of the European noblemen and royalty. Urban VI and Clement VII each became the source of a line of popes who ruled after him for sixty years. This shameful 60-year period in which the Roman Church had two popes (and for a few years, three!) competing for authority is called the Western Schism.

In this double-papacy, the line of Italian popes was supported by the largest number of Christians, exclusive of the French. To resolve *this* scandalous situation, the world’s bishops met in Ecumenical Council at Constance, Germany in 1417 and decided in favor of the Italian line of popes. Then they elected an Italian cardinal, who took the papal name Martin V, to replace all reigning popes. Martin was not murdered, and his papacy ended the Western Schism.

What would Jesus say?

In 1343, in the midst of this foppish in-fighting, the Black Plague entered Europe. Beginning in Western Russia, it relentlessly pushed its way toward the Atlantic Ocean, engulfing every population in its path. Rome was no stronger against the Plague than any other European city. The population there withered. Cardinals, and archbishops, royalty and noblemen all died of it in their splendid mansions, turned death houses. As the Plague swept through Europe, it left many parts of the continent in shambles, to pull themselves up from destitution after this first passage of the Plague (which continued to kill in Europe in occasional outbreaks for 500 years more.)

In 1455, Pope Julius II took the papal throne. An egotist with a flair for the magnificent, Julius had the old St. Peter’s Basilica demolished and on its site, hiring the best architects and artists, including Michelangelo, he planned to build the largest and most splendid basilica in Christendom—in order to house the enormous tomb he had spent years designing for himself. (After Julius’s death, Michelangelo completed the tomb on a greatly reduced scale, and it was placed in a different church entirely. An old Jewish saying applies here: Man makes plans. God laughs.)

To finance the planned St. Peter’s Basilica, Julius II and the succession of twenty popes after Julius sent out missionary-style preachers who were also salesmen. They traveled from town to town, preaching to the people of their sinfulness, offering them the grace of individual confession for the reliable forgiveness of their sins, and then reminding them of the residual which remains after the absolution of their sins. This residual is called “the temporal punishment due to sin.” Remission of this punishment meant “less time” being spiritually cleansed in Purgatory before entering Heaven. This remission of the temporal punishment due to sin was accomplished by completing the works necessary to receive the Plenary Indulgence which negates the necessity of Purgatory. The preacher was delegated the authority not only to give absolution for a person’s sins, but also to grant Plenary Indulgences, for which he asked for a significant donation to the Papacy in Rome.

The theology is this. Even though all sin is forgiven in individual confession, the sinner’s soul is nonetheless damaged or “imperfected” by the commission of the sins. More sin means more imperfection and damage to the soul. But in order to enter the purity of the kingdom of heaven and stand worthy before God, one’s soul must be purged after death of this imperfection created by the commission of sin. The afterlife destination where this cleansing is done is the state-of-being called Purgatory. Purgatory is not a permanent state of suffering, like Hell. Rather, it is a temporary state of cleansing of the soul by suffering, until the point is reached at which the soul can fully and freely surrender itself to God in thanksgiving.

The Roman Church went so far as to develop a standard of measurement for the time one might spend being cleansed in Purgatory. It said that the time spent in purgation after death could be measured in human terms as equivalent to a certain number of months or years doing earthly penance. For example, a certain sin would earn you the equivalent in purgatorial suffering of, say, 15 years of sitting in ashes, dressed in sackcloth.

Then the Church brought the argument further. It taught (and still teaches) that because of the overflowing graces given to it by Jesus in his salvific death, the Church is able to grant *Indulgences* as a share in these graces when the penitent performs the prescribed works. These indulgences can, at the Church’s discretion, remove some or all of the “temporal punishment due to sin,” that is, the punishment of Purgatory.

These preachers would then suggest that donations for the upkeep of the Papal compound in the Vatican in Rome is a good work, worthy of the Plenary Indulgence which wipes away all “temporal punishment due to sin.”

Over the 150 years that St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome was being constructed, the Roman Church collected in such donations a large part of the 46 million ducats (equivalent to $2.3 billion 2017 US dollars) needed to complete the structure.

3.

A New **Age** of Enlightenment

1. The Reformation

In 1517, Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk and Roman Catholic priest, sent his bishop in Mainz, Germany, a copy of his *95 Theses*, in which he objected forcefully to the “selling of indulgences” to the poor and ignorant to pay for the Basilica of St. Peter. The bishop never responded to Luther’s letter, which is said by scholars to have been intended to initiate a theological discussion within the Church on indulgences and the whole issue of faith in Jesus. Rather, the bishop sent Luther’s *95 Theses* to Pope Leo X to be examined for heresy. Heresy, of course, was found because the document was not read in Rome as an invitation to debate, but as a challenge to Papal authority. In 1521, Pope Leo excommunicated Luther from the Roman Church because Luther would not recant his position.

The Protestant Reformation had begun. The central issue was always the rejection of the authority of the pope to interfere in the life of a Christian church-community. Although there were several “reformers” separating their congregations from the Roman Church, Luther’s separation was singularly marked as a Christian people’s movement by the publication in 1534 of the Luther Bible—Luther’s translation of the whole bible into colloquial German. For the first time, Germans could read the Scriptures in their own language. This was liberating for the people, who had been kept from direct contact with the Bible by the Roman Church, which reserved study of the Scriptures to the clergy. Now the people were free to study the Scriptures for themselves, and they bought a very large number of copies of Luther’s translation and others in other languages, which were made available by the recently invented printing press.

Luther’s strong objections to the misuse—or deliberate, corrupt abuse—of the God-given gifts of the Christian Church did not occur in isolation. Disgust with the vicious practices and with the sophistry of the Church’s theological justifications welled up in the hearts of dedicated Christians throughout Europe, and particularly in Northern Europe. In the twenty-three years before 1540, major Protestant denominations and reform movements arose in Germany (the center of the Reform movement), Switzerland, Bohemia, Scotland, and England.

Europe became divided into two regions over the course of a few decades: the Protestant Northern Europe, including the Scandinavian nations, as well as England and Scotland, and the Roman Catholic Southern Europe, including France. The reforming churches had the support of the nobility in the North, as the Papacy had the support of many of the Southern noblemen. Both sides hardened their positions. War was inevitable.

And so it happened: the Thirty Years’ War. In 1618, mercenary armies paid by the Protestants entered combat against small national armies and ultimately the Papal army. The war escalated from a religious war to a political war among national and imperial entities. This face-off between two nominally “Christian” armies became a bloodbath. Seven and one-half million people died in this war—one of the bloodiest wars in human history. It brought devastation to whole regions of Europe, mass executions, starvation, pestilence of all sorts, and displacement of millions of people. The main site of the war, Germany, was devastated. Misery was everywhere as brothers in faith killed one another without remorse.

The outcome of this Thirty Years’ War was that Europe, and particularly Germany, was ravaged and depopulated, but the Protestant churches remained strong. In the south, there was less devastation but more damage. Mortal damage was done to the Roman Church, which from that moment in history began to fade as a major player in European politics. The Papal States began shrinking year by year, as the secular nobles encroached on Roman Church land-holdings.

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### Galileo

During the same period, in 1610, the Italian astronomer Galileo Galilei unintentionally brought down the Roman Church’s philosophical justification for the pope’s being the supreme “pontiff” between God and humanity. The Roman Church could no longer justify the superior position of the pope from natural philosophy.[[46]](#endnote-47) Its sole resort was justification by acceptance of certain interpretations of passages from the Gospels. We have already discussed the problems with this approach to justification in a previous note.

By Galileo’s time, the European Renaissance had begun in earnest to revel in the delight of the human spirit, natural and unbound, as it was depicted in the (pagan) art of Greece and Rome, especially, and also in the philosophical works of European Jews, and in the scientific and mathematical thought of the North African Muslims. From this background arose the European Enlightenment, which found the source of human knowledge to be empirical observation of the actual workings of Nature, by which was meant not only the natural environment, but also human beings and human society and civilization, considered as natural phenomena. This new preference for empirical observation as the source of knowledge overwhelmed the medieval Roman Church’s reliance on philosophical speculation and especially on theology (philosophical speculation using as its starting point Christian belief and teachings, particularly those founded on Judeo-Christian Scripture, considered to be the enduring self-revelation of God.)

This “Age of Reason,” with its ability to establish the knowledge it discovered by appealing to simple observation and a clear system of logical reasoning, demanded from Christianity the empirical evidence for what it taught. The Christian churches’ considered response to this attack was that not everything in creation is observable, that is, that there is physical existence, which *is* observable, and spiritual existence, which is not. Christian knowledge and teaching, its defenders said, has as its proper subject spiritual matters, which are not observable and which transcend observation. These spiritual matters can be approached and deduced only through prior faith, and particularly, belief in the self-revelation of God, the Bible, the source of all knowledge, physical and spiritual—the canonical Scriptures.

The new rational empiricism of the Enlightenment found such arguments to be without foundation and empirically indefensible. One way to interpret this response is that the empiricists demanded that the Christian churches use empirical modes of thought to defend Christianity from the empiricists’ challenge, and they dismissed the Christian arguments because these were based in a different mode of thought, namely, *faith*, to which empiricism was alien.

Christianity found itself living out the perennial antagonism between Truth and Power. The dictum is this: Power ages and is overwhelmed by New Truth. That New Truth is quickly co-opted by the New Power which arises from within the New Truth. Then the New Power begins to age and becomes the Old Power. The cycle repeats itself endlessly.

If there is any continuing theme in this book, it is the acting-out of this antagonism over and over again. Christianity, the New Truth, overwhelmed both polytheism and Jewish monotheism. Then the clergy of the medieval imperial Roman Church arose as the New Power from the ashes of the New Truth of Christianity. Now, during the Enlightenment, the Roman Church—which had by this time aged and become the Old Power—was being replaced by the New Truth of scientific empiricism, which had captured first the wonder and then the hopes and expectations of Euro-American society. As the knowledge provided by rational empiricism continued to grow and to refine itself, increasingly profound explanations for the nature of Nature were offered to the people, along with the technological innovations which the empirical approach to human life on this planet provided.

The medieval Church’s “Natural Philosophy” withered before the “modern” world’s empirical Science. The Christian churches were increasingly sidelined by mainstream society. And both Protestants and Roman Catholics found themselves battling on two fronts. The long-term enmity between the Roman Church and the Protestant denominations continued full-force, while each also fought the common enemy of both: secularism in its many forms—atheism and agnosticism, nationalism, philosophical materialism (which claims that “spiritual issues,” as well as all apparently immaterial human functions, are no more than manifestations or outputs of processes driven by inherent and discoverable scientific laws), hedonism, and economic philosophies fueled by avarice, greed, and careless justice.

The Christian churches’ first responses to this new approach to knowledge were more or less contentious. The Protestant churches were in general more accepting of the Enlightenment’s approach to secular knowledge, but challenged the empiricists on what the churches considered to be “line in the sand issues,” mainly moral issues and issues which offended the words of Scripture, such as the issue of Creationism.

The Roman Church took a more aggressive approach. The popes repeatedly condemned the empiricists and social theorists for abetting immorality, for leading nations of people away from consideration of their eternal destinies, and for rejection of the popes’ exalted position as commissioned ambassadors of the Almighty God to humanity. The popes rejected every scientific conclusion which contradicted the Christian Scriptures or the theological teachings of the Catholic Church. The popes rejected as well the dismissal of the Church’s spiritual authority, modernism, the methods of science, and the oppression of workers and disregard for their dignity, occasioned by the new world economic theories of communism and capitalism.

In 1870, the reigning pope, Pius IX, convened an Ecumenical Council (the First Vatican Council) in order that it would declare that a validly elected pope, including himself, is infallible in his teachings on faith and morals, when they are presented as infallible statements.[[47]](#endnote-48) This assumption of infallibility by the popes has been a point of contention between Catholics and Protestants ever since.

At the same time that Pius IX was being made infallible, his armies were losing for him the last of his Papal States. After 1870, the pope truly was a spiritual leader, for he had no more lands to rule.

In 1929, Pope Pius XI signed an agreement with Benito Mussolini’s Italian government, which permanently established the Vatican City as a separate national entity within Italy. The Roman Church had shrunk from a continent-wide empire to a wall-enclosed city-state.

1. Slavery

No greater moral impairment has ever stained the character of the mainline Christian churches than the enslavement of some human beings, innocent African natives, by others, who called themselves “Christians,” in Europe and in the “New World” of the Americas during the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries. Of all the injustices and oppression and slaughter and moral degeneracy which we have witnessed so far as springing from or endorsed by the Christian churches, none were as morally corrosive nor as revealing of the Christian character of the “Christian” churches than were these churches’ responses to New World Slavery, and especially, to the chattel slavery system operative in the United States.

We have to recall and bear in mind throughout this discussion that the original message of Jesus, which his early followers attempted to live out, was simply defined by two exhortations: love God wholly, and treat your neighbor with the same care with which you treat yourself. When we consider New World Slavery in itself, as we will below, it is clear that for whatever reasons it was brought into existence, it violates to its very depths the injunction to love others as you love yourself.

Nonetheless, the Christian churches of the era found ways to ignore the original teachings of Jesus and to justify their participation in this heinous business of slavery. To these justifications, the First Letter of John speaks clearly:

He who says, “I know [Jesus],” but disobeys his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. (2:4)

He who says he is in the light and hates his brother is in the darkness still. . . . [H]e who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes. (2:9,11.)

Enslavement of captured enemies, and voluntary slavery in order to repay debts have been features of human civilization since before history. And so, at the time of Jesus, these forms of servitude were regularly accepted as part of the way of life. Jesus never spoke against these forms of servitude, particularly because in Israel, both master and slave were subject to the regulations imposed on them by the Mosaic Law. The cruelty and indignity of chattel slavery, as we know it in the American historical experience, was unknown to the masters and the slaves of Jesus’ time. Moreover, the writings of Paul of Tarsus make clear that the Jesus-people made a distinction between the servitude which a slave was required to perform in the outer world and the dignified freedom which the slave enjoyed within the Jesus-community. (See Gal. 3:28 and Phm *passim*.)

By the thirteenth century, however, all of these Christian niceties had been forgotten as the Roman Church degraded itself in its fidelity to the message of Jesus. At that time, Pope Gregory IX promulgated the canon laws on slavery. Canon Law is the set of official operating procedures of the Roman Church. Gregory’s canons accepted and justified slavery as a form a punishment, and permitted enslavement of prisoners of war and of criminals.

By the fifteenth century, the Roman Church’s operative principle had developed to this: resistance to Roman Church conquest and to subsequent conversion to Christianity makes people and tribes “enemies of Christ” who could be enslaved, and remain so even after the ostensible motive of conversion had been fulfilled. This principle, over time, was applied to Muslims, Guanches (the original inhabitants of the Canary Islands, which became an important Portuguese staging area for the African slave trade), and black Africans.[[48]](#endnote-49) We see in this that the Roman Church regarded the economic benefits to its allies to be of greater value than the Christian principles for which it publicly stood.

All this principling was occasioned by the conquest of the Guanches on the Canary Islands in 1402. The age of the trans-Atlantic slave trade was about to begin.

At first, several of the popes, by way of objection, restricted the enslavement of the Guanches. In 1435 Eugene IV condemned the enslavement of Christians (among whom were those converted to Christianity after enslavement.) Later, Pius II and Sixtus IV forbade the enslavement of the Guanches outright. However, these demands were scattered objections made by popes who were out of the mainstream of colonial economics. They were thus ignored in the enthusiasm for the wealth which this new industry promised.

The pope who set the pace for his successors was Martin V, the pope whose coronation ended the Western Schism. Shortly after assuming office, Martin called for a crusade against Africa. Later, in 1441, he wrote the first papal bull (a formal decree addressing a particular individual or situation) which endorsed the Portuguese enslavement of Africans. Shortly afterward, in 1452, Pope Nicholas V, in the infamous papal bull, *Dum Diversas*, granted permission to King Alfonso of Portugal to perpetually enslave all “enemies of Christ,” including black Africans.

The Roman Church, with the consent of the Holy Roman Emperor, had given its blessing to the slave trade.

Nicholas V’s sanction of Portugal’s slave trade was affirmed in the next sixty-two years by three additional popes. This collection of papal confirmations provided the justification for the trans-Atlantic slave trade, as well as for European colonization in the Americas.

Not to be outdone, the king of Spain in 1493 requested and received from Alexander VI exactly the same rights and privileges to conduct slave trading as the king of Portugal had previously received. Alexander’s cynical justification for giving this permission? Enslavement would give the Africans the opportunity to be converted to Christianity.

And so, to accomplish these conversions, Spain sent to the natives in the New World the *conquistadores*. These men were warriors, explorers, and hounds in search of riches. They brought priests along with them to do the converting and the baptizing. But the *conquistadores* themselves set their minds on acquiring the wealth of the natives, and they were not shy about using compelled servitude to force the natives to give over their wealth.

The *conquistadores* devastated the native civilizations. Many natives died of European diseases, against which they had no immunological protection. Others died of the harshness of their treatment. – When reports of these abuses reached Europe, religious groups and the princes were outraged, and they protested to the pope. The positive outcome of these protests was that the *conquistadores* were ordered by several of the popes to cease and desist. Oppressive treatment of the natives came to a stop.

However, in order to get the work done which the now-exempted native Indians had performed, it was necessary to increase the number of imported black African slaves. The demise of one evil gave birth to another.

During the sixteenth century, the popes, and in particular, Paul III, did not hesitate to authorize the enslavement of all people of all races and nations, including Europeans and converted native Christians. Spain, the dominant nation of the era, used this new total power aggressively. It established a settlement policy which gathered natives into compounds called *reductions*. From 1609 until 1767, the Jesuit Order was in charge of this plan, effected mainly in South and Central America. The Jesuits, in order to convert the natives, moved them from their native villages into the reduction settlements (“missions”.) This move disrupted the native cultural life and confined the native people to the mission grounds, where they were “protected,” sheltered, indoctrinated, educated, and put to work for the king of Spain. The Jesuits “civilized” their “savages” and taught them how to grow European fruits and vegetables, and how to make items useful in Europe, such as leather goods.

Thus the kings of Spain and Portugal, as well as of England and France, reaped the rewards of the slave-labor economies that they had instituted and developed.

These reduction settlements offered the natives permanency, predictability, and productivity, as well as legal rights which protected them from undignified treatment, all for the price of their cooperation, which was assured by the military garrison posted at each settlement.

This was enslavement, but enslavement at its most humane, unless the natives rebelled.

In 1769, the Spanish Empire extended its colonies northward from Mexico into Alta California, which we know today as the State of California. They instituted the reduction system there as well, this time under the direction of the Order of Friars Minor—the Franciscans—the most notable of whom was Fra Junipero Serra. Serra and his brother priests founded 21 reduction settlements, which they also called “missions,” along the California coast between 1769 and 1833. For all of the admirable self-imposed poverty and discipline of these men, and for all the good that they did the natives, both spiritual and physical, their primary purpose was nonetheless, in the end, to produce merchandise which would result in the filling of the king’s coffers. And so, they were nonetheless the jailers of the natives.

As lethal as enslavement and forced labor were to native American cultures, and as oppressive and on occasion cruel as the Spanish conquest of the Americas was, at least it can be said that the Spanish conquerors observed the Spanish-Catholic principle that every person, native slaves and African slaves alike, was to be granted respect for their human dignity.

The same cannot be said for the chattel slavery practiced in Protestant North America. The roughly one million slaves bought and owned by North Americans had no rights at all, and indeed they were by and large considered to be subhuman creatures by their white owners. At their owners’ whim, their families were separated, they were bred like animals for strength and stamina, they were housed and fed in the most minimal way that would keep them alive and productive, they were mercilessly beaten, even maimed and killed for offenses great and small, and they were worked sometimes literally to death in the fields of their owners’ plantations.

And all of this was done by righteous, church-going Southern white people, in the main. Slavery was thought by the plantation owners to be an economic necessity, in order to produce and sell their products—mainly cotton and tobacco—at competitive prices. The success and wealth that farming with slaves brought the plantation owners meant that the chattel slavery which we described above was an integral component of the genteel Southern way of life. And so, the God-fearing, Sunday church-going Southern gentry felt no disconnect between the often inhuman cruelty with which they treated their slaves and the “love God, love your neighbor” Bible verses on which their preachers preached every Sunday. For they firmly believed what their preachers re-enforced so often, that slavery was a God-given institution which is discussed repeatedly, but never condemned, in the Christian Bible, both in the Old and in the New Testaments.

These “good Christian folks” were not Bible scholars, and they knew nothing about—nor did they see for themselves in their Bible-reading—the disparities between respectful, law-governed Torah slavery and the cruel and vicious chattel slavery which they themselves practiced. Nor did they have much appreciation for the loquacious “necessary evil” arguments which their senators and congressmen in Washington D.C. debated. As long as the Bible mentioned slavery without rejecting it, these Christian folks were satisfied. That was justification enough for the life-comforts which plantation living brought them.

This torture of the black slaves in the American South continued for two hundred and fifty years, generation after generation. This slavery system succeeded on the basis of some simple but profound psychological motives. Primary among these was this: No matter how many or how few slaves a farmer might own—the poorer dirt farmers might own one or two; the successful plantation owners might own hundreds—the owner must always strike fear into the hearts of his slaves. The slaves’ fear was the restraint by which on each plantation, a few white owners and foremen were able to control hundreds of slaves who at once feared the violence and the overpowering weapons of the white owners, and bore rage and hatred for their white bosses in their heart of hearts.

In response to their overt powerlessness, during these centuries the slaves developed a subculture characterized by keen observation of their enemy and cleverness in their interactions with him, a coded system of communication and new dialects of English, unintelligible to their oppressors, a mighty endurance through suffering, and a perseverance based in strong, authentic Christian hope—a hope in which they worshipped the God they loved and by which they sustained one another in their grief.

On the other side of the coin, the violence and cruelty with which the white owners and foremen treated their slaves was not a tactic of choice; it was a necessity. The white bosses understood that they were well outnumbered by their slaves, and that the breeding which they used for their economic benefit produced slave men who were substantially larger and stronger than were the white bosses. For these white bosses, their fear of their slaves, and especially their fear of the black men, was the well-spring which fed their boundless hatred and their fiery, retributional violence.

As outnumbered overseers of their slaves, they armed themselves well, they responded to slave restiveness with sudden fury, and in particular, they developed a strong, self-protective social connection with their fellow overseers, a connection which expressed itself as inordinate loyalty to their Southern homeland and way of life, as well as in concerted defensive actions against rebellious slaves, such as the later lynchings and white supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan.

In the chattel slavery system of the Protestant South, fear, hatred, and rage were the propelling forces which governed virtually all interaction between overseer and slave in both directions. Indeed, so determined were the Southern farmers to maintain their traditional way of life that they resisted all demands for the abolition of slavery, despite the fact that the geopolitical tide was working against them. During the early nineteen century, the nations of Europe outlawed slavery both at home and in their territories, beginning with France in 1794. The northern states of the United States followed suit in 1808, and in the 1860s, these abolitionist northern states devastated the slave-owners’ properties and their way of life in the American Civil War.

In the history of American chattel slavery a clear distinction appears between the stances of the American Protestant churches and the Roman Church. The Protestant churches operative in the South took a palliative approach to slavery in their services. The white preachers conformed their words to the buttressing of the Southern way of life, while urging slaves to accept the will of their overseers and obey it, and overseers to treat their slaves with respect and self-control.

In the North, the Protestant churches were among the staunchest advocates for the abolition of slavery.

Meanwhile, the Roman Catholic Church was hog-tied by its own tradition and so took no active part in the resolution of the issue of American chattel slavery. The problem for the Roman Church was that Catholic doctrine had for many centuries been looked upon as divinely ordained and therefore incapable of change or alteration. And so, the Catholic response to American slavery had to take into consideration not only the clearly appalling moral circumstances of chattel slavery, but also the Catholic tradition of papal decrees which taught Roman Catholic doctrine. Among these decrees were the papal declarations affirming the moral validity of slavery, propounded by six popes in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, which throughout the American slavery era were considered by Roman Catholics to be divinely authoritative and the justification for slave trading and forced labor.

For this reason the Catholic Church, in the United States and in Rome, never condemned slavery in principle or as an immoral activity until Pope Leo XIII did so, in 1890. During the whole four-century period of European and American slavery, the Catholic Church was never a conspicuous proponent of moral rectitude on this issue. The Catholic Church remained a conflicted follower of the moral tides of social change.

1. Modern Era Christian Relations with the Jews

In what was perhaps a singular moment of clarity of mind, like a demented old man stilling his babbling hatreds and writhing torments, and settling into an intelligent wholeness, Europe during the Renaissance of the 15th through the 17th centuries briefly transcended its murky anti-Semitism, and ordinary Christians began to take a fresh look at Judaism.

The Renaissance humanism of the era, which tended to respond to the human world realistically rather than ideologically, together with the Protestant Reformation’s inherent populism, apparent as translations of the Bible began to appear in every major European language and as common Christians applied the bible stories to their daily lives, brought about a period in which what we might today call “Jewish studies” became popular. Christians began to study Jewish versions of the scriptures which appeared in the Christian bible, and the Talmudic commentaries, as well as the medieval and Enlightenment Jewish philosophers. This relaxation of Christian anti-Semitism in Jewish-Christian relations led on the one hand to increased freedom of movement for Jews and increased business between Jews and Christians.

The Roman Catholic and Protestant churches, however, feared the increasing number of Jews in Europe and the increase in interactions between Jews and Christians. As a result, the heat of anti-Semitic fervor was re-kindled in the common people, and severe repression of further Jewish moves toward assimilation began to erode the humanism of the Renaissance insight into Jewish culture. Largely due to the tirades of the aging Martin Luther in the Protestant world and the writings of theologians and the popes in Catholic Europe, another wave of oppression of the Jews and their ways swept through Europe.

This oppression resulted in further restrictions on Jewish opportunities in business, on the manner of Jewish dress and other identifying marks, and on Jewish-Christian day-to-day interactions. The number of synagogues in the Jewish quarters was restricted, and the Jewish quarters themselves were aggressively “ghettoized,” that is, literally walled-in, so that there was only one entrance into and one exit from the ghetto. – The groundwork was being unconsciously laid for the twentieth century persecutions in Nazi Germany.

At the same time, the increasing European interest in Judaism and in the intellectual and business contributions of Jews to European life during the early-modern era, producing, indeed, documented cases of genuine friendship between Christians and Jews, set up a counter-force to the established cultural anti-Semitism nourished by the dominant European culture. A tension was created in European society between, on the one hand, the firmly entrenched right-wing political and ideological powers—namely, the churches and the princes—to which the ordinary people habitually conceded and which supplied them with their leaders; and, on the other hand, those participants in the vigorous embrace of empirical knowledge, which characterized the European Enlightenment. These creators of the Age of Reason found wonder and experiential knowledge in travel, exploration, and curiosity. The increase in business travel throughout Europe and the Middle East brought into contact with each other cultures which had known one another only as ideological opponents. That is, in direct contact, enemies began to see each other as human beings, and then dimly and with difficulty, to listen to each other—not only to listen to each other’s terms and conditions, but to listen to each other’s experiences as human beings.

Moreover, the solid edifice of medieval Roman Catholic imperialism had been undermined and destabilized by the Reformation. And the antipathies and hatreds formerly focused on Jews and Muslims were being leveled by Christians now at other Christians of different “confessions” or denominations. This redirection of prejudices gave some breathing room to Jews and Muslims in Europe.

In brief, the Jews in Europe were able to exercise more freedom of movement and exchange, and to some extent, were able to participate actively in the society of the time.

Nonetheless, beneath the veneer of civility and assimilation lay the sleeping dragon of anti-Semitism which, two hundred years later would rear its ugly head as Nazism and Euro-American antipathy, including official silence on the part of the Roman Church, toward the plight of the European Jews, torn by their persecutors from their homes and businesses, imprisoned, and obliterated like beasts, like the bison of the American plains states.

Let us not be nearsighted and see only Nazi psychopathy in the slaughter of the Jews in the 1940s. Even the “shining light on the hill,” “the land of the free and the home of the brave,” is not without guilt in the persecution of the Jews. A clear example is the fate of the Jews aboard the ironically named luxury cruise liner, the MS St. Louis, in 1939. (Recall from above that King Louis IX of France—canonized as “Saint Louis”— initiated the burning of copies of the Talmud in his country, setting the stage for the subsequent expulsion of all Jews from France.)

In 1938, in an attempt to encourage Jewish emigration from Germany, the German military attacked the Jewish communities throughout Germany and the adjoining nations of the Third Reich. This sudden and violent series of nationwide attacks came to be known as the *Kristallnacht*. The victims’ homes and businesses were confiscated or destroyed. Less than 100 Jews were killed in the 2-day series of attacks, but 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and sent to Dachau and other concentration camps.[[49]](#endnote-50)

The Jews were quick to respond. They bought spurious transport documents to Havana and rushed to the port in Hamburg to escape the violence. The MS St. Louis, filled with 937 passengers, most of whom were German Jewish refugees, sailed for Havana on May 13, 1939.[[50]](#endnote-51) Filled with hope, they arrived in Havana to learn that Cuba would admit just 28 passengers—6 Europeans and 22 Jews. The worldwide Great Depression had just ended, and the people were vociferous in rejecting the admission of foreign, especially Jewish, workers into their country of few jobs. Jewish organizations of substantial wealth stepped in to offer payment to the government for the resettlement of the refugees. These were rejected.

The ship set out for Miami, slowly, as Jewish negotiators made the same offers to the United States government. The mood of the American citizenry, however, was anti-Semitic, xenophobic, and isolationist. The people wanted to cling to the few jobs still available. In addition, the United States had restricted the numbers of immigrants it would allow from the various parts of the world, and the Jewish refugee quota had been reached and a years-long waiting list was being kept.

The government of Franklin Roosevelt was immovable. The fear was that admitting these desperate few would unleash a flash-flood of European Jewish refugees seeking the same treatment. The people were in no mood for human kindness, and Roosevelt was planning a third run for the Presidency, so he could not face off against the people, even if he had wanted to. And it appears that he had no personal inclination to take any action in favor of the Jews.[[51]](#endnote-52)

Canada also denied help to the passengers.

The St. Louis set out to return to Hamburg. The passengers knew that the Nazis awaited them there, and tears flowed. The ship, however, did not return to Hamburg. The same Jewish organizations which had been negotiating on behalf of the passengers reached a multi-national agreement, with payment amounts. Great Britain admitted 288 passengers; the Netherlands 181; Belgium 214; and France took the remaining 224 on temporary visas. None returned to Germany with the ship.

In 1940, however, the German war machine invaded and conquered the Western European countries. Of the 532 passengers of the MS St. Louis who had not managed to escape to the Western Hemisphere but who stayed in the countries that had admitted them, 254 (48%) had been killed. These are innocent Jewish lives for which the United States and Pope Pius XII’s Vatican State share culpability.

By war’s end in 1945, some 6 million European Jews had lost their lives in the Nazi Holocaust, abetted by several Western nations’ refusal, including that of the United States, to accept those refugees who had arrived at “the golden door” only to be turned away, and the Roman Catholic Church’s obstinate refusal to speak out publicly against the Germans’ attempted genocide of the European Jews.

1. Current Christianity in Its Decline

With what you also might be experiencing as growing revulsion, let us continue with our discussion of trends in current Protestantism and Catholicism, particularly in the United States.

From its beginning in the early sixteenth century, Protestantism, the term meaning in effect “We protest!”, has been characterized by denominational fragmentation—that is, theological differences and authority issues cause a dissenting congregation to follow its new leader and break away from the denomination of which they had previously been members. In this way, Protestant denominations continue to multiply throughout the Modern Era.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the advent in Europe and the United States of major new Christian and para-Christian churches and ways of life, including the Wesleyan (Methodist) church, the Baptist churches, the Episcopal branch of the Anglican Communion, as well as the Evangelical churches, including Evangelical Lutheranism, Mormonism, and later, Pentecostal churches, the Seventh Day Adventists, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the Christian Science churches. Today, estimates of the number of Protestant and “Modern Protestant” denominations worldwide are difficult to establish[[52]](#endnote-53). In the United States, a 2015 study found that roughly 70% of adults identified themselves as “Christians” (mainly mainline Protestants, Evangelicals, and Catholics), while 23% identified themselves as unaffiliated, “no particular religion,” atheist, or agnostic.[[53]](#endnote-54) Evangelical churches were reported as increasing their share of the adult population, while mainline Protestant and Catholic churches were declining.

Beginning in the 1980’s. the worldwide Roman Catholic Church began to suffer extensively from a scandal responsible, at least in part, for the reported decline. Initially, the problems were handled covertly within individual dioceses. However, in 2002, news broke nationwide in the United States that Catholic priests in the Boston Archdiocese and other places had been abusing minor children sexually for decades.

Some of the offending priests were prosecuted and convicted. The nation’s bishops met in Dallas, Texas, that same year and signed the Dallas Accords, in which they promised to aid civil prosecutors in the arrest and conviction of offending priests. But many bishops have since ignored that promise and are still protecting those of their dioceses’ priests who have been accused of sexual abuse of minors and are blocking attempts by civil prosecutors to open diocesan personnel records.[[54]](#endnote-55) For example, in 2009, the US Supreme Court turned down an appeal by the diocese of Bridgeport, Connecticut, to prevent diocesan files from being examined by local civil prosecutors.

Back in 2002, when the news of the abuse of minors in the Boston Archdiocese first broke, witnesses there reported that Boston’s churches quickly lost one-third of their membership.[[55]](#endnote-56) Published reports indicate that charitable donations to the Catholic Church nationwide have plummeted.[[56]](#endnote-57) In the United States as a whole, many Roman Catholic churches in that first decade of the 21st century were nearly empty on Sundays, and donations to its charitable associations, such as Catholic Charities, fell drastically, as Catholics appear to have become disillusioned by the hypocrisy and deceit perpetrated by many of their bishops as these bishops attempted to protect the institution at the cost of protecting the young members of their flocks.

Since then, although the Catholic Church in the United States has regained some of its membership (largely due to the immigration of Hispanic Catholics), the sexual abuse of young people by Catholic clergy has come to be recognized as worldwide in extent, having victimized and traumatized tens of thousands of young people, in virtually every predominantly Christian nation. More recently, Australia, Germany, Ireland, and Austria underwent the same tribulations which the United States suffered two decades ago. Currently, nations in Asia and Africa are dealing with the same torment.[[57]](#endnote-58)

To date, as far as I know, no pope or other high Roman Catholic Church official, speaking for the hierarchy, has publicly admitted the worldwide, decades-long conspiracy among the hierarchy to protect the predatory members of the clergy from prosecution and to forestall an increase in the priest shortage by the conviction and imprisonment of these predators. Nor has any official Roman church representative, to my knowledge, admitted to buying the silence of the victims of these predators. Nor, to my knowledge, have the Roman Church hierarchy publicly humbled themselves in a sincerely genuine way, begging the forgiveness of those thousands of innocents whose lives they were complicit in shattering. No. Rather, they remain often plump and always glossy, with a deflective answer to any direct question, icy and superior beneath their veneer of respectability and cordiality—preening, self-centered, calculating hypocrites—white-washed mausoleums.

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As our final tour-stop, we must take a look at the most recent manifestation of misdirected Christianity: the current politics of morality in the Evangelical movement in the United States. This political/religious movement came to public attention in the 1970s as the “Moral Majority” movement, which claimed that the majority of Christian Americans were silently horrified by the abuses and extremes of modernism—its hedonism, its rejection of Christian values, its self-centeredness. The leaders of this “Moral Majority” movement sought to organize their “righteous” followers into a political force which would contravene the established forces of political “evil.”

Forty years later, the fruit of this movement was harvested in the 2016 election of Donald Trump as President of the United States. Trump, though he was raised a mainline Presbyterian and as President, generally attends churches of that denomination, won the presidency largely with the support of politicized Evangelicals (and his wealthy financial backers.) This group of Evangelical Christians asserts that it is Bible-based in its reliance on the inerrancy of the Bible as the Word of God—both the Jewish Scriptures (the “Old Testament”) and the Christian Scriptures (the “New Testament.”) Its faith is centered on belief in the work of the Savior, Jesus, who won for believers forgiveness of their sins by his death, and who passed on to these believers access to eternal life in the Kingdom of God by his resurrection from death.

The conservative orientation of the Evangelical approach to Christianity which is evident here—where “believers” are distinguished from “non-believers,” where the “elect” or the “saved” are separated from those who are “astray” and eligible for damnation, and where “good” is so clearly distinguished from “evil”— extends also to the political conservatism of these Christians, often expressed in the counter-Christianity of their White Supremacy, their demonstrated hatred of Jews, of people of color, and especially of non-Christian people of color, despite the American citizenship of their targets, and their disdain for public assistance to the derelict, the unskilled, the defective, the unable, and the politically oppressed of this nation. They are currently aggressively defensive in their ideology and their tactics, many of them arming themselves for a second civil war, expected to be a race war which will pit these patriotic “Christian” white supremacists against the “invading” people of color, poised to crash like a tsunami across our southern border.

Currently, their moral certitude is focused particularly on the issue of elective abortion, which they universally condemn as the great moral flaw of the self-serving, irresponsible American culture. On this issue, they are joined by conservative Roman Catholics, who argue—with historical incorrectness—that condemnation of elective abortion has been a tenet of the Roman Catholic Church since the early bishops’ declaration of the immorality of elective abortion in the middle of the second century. In fact, elective abortion *was* denounced, at least by some bishops, in the early Christian Church.[[58]](#endnote-59) However, the issue was obscured by questions about when the fetus became “ensouled.” For, these early Christian thinkers believed that before a fetus received its immortal soul, it was not human and could be aborted with no sin. In the fifth century, Augustine of Hippo argued that ensoulment occurred when the fetus began to move in the womb. This reasoning became the preferred theology. And in the thirteenth century, the authoritative medieval Catholic theologian, Thomas Aquinas, reiterated Augustine’s argument. Augustine’s position on ensoulment, then, was the official doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church until 1868, when the doctrine of ensoulment at conception was revised. The revised teaching, that the soul enters the body of the unborn baby at the moment of fertilization, when male sperm cell unites with female egg cell, is still the current Catholic teaching.

In the 120 years that followed, the Catholic Church stood steadfastly against elective abortion, and opposed the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling, *Roe v. Wade*, and subsequent rulings, which permitted women to choose abortion if they desired it. *Roe v. Wade* enflamed the new Christian (including the Catholic) anti-abortion movement. This Christian “Right to Life” movement drew a line in the sand—a “litmus test” for all politicians and, *sub rosa,* for judicial nominees as well: Do you support reversal of the *Roe v. Wade* decision? Even mayoral candidates and city councilpersons were obliged to take a position on the question.

In the 1990s, the “Culture Wars” brought demonstrators from both the politically liberal left and the politically conservative right out into the streets. Positions on elective abortion hardened around slogans rather than reason, and shouting these slogans into the opponents’ faces, as police stood near, substituted for dialogue and understanding. The pro-abortion camp, with *Roe v. Wade* on its side, saw itself as the bringer of enlightened humanism into the American way of life. The inviolability of the individual’s decision-making about their own bodies was their main political thrust, that is, that at the foundation of each person’s liberty is the right to make his or her own life decisions unimpeded by government—what was then known as “the right to privacy.”

The anti-abortion camp interpreted elective abortion plainly and simply as the killing of human children not yet born. This camp saw itself as the protector of the fundamental and unalienable human “right to life.” This camp’s claim was not only that elective abortion was the legally unjustified killing of an innocent human being, but also that our society of born humans suffers irreparably from the loss of the talents and contributions to society’s betterment which the annual killing of more than1 million unborn citizens deprives society of. Moreover, the anti-abortion camp argued, the wholesale killing of unborn infants has the effect of desensitizing the whole society to the value of human life.

Politicians at this time, especially in the most liberal states—New York, Massachusetts, and California—found it very difficult to take a viable position which would dissatisfy each constituency the least. Many of them adopted New York governor Mario Cuomo’s position at the time of being personally opposed to abortion but as a public figure representing people on both sides of the question, of being obliged to concede to current law.

By the final decade of the twentieth century, the two major political parties had carved out new niches for themselves. The Democratic Party, which previously had been the party of working people and of the labor unions which represented them, and of the new European immigrants into the United States, had swung farther left, to become the “party of inclusion.” The party saw its future success in attracting new adherents from the minority populations and their supporters—American Blacks, liberal whites, immigrants from every nation, especially the Middle East, the Pacific Rim, and Latin America, American citizens whose ancestral roots were in these nations, refugees from the Balkans and from central and eastern Africa, and also the socially outcast—the impoverished, the disabled, those with alternative gender identities, and non-native speakers of English. And because of the Democratic Party’s strong focus on social justice, on religious freedom, and on the protection of workers’ rights, the American Catholic Church had traditionally endorsed the Democratic Party’s vision and platform.

In the age of the Culture Wars, however, their opponents portrayed the Democratic Party as comprised now not of “ordinary Joes,” but of “fringe populations,” including immigrants who brought with them cultural habits and expectations which were unfamiliar and distasteful to many Americans, and also Communists and socialists who sought the collapse of American democracy, as well as militant atheists, militant Blacks and militant feminists, all of whom “bullied” their way into power positions.[[59]](#endnote-60)

The Republican Party then styled itself as the party of the ordinary white American who was dismayed by the nation’s apparent turn toward anarchy, toward mixing of people from minority religious, racial and ethnic groups with the dominant group of white Americans, toward the “immorality” (in Evangelical Christian terms) of elective abortion and of homosexuality and of aiding the poor who “refuse” to work with the tax moneys collected from those who “choose” to work.

The Republican Party found itself in a reactionary mode, reacting against Democratic Party attempts to extend medical insurance coverage to yet more millions of impoverished people with the Affordable Care Act (known as “Obamacare,” although the final program, largely re-shaped by the demands of resistant Republican lawmakers, looked very little like Obama’s initial proposal and should perhaps have been nicknamed “Boehnercare,” after John Boehner, the then Republican Speaker of the House.)

The Republican Party leaders began to see their reactionary weakness as their strength. The Party adopted an anti-abortion platform, drawing to it the millions of single-issue Catholic and Evangelical voters, as well as the endorsements of well-known Evangelical preachers.[[60]](#endnote-61) And by the 2016 presidential election, the Trump Campaign touted its nominee—a luxury hotel and resort developer and well-known reality TV personality—as the Washington outsider who, as a businessman, understood how to get things done in the world profitably, and who would eliminate the corruption and cronyism in Washington. Trump claimed that it was American decadence, especially in the nation’s capital, and Democratic internationalism which had destroyed America’s ability to protect its workers from foreign dominance and which had broken that traditional American “can-do” spirit which had made the United States the world’s superpower in preceding years.

Thus Trump succeeded in blending middle American traditionalism and respect for order and predictability with Evangelical anti-abortion righteousness, as well as with the isolationist fear and hatred of minority populations, both homegrown and immigrant, and especially of Muslims, whom he blanket-profiled as Islamic militants whose intention was to terrorize innocent Americans. He set this fear-mix into the context of a weakened world economy which drains manufacturing jobs from American factories and revives them in impoverished nations, where labor costs are exponentially lower.

Trump fed to surfeit this intoxicating brew of Christian moral righteousness, traditional American racial and ethnic bigotry, fear of terrorism, nostalgia for an American greatness which exists only in the white American imagination, and the withering American dream of prosperity for everyone who has the grit to achieve it to the politically under-served in the small towns and rural areas, as well as in the rusting cities of the formerly industrial North. And these target populations responded with their votes, grateful to have been recognized by a presidential candidate.

As president, moreover, Trump attempted to realize this Christian-based, morally questionable program of social injustice. Immediately on taking office, he engaged in a campaign to prevent Muslims from entering the United States for any reason, claiming that the possibility of terrorism was too great.

Trump also dishonored the American commitment to take active steps to come to a stasis of zero positive carbon emissions by 2050, per the Paris Climate Accord, prioritizing current jobs above the continued habitability of the planet in the near-term future, due to climate change.

And perhaps most heinously, Trump arrested and encaged those Latinos emigrating from Central and South America at our southern border with Mexico—people who were escaping the poverty and government-sponsored violence in their native lands and were seeking political asylum in the “Shining Light on the Hill.” He separated many families, who will never be rejoined. And he ordered the arrest and return, and is still returning, many of these people back to their home countries, where they face government retribution.

This is the president who leads, to great applause, this nation, which is now wandering in a moral maze, blinded by a profitable but unstable economy—a president who represents the people who follow him, with a Christian mask on his face and a semi-automatic rifle, with a high-capacity magazine, on his shoulder.

And so, as I write this, politicized American Evangelicalism has committed itself to the Trump agenda, ironically not even understanding what that agenda is, or how it aims to further enrich the wealthy—at the expense of these very supporters—and to connive with the political leaders of nations who have made clear their antipathy toward the United States.

Nonetheless, these people strive for the defeat of legal abortion—an understandable though philosophically misguided Christian goal—as well as, inexplicably, for protection of the right to bear arms, including pistols and semi-automatic weapons whose only purpose is to kill human beings—a commitment to life, on the one hand, and simultaneously, to the opportunity to kill troublesome humans, on the other. The American Christian right is also committed to American withdrawal from the world diplomatic stage into a deep and brooding xenophobic isolationism; and most particularly, to the continued and indeed, extended, deprivation of proper health-care for our neediest fellow-citizens, of the other necessities of dignified life, and of an education which fulfills the original intention of public education, namely, the formation of informed and thoughtful citizens who think in terms of the well-being of the community rather than in terms of meagre self-interest.

Of all these platform planks, only the opposition to abortion bears any resemblance at all to the original teachings of Jesus. Of the others, the last—the denial of basic services to the impoverished and disabled and homeless—is the most pitifully un-Christian. To make this mercilessness palatable, the Christians themselves have painted the issue in the glossy enamels of “tax cuts” and of “protection of our families from foreign gangsters,” and so on, obscuring in darkness their sins of greed, of arrogance, of closed-heartedness, and of compassionlessness.

1. The Questions

I have written this book to reach this point. We have catalogued the inhuman horrors, one after another, which the Christian churches have inflicted on huge numbers of human beings throughout the last two millennia. The hollowness of the concerns of today’s mainstream American Christian churches has been made apparent, and the churches’ contribution to the wholesomeness of the people’s lives has been shown to be spectral, hardly visible, overshadowed by the churches’ crimes against the people.

As the Roman Catholic Church maintains and protects its vast traditional wealth, even in the midst of moral decay and fiscal scandal, and as Protestant and Evangelical media evangelists and megachurches grow rich on the preaching of the Christian message, nonetheless, there is an absence of the authentic generosity of spirit and the “Let’s get it done” practical determination necessary to bring all the people into the freedom of their human dignity—to bring the people of Haiti, for example, and of other impoverished nations and of impoverished regions of our own country out of the destitution and early death imposed by their military and economic overlords and by the living conditions which these overlords force on them. No effective and sustained Christian attention is being paid to the Caribbean islands, like Puerto Rico, about whom their “protectors” do not care, as these islands are battered and desolated by hurricane after hurricane, nor to the peoples of the Sahel in northern African, who are dying by the hundreds of thousands of drought, nor most recently, to the timely provision of medical equipment to the personnel battling the Covid 19 pandemic.

It is not for lack of resources that such meanness and inhumanity occur. We have abundance enough to pay millions to star athletes and to film actors and to pop idols and to “influencers.” Surely there must be some left over for the hopelessly unskilled, the disturbed and traumatized, the directionless, the sick, and the disabled. We style ourselves a “Christian nation,” though perhaps in recent years we have given up that charade. Nonetheless, we possess the resources. But we have grown small in heart. We lack kindness.

It is the ***obligation*** of the Christian churches, if they truly believe in Jesus and his teachings, to come to the relief of the suffering of these people and of others like them. Where are the Christian churches in these people’s time of need? I don’t accuse one particular denomination; I point to all the churches which claim Jesus as their Lord. Where is your money? Where are your hands? Christians, do you care beyond “I’ll say a prayer for them”? Prayers are cheap. The Second Great Commandment of Jesus, because it contains the words “as yourself,” is costly.

“It is not pity I desire for those in need, but conscience.”

Call to mind the gladness of the Jesus-communities, who lived by a simple 2-sentence code. Then, if you still participate in one, look at your church community. Is there worship-from-the-heart there? Is there genuine gladness there? Is there community-wide commitment to selfless generosity there?

Do you see now how far the Christian churches have drifted from the authentic teachings of Jesus and from the legacy community that he established? How does a person honestly call himself or herself a Christian if he or she is not dedicated to the loving action that Jesus proclaimed—and lived?

We have among us now politicized Christians who are greedy, selfish, full of hate and prejudice, conniving, overbearing, asserting their power, and ignoring the pleas of others who are desperate. Some of these politicized Christians are our pastors, our bishops, our popes. These people claim to be faithful Christians because they attend church on Sunday, and study their bibles, and sit at the fellowship after worship and converse nicely with their church-friends, while in their hearts they harbor all the current diseases of the soul which I named just above.

That is what Christianity has, by and large, come to. There are pockets of faithfulness and loyalty to the genuine Way of Jesus, here and there, hidden away, often in suffering minority communities. There are Christian individuals who are genuinely dedicated to serving the needs of the destitute to the extent that they can. (If you see yourself in the previous sentence, you are probably not one of them. Schindler agonized: “I could have saved more. I could have saved more.”)

Can we honestly say that when we go to church and in our lives once we leave church after the service, we are living our lives in the example of the Jesus-people of the first century?

If we cannot, then as Christians, we need to re-form our lives and decide to become Jesus-people. If we do not do that, then let us give up the self-deceit that we are Christians. Let us admit in honesty that the authentic teachings of Jesus are not the foundation of our lives. Let us admit to ourselves that Salvation History is not alive among us today, that the authentic teachings of Jesus passed away by the end of the first century.

Let us admit that what we live today as Christians is something else, something social, something satisfying to the self, perhaps, but that it is not truly self-sacrificing devotion to fulfilling the needs of those around us, our brothers and sisters, with whom we are called to be one in love.

## The rest of this page, and the next, are left blank for your written reflections on the questions.

**4.**

**The End of the Beginning**

### ****A. Detox****

I am a saddened, disillusioned, embittered, angry old man. For the wife I had loved for decades and given my whole heart to, believing that she would lead me to the bliss of encounter with Divinity, I found lolling about alleys and on the corners of cluttered streets, in strumpet’s dress, selling herself cheaply—for the power to bring misery to the lives of people—my dear one, playing the Whore of Babylon.

When I left the Catholic Church four years ago, in 2016, I endured a long and dark period of anxious uncertainty, interrupted by bursts of anger or of scorn at the dehumanizing baseness of some of the Church’s teachings and at the hardheartedness of many in the clergy and in the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. I saw clearly the artificial conviviality and showmanship of some of these priests, who, speaking in private, often criticized those with whom they socialized. And I saw clearly that, good intentions notwithstanding, “It’s all about the money,” as it is with every large institution.

For example, when money became tight due to rash spending on the part of two of the four pastors for whom I worked as a deacon, in two different dioceses, I proposed at staff meetings that instead of laying off diligent, loyal, long-time employees as a solution to their budget problems, the pastors might consider a more Christian approach: that each of the staff, including the pastor, take an across-the-board percentage pay cut, so that the amount that would have been saved by laying off some employees would be realized instead by the pay reductions of all the staff members. In that way, the whole staff, in Christian generosity, would suffer a relatively small distress in order to avoid casting those who were about to be laid off into the profound distress of unemployment.

I thought that such a solution was evidently Christian. Both pastors apparently thought that I was evidently crazy. Each pastor brushed me off, like a mosquito, in one sentence.

What they were doing, of course, was evading their own responsibility for the consequences of their overspending. And rather than take the pay cut that they themselves had earned by their rashness, they put several of their employees out into the darkness of financial instability. At one parish, one of those who were laid off was the loyal, 25-year maintenance man who had, just the month before being laid off, learned that his wife was suffering from stage 4 breast cancer.

My point here is that the values which Jesus taught—and lived—are taught—but not lived—by both the high and the low among the clerical ranks—by popes and by backwater pastors.

I eventually reached the point of understanding that church-people, in general, and certainly in parish committee meetings, have no more maturity in Christian virtue than did the small-minded orthodoxy-seekers of the fourth century or the Borgian and Medici popes of the high Middle Ages. In the sixteen centuries during which the bishops have had political influence, the Roman Catholic Christian community has not advanced one whit toward the genuine fulfillment of either of Jesus’ Two Great Commands. Today’s Church leaders are as banal and rapacious and deceitful as any have ever been.

I do not hold myself unaccountable for my own personal faults and errors of judgment as a Catholic deacon, and some of the disapproval and, indeed, public tongue-lashings I received from my pastors were justly given. But I found in my time in the Catholic clergy that disapproval and faultfinding and skepticism were common traits among my fellow clergymen, and encouragement and constructive criticism were as scarce as Ivory-Billed Woodpeckers.

I concluded after eleven years of dissatisfying my pastors, that I had nothing to contribute as a deacon or as a person to the pastor’s community. On one occasion, the pastor, reprimanding me in a stage whisper which could be heard in the next county, referred to the altar on which the bread and wine were being prepared to be offered as “my altar.” I realized then what had been clear to me but unverbalized for months, perhaps years: that in his mind, this church building which the parishioners built was his own domain, and that I of lesser rank was simply a bungling nuisance to him. Although as a Catholic deacon, I was essentially an unpaid volunteer, attempting to assist the pastor in providing ministerial services to the parishioners, I received more than a little verbal abuse from him for my inability to match the perfection of ministry which he appeared to think he had achieved in the course of his lifetime as a priest.

After those years of arm-wrestling with my bosses in the Church (as I had with my politicized bosses in the colleges where I taught before I retired), I grew weary. I was resentful of those tiresome authority figures, as I had been for my entire life, for obstructing or challenging or restricting my attempts to live my life fully, exploring what I was drawn to explore (within the ordinary social constraints) and trying—successfully or not—to uncover the truth of things.

In those years of personal testing, I had become increasingly disillusioned, as the priest sex scandal sank more and more deeply into the putrid underbelly of the Church leadership. I reasoned that if the bishops and popes were so deceitful in this mighty matter of the moral treatment of children, how could I accept at face value the doctrines they taught as Divine Truth? I began to inquire into the teachings, then, with greater energy. I took the position that no doctrine should be accepted without intelligent skeptical examination. As I preached during those years, I began to see more clearly which teachings were reasonable and worthy of defense, and which grew simply out of a faithfulness to the Catholic mythology (such as, for example, the doctrine of “papal infallibility.”) And as I read the gospels more closely, I grew more clearly convinced about which stories and quotations could be genuinely attributed to Jesus and which were clearly invented by those who followed after him.

Soon I began to envision the massive intellectual structure of Catholic theology, which details the behavioral options and obligations expected of its most faithful people, who for the most part have little understanding of what they are participating in, as an intimidation strategy. The Catholic Church for millennia has been sweeping up its adherents into the mighty whirlwind of its intimidating theology, which casts blame and guilt on people who were seeking only the love of God, of which the Church claims to be the only effective conveyance.

 The people, then, are in our time, as in all the previous eras since the fourth century, being held in bondage by the burdens imposed on them by this theological structure. They are herded by their pastors from one celebratory liturgy or folk-practice to another—to each of which the sincerely pious ones give their hearts and their labors and their money—for, in these opportunities to lift up their hearts to the god they envision as the perfection in their lives (although on reasonable examination this god turns out to be a self-contradictory being who both murders and creates, who both savagely stings and then binds up with love the wounds it has inflicted)—in these expressions of devotion they find meaning and purpose. They find joy in their otherwise turgid lives. They find hope and spiritual destination in the fulfillment of the promises which, the Church teaches, all occur in a future time, while in the present, its leaders enrich themselves and indulge their sometimes lurid predilections, abusing the innocent good will of those who are entwined in the moral and intellectual web of “the sacred mysteries.”

This whole mythic enactment, I suppose, is somewhat more life-sustaining than heroin or crack-cocaine. But having spent the past four years trying to maintain myself as a spiritual seeker and yet struggling to cast off from myself those choking vines of the Catholic way of life which I have been living with for more than seventy years and which have penetrated virtually every space in my conscious being, I see now that religion of any sort—and in particular, the **hope in the future** which religions offer—is, as Karl Marx observed, a powerful narcotic.

And billions of heart-feeling people flock to the explanations which religion offers for the painfulness of present life and particularly to the promises which religion makes about the exaltation of the self-sacrificing believer in the future times. To these hopes, the adherents to religion become addicted. This state of addiction is manifested in their feeling the need or the opportunity to pray more fervently or more extensively, or to give more and more in service to the community.

In the most extreme cases, the sustaining power produced by this addiction to self-perfection or to self-sacrifice yields truly heroic wonders of human compassion and strength. Of these, the one I hold in highest esteem is the great Christian addict—that is, “saint”—Peter Claver, who worked for decades, ministering to the needs of the brutalized and terrorized African natives who arrived in the “New World” to become the chattel slaves of the sleek “Christians” who could afford to buy and use them mercilessly.

You might wish to read about Claver. Though his story is told by his biographer in an idealized way, the immense power of his human compassion, deriving from Claver’s addiction to faith, is indisputable.

My own diaconal ministry, born of my own addiction to the Catholic religion, was in no way heroic. Nonetheless, I was able to recognize in the comments and requests of the people who spoke to me that some in the crowd understood what I was trying to express when I preached, or at any rate, were led to think about what they had never considered before.

Some others came to me and listened to my advice about how to deal with their life problems. I found myself at these times analyzing their situations in clear and perceptive ways—ways in which I did not ordinarily think. I don’t claim to understand this phenomenon, but my current grasp of it is that their desire for counsel brought out of me a capacity to understand and a wisdom to which I was unaccustomed, for people had rarely sought my advice or counsel before I was ordained.

I attributed this newfound trustworthiness simply to my status as deacon—and to the liturgical uniform that came with it (the “dress,” as one pastor put it, as in, “Look, Mom! That man is wearing a dress!”)—that in the minds of people who needed to share their lives with someone who would listen and who would offer appropriate counsel, I was raised to a level of trustworthiness I had never experienced before, or since.

Though I had no great regard for most of the clergy I worked with, except for a small number who seemed to be on the seeker’s path as I was, and from whom I had learned and would continue to learn in our exchanges, I saw value in the productive relationships which I described above with some of the parishioners—people who trusted me to tell them the truth as I had found it to be, and to help them with the often distressing circumstances they faced. With some of these people, I shared on a personal level the questions that were twisting in my mind, and I took positions which were evident to me but which contradicted the teachings of the Church.

I had begun to leave the Church in these conversations, long before I realized that I was leaning—listing like a torpedoed freighter, really—away from Catholic orthodoxy. I had begun to see clearly and, as a result, when I spoke about these things, as I did endlessly —the theological issues and the practical deceitfulness of the leadership—I spoke the truth of what I saw. Some received that truth with enthusiasm—and occasionally, with tears of joy that someone was speaking to their personal pain. Others thought “Heresy!” And others walked out without listening or flopped onto their kneelers and prayed to the Virgin Mary, I suppose, that those words I spoke would be cleansed of evil.

When they had had enough of me and I had had enough of them, I turned and left. But that is not the end of the story. It is true that I was, and still am, in some way, seeking the truth of things, including the truth of Divinity. But after having suffered through that years-long tunnel of disillusionment and anger and disorientation which beset me after I left the Catholic Church, I also realized that I had gone through a type of addiction-withdrawal. I had needed those pastors, so that I had bosses to contend with, or rather, against. I had needed everything that I had used to support my rebellion against the Church, which I believed I understood.

Now I look on those times and see that my struggle was with my own addiction to Catholicism. I needed religion. I needed its structure, so that I could attack it and tear it apart in my mind, in order to confront some of the many questions which religion raises in the rational—and skeptical—mind.. I needed its basic human incompetence so that I could de-divinize it and make it comprehensible in its purpose. Catholicism—and all of Christianity—and every institutional religion, for that matter, all of them are businesses. They are all profitable for the leadership, and they are all addictive to their faithful clientele.

Many churches do some good for some people in need. But the Christian churches in general are all of them too inward-looking, to self-absorbed with their patent Christian-ness, to be of much use in fulfilling the vast neediness of those who are unspoken for. And so, all do much harm because they are all human institutions, commanded by—and populated by— human beings who are always flawed and willful. And most churches are ordinarily contaminated with hatreds and prejudices, particularly aimed toward other, competing religions or enemy groups.

Imagine for a moment a Christian church which is not like that—a church in which every parish were led by an Óscar Romero—a Christian trained to be an ordinary institutional priest, who as a bishop enjoyed the wealth, comforts, and prestige of his clerical rank, and who, with the suddenness attributed to divine grace, began to see the deep, suffering humanity of his parishioners, to feel their needs and their fears—a bishop who then began to speak out against the self-indulgence of the Church hierarchy and against its collusion with the morally foul leaders of the Salvadoran state, a priest who defended his people against the indignities, and worse, the disappearances and murders, of innocent people by the Salvadoran death squads in the depths of night, a man unafraid—and emboldened by the truth he saw with great sorrow around him—the rapacity and hoarding that consumes the attention of the social elite, and the desperation and hopelessness of the poor and abandoned.

In our 21st century world, ***that*** is what an authentic, Jesus-inspired Christian church would look like, and that is how it would behave. There would be no desire for luxury or cushioned seats. There would be only the ceaseless action of the people in the pews, led by bold and fearless clergy, to bring the generous Truth of the teachings of Jesus to bear on the terrible truths of a world which knows no way other than climbing over the broken bodies of one’s neighbors—every one of those who are present in one’s life—in sheer neglect of the dignity of those persons, and blind to everything except their own grasping viciousness. ***That***is the Christian community that Jesus dreamt of when his fledgling two hundred took upon themselves the open-heartedness that frees one from one’s human weaknesses and set out to heal the benighted world with the light of their Truth.

Poor Jesus of Nazareth! —the man whom I, and most people who care, presume to have actually lived and to have walked the hills of Galilee. Look what we have done to his memory. In his life, he was a good man, filled with mercy and compassion, easily forgiving and welcoming. He was young and idealistic enough to see how his religion could actually benefit the people in their needs, intelligent enough to make fools of those who sought to entrap him, wise enough that what he taught appealed to the common sense of the ordinary people, and humble enough that he sought little for himself, except the notoriety that drew people to listen to him. And he was committed enough to his vision of truth not to recant in the face of death. What better sort of man would anyone desire?

But the life and work of this humble, courageous man became the seed of an elaborate and ever-evolving mythology which transformed a human being into a god—into *the* god who excites the hearts of people in its power and presumed majesty. And on the basis of that mythology the mighty structure of Christianity was built, a façade which rarely leads to large-scale human benefit, but often leads to human misery in hope, and to venal gratification for its leaders.

I have finished with the Roman Catholic Church. It is not what it was meant to be—nor could it ever lead a person on the Way of Jesus, given its current actual values and the corruption which is rampant in its leadership. As far as I am concerned, the Church is going nowhere that I wish to go with it.

This is not to say that my respect for Jesus and for the way of life that he taught has diminished. What I discovered in my explorations of various churches after I left the clutches of Rome, however, is that the Way of Jesus is not practiced in any of the settings in which I attempted to find it. After a brief while, I stopped looking to institutions and organizations to offer me the next step on my seeker’s path. I set out on my own, with those rare friends who are also seekers as my only collaborators.

 As I continue along the path toward the truth of the Divinity which is found wherever I look, I continue to get entangled easily in life-old background issues, to which only an emotional reaction comes, rather than a peaceful, beneficial understanding. These are my worst tiimes. They are dark and painful, and I always await their end.

One of these painful issues has been my relation with the Catholic Church. I look forward to finishing this book, which says all I need to say about the realities of this institution, as I perceive them. I await being purged of what remains of the pain and anger which have been afflicting me for all my adult life. Some of you will have perceived that I was sexually molested as a thirteen-year-old. As far as I know, the man who abused me was not a priest. Nonetheless, because of that experience, which I struggled with into old age and have finally resolved, without the help of the Church, I know the terrible damage that such treatment causes in an innocent heart, and the life-long struggle through dark confusion which I had to endure to find genuine identity and integrity.

At my age of 76, I expect, but do not await, dying, and I do not now feel afraid. But of course, no one knows how they will actually respond when dying does whatever it does. I expect nothing, and I hope for nothing. As everything else is, dying will be what it is.

I “retired” from the active diaconate, citing health reasons. Here in this chapter, for the first time, I tell the real reason. It boils down to this. I found I could not respect the Church, and at the same time, the Church found that it could not respect me. I see now that what I wanted from the Church was to be left alone to grow in the spiritual life toward the Supreme One, and then to be allowed to share with others in the Church what I had found, as a way of encouraging them to set out on the same mission. The orthodoxy-masters would not allow that.

The leadership and I were continually at odds, and over time, the conflict drained me.

But I wonder about the need for so much leadership and for so much orthodoxy. I have since realized that none of the great contributions to humankind of which the Catholic Church touts itself their source—not hospitals nor universities nor the scientific method nor feeding shelters—were the work of Church leaders. Rather, they were always the work of ordinary but inspired parish clergy or nuns or people in the pews.

And sometimes these real Christians had to battle with the reactionary leadership in order to get their work approved. For faithful Galileo, it took four hundred years for the Catholic Church hierarchy to accept the accuracy of his observations and the validity of his conclusions, and to admit the errors in the doctrines which it taught—doctrines which Galileo’s findings contradicted and for which the Church hierarchy punished him in his lifetime.

From an outsider’s view, what is the Roman Catholic Church now? I see a waning glory, wealth unimaginable, protected and hoarded by the few in red and white costumes who have access to it—little of it shared with the poor, much of it given to the venal comforts of these men—only men. I have seen human baseness at its worst among the clergy, who are working against the odds of time and scandal to cling to the glories bestowed on them in the past.

 It is that same human baseness which the Christian Church, in its earliest days, was admired for standing against. In those days, the Christian Church was a source of health, a fresh wind of wholesome living in the love of God.

In our day, this same Church is corruption, lying, double-speak, connivance with influential, reactionary politicians, all wrapped in a now see-through haze of secrecy. Even murder. Yes, even murder. You shouldn’t believe me about this. Form your own conclusions after you watch the PBS documentary called *The Keepers*.

I ran away from it, horrified and disgusted. I gave away all my liturgical books and my deacon gear. I no longer associate myself with the Catholic Church. My last act of mind given to the Church, as far as I can see at this point, is this book.

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 Religion is a powerful formative and transformative force in human life. It offers to every culture meaning and purpose, access to the sacred, as well as the culture’s existential identity and its sense of location in the universe. Sadly, the Christian churches of the modern era have lost their spiritual integrity—their ability to place their adherents properly in the spiritual universe—largely because of human baseness and because of the adulterations of the message of Jesus which have seeped into them. These impurities, extending back to the very beginnings of these churches, have taken the attention of both clergy and laity away from the simple, direct, but difficult teachings of Jesus. Today’s Christian churches of every major denomination have, by and large, lost their spiritual vigor, often substituting for it an emotional elation during worship or else a self-righteous stance on social issues, in particular in today’s world, their opposition to elective abortion. In foregoing the spiritual path which Jesus set out for his followers, they have become spiritually passive.

Today’s churches have developed to a great extent into distinctly social organizations, where coffee hours, gaming, study groups, suppers, hobby groups, yard sales, and other functions which aim toward strengthening the community thrive. Many churches of this sort also support local church groups and national organizations which promote and sponsor programs which assist those in need, and which spread “the gospel” to the poor in other nations. These are laudable Christian efforts supported as “outreach” projects by the churches.

However, it is difficult to assess these efforts as “committed Christianity.” Often, the participants engage in them zestfully for a brief time—two weeks or a month—sometimes even staying not in the homes or neighborhoods of the recipients of their charity, but in affluent American-style hotels. I do not criticize the work which these participants do for the people, which the people appear to receive with great joy and gratitude. I do wonder, though, how many of the Christian participants, in their heart of hearts, consider these service ventures to be “sprees” or “worthwhile vacations,” or whether they feel as though they are “doing their share” for the Christian cause, in order to qualify as good Christians. The fundraising letters I used to receive, especially those which sought to fund people “missionizing” in foreign lands, often had something of that tone to them. Those who were asking for funding seemed to me to be “practicing” Christianity rather than to be living the day-to-day Christian life.

It has been said, and I have found it to be true in my experience, that the actual participating, laboring people involved in these projects number only about 8% of the congregations. As a result, that large majority of church-goers who are not members of the “sweating 8%” might be proud of their inclusion in the congregations which support these efforts, but if these non-laboring people count themselves as real Christians without working up a sweat, they are only deluding themselves and wearing a Christian facemask.

It is easy to say, “Jesus loves you.” That puts all the burden on Jesus. Much harder is to say, “Here is my time and my effort, to help you, my brother/sister, because I love you.” This is especially true if you have seen them only on their best behavior, for two weeks.

If what I am claiming here is factual, the living out of the message of Jesus, even among faithful, church-going people, is an uncommon phenomenon. Now, if conversion of the congregations’ hearts to Jesus and his way of life is the authentic goal of the Christian churches, they must examine themselves and their histories deeply, in order to see the evils which they have permitted, and even encouraged, their members to perpetrate on others, in centuries past and indeed in our time as well. The churches, and especially the clerical leadership, must themselves undergo a process of cleansing and conversion. Thereafter, they will be able to preach the actual Way of Jesus to their people.

The Christian churches must also purify themselves and return to the Way of Jesus in order to find a meaningful way to offer Jesus again to those millions of people who have simply walked away from Christianity, especially “High-Church” Christianity, such as Catholicism, Lutheranism, Presbyterianism, and the Anglican Communion, including the Episcopal Church in the United States. Those who have left Christianity all have their different reasons. But I presume that in the hearts of perhaps every person who has left Christianity, the inarticulate yearning for something spiritually significant—the yearning for the meaningful and dignified way to live which Jesus offered—was unfed and unpracticed when they went to church, and after they stopped their church-going, is still unsatisfied.

They sought their fulfillment in Christianity. But Christianity gave them something less valuable, something more pretentious, something more pernicious.

After leaving the Roman Catholic Church, I looked into other churches briefly, knowing all the time that I was not the right person to join any religious organization. Having left all of them, I have now encountered within myself an expansive sense of spiritual freedom. And I learn much as I live day to day. I do not have all the answers, but I am settled at heart with that. I will tell you in the following final chapter what has arisen in me about the elemental nature of my human life.

B. What Remains Is Everything

Now I simply seek to accept What Is, as What Is springs from the Supreme One, of which I know nothing, and to rejoice in the silence during which at times the fullness of everything I am perceiving thickens with the reality of these objects in my field of vision. What I’m saying is that I experience moments when the naked *existence* of the beings and objects which surround me becomes vividly real to me, in the density and clear colors and sounds of those things. In those times, my mind silences, and I experience myself as simply existing in the same space with the other entities which surround me, not passively or observationally, but rather, as integrated with them—*one* with them in the on-going process of Being. These quiet moments are marked by a pleasant heart-feltedness, as I, with all the beings around me, simply manifest separately but simultaneously our *existence*, as though we were each singing or proclaiming, “I am…..I am….” In these moments, I am standing with, and beholding, and recognizing that my heart is in Divinity.

That is the experience of Divinity, as I know it. Its coming is always a pleasant surprise, for which I am grateful. It is a lively and fresh experience, during which everything is vivid, and rich in its color and substantiality. I find myself honored to be in such a place and also in communion with all the entities I perceive. This communion is direct and intimate, and peaceful. It is like speaking gently to does and fawns, who attend to the speaking with open attentiveness.

That is the experience I have become a participant in. Now, let me structure my presentation of it more verbally and more formally.

That there is a single, unifying entity in the universe is without doubt. That entity is the One whom Jesus called “the Father.” But names mean nothing. The ancients said, “The One is every name.”

More than that, the One is everything that is. The One is Being itself—the act of existing—in all its glory and vitality and silent beauty, and in its colorfulness.

We cannot perceive the One as it is in its fullness. The reason for that is that the One is us, and we are part of the One. To see God, we simply look at everything around us, and we look at ourselves. Look, and see your God—everywhere!

God is Being, and so, God fills everything that exists with its existence. You and I and every human being are not some hodge-podge of physical desires to be mastered and suppressed, mixed with a spirit which looks always to something better. What a frustrating view of human life is that Catholic vision, full of guilt and angst.

I ask, Is such a human being as that the work of a loving God—a human being that can never simply live peacefully in his world? I answer, No, such a being is a creation of tortured men, seeking power over the lives of others. The humans that God builds we see clearly in our three-year-olds. They have zest. They explore, They do not seek research grants to analyze the marvels of the world; they simply delight in them. They simply, happily love everything.

I am not proposing that we adults must become three-year-olds in mind and heart. I am proposing that we remember why our three-year-olds give us so much delight. They are pure in a pure world.

That the world of adults is not pure but dangerous, full of death-traps at every turn, is the reality we live in. Is there any fault or blame to be cast on anyone for this situation? I say, No, there is not. If you need to cast blame, you must cast it on the Creator of All, not on the driven beings whose pleasure comes from the misery of others.

Everything must eat to live, and therefore, everything must be eaten. Even the predator is eventually prey. That is what the poets call the cycle of life. There is no need to feel sorrow over this. And yet, when we lose what we love, we weep. This weeping is worthy. It is as worthy as the joy we feel when what we love enters our lives. That is, truly, the cycle of life.

If you blame God for the evil in the world (as though it could somehow be eliminated), then you miss the point of creation. Evil in an action is identified from one point of view; evil is accepted or ignored or re-named from other points of view. There is no spiritual benefit in lingering over judgments about what is evil. That is not the point of creation.

The point of creation is to bring everything into existence. God is the One who loves. The One loves. For that to occur, there must be an object of the One’s love. The One itself cannot be the object of its love. For, the beloved must be other than the lover, to keep things untwisted. So the One makes itself into the beings that it loves. The One, God, becomes us and all other existing things. In doing so, it bestows existence on us, all of us, and allows us to be ourselves—to be simply the ones which the One itself creates.

The Supreme One made—and continues to make—you and me moment by moment as who each of us is, with all our individual talents and with all our individual flaws. Along the way, the One prompts us to undertake challenges—as the One did with me and the burden of pastors and the sorrows of the people. Some of these challenges we respond to in a wholesome way. To others we do not. But in every case, all we can say is, I am who I am, and so I do what I do. For who I am propels me to do what I do. Am I to be blamed for being who the One is making me to be? Am I to be blamed if I exult in what the One gives me as my experience, just as I am, just as the One holds me in existence to be?

If God wished me to be different—to be “better” in some way—why would God bring me into existence without that better feature? I cannot believe that such a loving God would say to his creature: “I have made you imperfect. Struggle for your whole life to overcome that imperfection, even though I have denied you the skills to do so by making you imperfect in the first place.” – Or, the Catholic alternative: “I have made you imperfect, but I have given you the medicine to cure you in an external location, called The Church, which you must seek out among all the other non-churches which look like The Church to the untrained eye, and find it, and then understand it so that it can lead you to be what I intend you to be, because I did not create you to be what I want you to be!”

That is not the God who caused Jesus to assert, “You are gods.”[[61]](#endnote-62) What could he mean? I take him to mean that there is no separation at all between what Catholics call the spiritual realm and the physical realm. God, the One, exists in its fullness as what the One is, as Being. It forms itself into me and into each of you and into everything that exists. The One gives all of us the light of life and consciousness, and it sets each of us into a context of color and sound and feelings. Some of us the One made—and moment-by-moment continues to make—so that we respond in gladness and we do not resist whatever the One puts before us, painful or joyful, self-centered or other-centered. We live our lives, day to day, accumulating experience and knowledge, as our hearts lead us, doing what we find ourselves urged from within to do, and if we have been given understanding, then from all this we learn to understand it all. The understanding is this: God is All, the One, the One of whom we are made.

We are God expressing itself as us, no matter where our “us” leads. For some, it will lead sometimes to socially disapproved behaviors—sometimes intolerable behaviors—to which others of God’s beings respond in the ways that they do, from the brotherly embrace of forgiveness to summary execution.

And sometimes our behaviors, coming simply from who we are, are loving, helpful, truthful, generous and comforting, and others respond to those behaviors as they do, as well.

Is there any praise or any blame here? No. There are just people, being who they are—being the way the One makes them to be.

Most pathetic of all human beings, then, is the person who does not realize that he or she is a god, born of God, satisfactory to God in all this person does—the person who does not realize that he or she is simply and completely God being God as this person.

That lack of understanding leads the person to presume that he or she is deficient and must find a way to behave more suitably in the area of his or her imperfection. The person then enters the state which I call Christian Psychosis—a personality fracture in which the person sees himself in two lights: the despicable one that he is; and the perfect one which he believes the One “wants” him to be. And so, he struggles to “overcome” the person whom the One is making him to be, in order to put on the costume or the appearance of what he believes he ***should*** look like.

There are no *should*s in creation. There is only *it is*.

Everything in the Supreme One’s creation grows and changes, at its own pace, without forcing. For some, Christian Psychosis is a useful plateau to cross because it demonstrates experientially that only suffering results from dividing oneself into some combination of the real and the ideal, and the realization of this pain and its truth opens the way into wholeness and freedom. As a freed person, you understand then that you are best when you are “being who you are.”[[62]](#endnote-63)

However, those who get stuck in Christian Psychosis, caught in the cycle of self-condemnation and of trying to be better, lead lives of lonely desperation, always understanding themselves to be burdened because they are somehow not with God.

They *are* with God, just as they are. They do not see God because they have not looked at God, everywhere.

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**On-Line Articles and Essays**

The history of the Christian Church and other historical topics are clearly delineated in the Wikipedia articles which recount various aspects of that history and which are noted in the text.

The website, www.bishop-accountability.org, is a valuable resource for information on the Catholic priest-sex scandal worldwide.

## Notes to the Text

1. “Literally inerrant” means that the words contained in the Bible come directly from God, via the hand of the holy person who received the words, and are therefore always without error. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. . When we read the Jewish scriptures remembering that the nation of Israel was often depicted as an individual, we find this prophecy articulated in Psalms 27 and 37, for example, and also in Isa 2:1-5; 9:2-8; 42-43:13; and chapter 60. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. . This is even clearer in Hosea’s original text (6:6): “For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings.” Here, as throughout the Jewish Scriptures, the word *knowledge* means that intimate understanding of the other which comes from committed engagement with that person in a covenant relationship. (See https://www.torahresource.com/EnglishArticles/Yada\_as\_Covenant\_Term.pdf.) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. . A clueless annotator on Mark’s parallel passage, enthralled to Jewish tradition, comments at this point, “Thus he declared all foods clean.” (7:19.) Perhaps that was true of Jesus. But erasing the kosher prescriptions was not high on Jesus’ list of reforms for Judaism. The comment—and its writer--seem to miss the crucial point of the passage, that interior sanctity supersedes all the external devotions, including the kosher laws. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. . If Jesus actually spoke these parables, he spoke either in Hebrew or more probably, in Aramaic. Neither language makes the distinction I have made here, for there is no future tense—nor present tense, for that matter—in either language. Both languages attend to whether the verb-action is completed or not. No attention is paid to when the action occurred along a timeline. For example, if the following hypothetical sentences, \* “My shop was robbed” and \* “My shop is being robbed,” were articulated in either Biblical Hebrew or first-century Aramaic, they would be distinguished from one another not by the fact that the first sentence is in the past and the second in the present, but by the fact that in the first, the robbery was completed and the robbers ran away, in contrast to the second, in which the robbery is still occurring and we don’t know the outcome or when the robbery will be completed. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aramaic\_language#Verbs, q.v. “Aspectual Tense,” and http://biblicalhebrew.org/hebrew-tenses.aspx.)

 Since this is the situation with respect to Hebrew and Aramaic verb “tenses,” the https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%CE%B5%E1%BC%B0%CE%BC%CE%AF.)

 So when he wrote that Jesus said in Aramaic or Hebrew, “The kingdom of heaven ***is*** like a grain of mustard seed,” he was translating into the Greek tense system an Aramaic or Hebrew verb which simply means, “it has not yet reached its full growth, but it is continuing to grow.” If he had chosen to use the Greek future verb (ʾέστaı), he would have been suggesting growth into the future time, beyond this present moment. The Greek future tense would have suggested an afterlife to those who believed in such a concept. But he did not. He chose the Greek present tense verb (έστίν), which suggests that the growth being alluded to is occurring right here and right now. [End of footnote.] [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. . See the interaction between Moses and Jethro, a Midianite priest, for an exemplary relationship between Jew and Gentile. (Ex. 18). However, in practice, the Jews looked down on Gentiles. Jesus himself displays the ordinary first-century Jewish scorn for Gentiles when he enjoins his followers from trying to preach to Gentile “dogs” and “swine”. (Mt. 7:6.) However, he experiences a “conversion,” in which he learns to regard Gentiles otherwise, during the lesson taught to him by the Syrophoenician woman, who remains unperturbed when Jesus refers to her as a Gentile “dog.” She retorts that the “dogs” also are waiting for his love and generosity of spirit. Chastened, he grants her request. (Mk. 7:24-30.) – This story is so frank in its depiction of a humble follower opening Jesus’ eyes to a new way of seeing that it is without doubt an authentic Jesus-report, though it is preserved only in Mark.

 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. .  In the Jewish scriptures, the committed devotion to YHWH which the Mosaic Law desires is expressed by the word translated as *upright*. This word characterizes a spiritual attitude by a physical posture. The spiritually upright stand upright before God; the evil stumble and fall. See Hosea 14:9. Thus, Jesus, in raising Simon’s mother-in-law to an upright posture, is releasing her from bondage to the spirit of the fever, in order that she stand upright before the God whose healing/exorcising power flowed out to her through Jesus, who in this case functioned as a wordless prophet of God. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. . Why Jesus requires silence on the healed man’s part about Jesus’ powers has been the topic of considerable scholarly debate. Since no convincing conclusions have been reached in the matter, we will leave this an open question and move on. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. . The text is, “While Peter was still saying this, the Holy Spirit fell on [*lit*. fell upon them suddenly, as in a surprise attack] all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them *speaking in tongues and extolling God*. Then Peter declared, “Can anyone forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (Emphasis added.) [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. . In the following analysis, I am indebted to Joseph Martos (1991), *Doors to the Sacred*, “Eucharist,” Liguori Press, and to James Carroll (2014), *Christ Actually*, Penguin/Viking. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. . This meal, as Martos demonstrates, was not a Seder meal, as is commonly believed, for the gospel accounts do not square with the Seder ritual. For example, no bitter herbs are mentioned. But the washings, the cup-passing, and the final hymn are characteristic of these fellowship meals. In addition, sensing that the authorities were coming for him, Jesus invited all his faithful followers to this final fellowship meal. As a result, Jesus could not join his people in an ordinary home because he had invited so many people that he had to rent a hall. (For more detail, see Matthew Skulicz, “Who Dined With Jesus At His Last Supper?”, www.GodDesire.com/who-attended-jesus-last-supper.html.) [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. . The title *Christ* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew title, *Messiah*. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. .  See in particular, Bart D. Ehrman (2014), *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee*, Harper One. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. . Ehrman (2018), p. 119. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. . Jesus accepted this invitation in Lk 4:1-21. Likewise, Paul speaks to a synagogue in Acts 13:14-41. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. . The First Jewish Temple erected in Jerusalem was the Temple of Solomon, built in the 9th century BCE. That temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in the 6th century BCE. The Second Temple was later built on the same site in the 6th to 5th centuries BCE. In the 1st century CE, King Herod “the Great,” in an attempt to win the affection of the Jews, expanded and lavishly decorated the Jerusalem Temple dramatically, so that the Jews could proudly claim the magnificent structure as the “footstool of God.” [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. . The sacrificing of animals was the primary act of worship commanded in Torah. In this sacrifice, the priests devoutly slaughtered the animal and then, except for birds, which were treated differently, butchered the carcass. The sacred parts were burnt in the sacrificial fire in the center of the altar, to make a sweet-smelling smoke ascend to God. (Ex 29:25, 41, etc.) The priests then took their appointed share of the butchered animal, and the rest of the meat was returned to the person who first supplied the animal. After the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE, such sacrifice became impossible because Torah declared that all valid sacrifices were made on the altar of the “meeting tent” of Moses, which was the prototype for the altar in the Jerusalem Temple. (See Ex 29:10-46.) When the Romans destroyed the Temple and its altars in that year, blood sacrifice could no longer be legitimately practiced by the people of God. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. . This combined ceremony, with prayers, readings, homily, and collection preceding the Bread-Breaking rite contains all the main elements, in the proper order, of the Roman Catholic Mass and may be considered the first form of the Catholic Mass. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. . See, for example, Paul’s tirade against the Galatians for accepting a “different gospel” than the gospel he preached to them. (Gal. 1, beginning at verse 6.) [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. . “Canonical” means “officially accepted by the Church.” At this stage in its development, the Christian Church was no more than a set of communities seeking a structure together. There was no office in place which could designate some text as canonical. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. . https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old\_Roman\_Symbol. The oldest existing text of this baptismal creedal statement comes from the late 4th or early 5th century. The final phrase of the statement is in parentheses here because the phrase appears in only some of the most ancient manuscripts. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. . See for example Clement of Rome’s Second Letter, Chapter 16-17, written in the middle second century. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. .  It is a cause of continuing wonder to me how after 1600 years of oppression at the hands of the European Christians, and knowing from bitter historical experience the sufferings and deprivations that oppressed people suffer, the dispersed Jews, coming together to occupy the Jewish Homeland in partitioned Palestine in 1948, could not have instituted or accepted a more just and peaceful way of living with their Arab brothers—all of them Semites, sharing the same distant ancestry—each with a heritage claim to the land of Palestine which goes back 3000 years, and each tracing its origins to the Patriarch Abraham and his sons, Ishmael and Jacob. The point here is not whether the Jews’ claim to the land is legitimate. It is. It is as legitimate as the Muslims’ claim. When that is conceded on both sides, then the issue becomes a matter of distributing the land justly among the two nations. In that case, either a love for possession or a love for justice for all must prevail. Either both sides fight for the land, or each side concedes the justice of the other side’s claims when necessary and evident.

 My point is that a millennium and a half of oppression of the Jews and 700 years of Turkish oppression of the Arab Muslims might have taught the combatants the softness of heart that suffering often does. That is painfully not what happened. The Israelis, in the twenty years following the war for Israeli independence, extended their national territory by land-grabs amounting to half-again the size of the originally partitioned Israeli homeland. These territorial expansions drove the Arab inhabitants out of their ancestral homesteads and created three-quarters of a million Palestinian refugees, a large number of whom ended up in the West Bank refugee camps, where they have been living since. The situation is now in stasis, with the Israelis refusing to give up recently occupied territory on the West Bank, as a further assertion of Israeli power in the region (which was based, at least initially, on massive infusions of American aid—amounting to billions of dollars in war materiel each year.) So the Palestinians sit angrily frustrated by the loss of their homesteads, and they occasionally fire rockets into Israel or commit other acts of terror or sabotage in retaliation. For each act, the Israelis exact retribution. And so, the injustices of one side against the other in this family of brothers stimulate in the other a simple desire for revenge. What could have been good come out of suffering on each side, with each side conceding what is necessary for peace, has remained simply a nasty feud in the world of *realpolitik*, in which acquiring and defending the wealth (territory, money, power) is the only value. (With regard to this, one thinks of Pompeii, smothered in 79 CE by the sudden ash of Vesuvius’s crushing blow to the city, where one body was found in a private home atop a treasure-pile of gold. For that man, when fatal disaster struck his home and his family, his only impulse was to defend his wealth. *Sic transit gloria mundi.*) [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. .  “Bonhoeffer’s death-row recognition was simple, and may yet prove timeless: if Jesus had been remembered across most of two thousand years as the Jew he was, the history of those millennia—and their climax in the crimes of the Thousand-Year Reich—would be very different.” (James Carroll (2014), p. 27 and *passim*.) [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
25. . Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Magnesians*, Ch. 3 and 2., Roberts-Donaldson trans. at www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/ignatius-magnesians-longer-html/.) [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
26. .  See J.B. Lightfoot, trans., *The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians*, at https://carm.org/first-epistle-to-the-corinthians. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
27. .  The First Letter of John contains an expression of the anger which Christian leaders carried toward heretics. See especially 2:18-28 and 4:1-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
28. . It is notable that in each of these three gospels, Mark, Matthew, and Luke, more than one chapter is devoted to Jesus’ own apocalyptic prophecies of the end-times, where he promises to come in glory to judge all people. Yet never once in any of these gospels, in any place in the text of each, does Jesus call himself “Son of God.” The Jesus character uses that term of himself only in John’s gospel. This suggests that the end-times prophecies were inserted later into Mark, Matthew, and Luke, and that the original authors had no intention of suggesting that Jesus was “Son of God” with the meaning that it later had in the Christian community. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
29. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\_of\_Jerusalem. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
30. .  Gehenna is a small, deep valley on the southern side of Jerusalem where early idolatrous Jews made child sacrifices to the god Moloch. Afterward it was thought to be cursed, and so it came to be used as a garbage dump, with a continuously burning fire. As such, it was used metaphorically to refer to the abode of the dead who had made themselves unworthy of Paradise. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
31. . Scholars currently agree that the gospel according to Mark was the first of the three Synoptic Gospels (*synoptic* meaning “seeing the topic in the same general way”) to have been written, in about 70 CE. Matthew and Luke, the other two Synoptic Gospels, are thought to each have separately used Mark’s gospel as a model, expanding the narrative and adding not only details but whole sequences of parables and sayings to the story.  [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
32. . We know that the joyful expression of the presence of God continued in some of the Jesus-communities throughout the first century in its original enthusiastic, charismatic form, as Jesus himself introduced it to his first community. We know this because the Christians who followed the Christian prophet Montanus in the second century CE continued to worship in a charismatic vein, although substantially different from the simple enthusiasm of Jesus. Some historians find evidence of the continuation of Montanism even into the 9th century. And such enthusiastic worship was revived, primarily in the United States and western Europe, in the 1970s and 80s, in the form of Protestant Pentecostalism and the Catholic Charismatic Movement, until the charismatic form of worship was suppressed, rather than embraced, by the Catholic bishops. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
33. . Of course, today’s Christianity, especially as a result of the Reformation, finds it heretical to believe that one can earn salvation by good works. It is believed, rather, that salvation comes only from God through the death of Jesus. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
34. . It is of interest to note that the position of the many Christian denominations has changed substantially since these formative discussions in the first century. At that time, of course, no basic science or technology existed to make clear and precise the development of the fetus within its mother’s uterus. And so, the earliest Christians (Jesus apparently not having spoken on the subject) thought that after fertilization of the mother’s egg, the fetus began its corporeal development as it lay quietly in the womb, not yet having received its undying soul from God. At a certain point in the process, the mother began to feel the fetus moving within her. This was taken as a sign of the *ensoulment* of the child.—As for abortion, first-century Christians thought on the basis of the evidence just presented that the fetus was not infused with eternal life until movement began. Before movement began, the fetus was not considered “formed” because it was “un-ensouled.” Thus, the earliest Christian thinking on elective abortion was that it was a serious sin under any circumstances. However, taking ensoulment into consideration, post-Apostolic thinkers, such as Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, and Tertullian, all writing in the second half of the second century, as well as Augustine of Hippo in the fourth century, considered it accurate to distinguish between “early abortion”, which is abortion before movement and therefore before “ensoulment,” and “late abortion,” including not only ending the life of an ensouled fetus intentionally (by taking herbal abortifacients, for example), but also by the exposure to the elements of children already born. These thinkers saw both early and late abortion as serious and/or sinful matters, but they also considered early abortion to be considerably less serious than late abortion, exposure, or direct infanticide.

 And so, throughout its history, the Catholic Church has taught that elective abortion is always sinful, but from the second century through the nineteen century, it retained the “early abortion exception.” In 1869, Pope Pius IX did away with the early abortion exception. In the late 20th century, the slogan “Life begins at conception” became a popular war-cry of the Pro-Lifers. [end]

 [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
35. .  We have to be careful when we use the term “eternal.” For, the Jewish language did not have a word that meant “infinite duration into the future.” The Jews of the first century had no concept of this sense of “eternity.” The Hebrew word which is translated as “eternal” is *ólam*. This word is actually a distance word which was applied to time metaphorically. Its meaning is “as far as one can see to the horizon, and then some.” So the term *ólam* has an indefiniteness to it, but nothing approaching infinity. Applied to time, it might mean, “For as long as one can imagine it lasting, and then some.” Likewise in biblical Greek, there is no sense of “eternity” in our English meaning. Rather, the Greek word translated as “eternal” is *aion*, which literally means “an eon” or “an age.” It means, therefore, “a long, long time” and that’s all. There is no sense of our “eternity” in the Greek word. (See Jeff Brenner, <https://www.quora.com/What-are-the-Hebrew-or-Greek-translations-for-the-word-eternal-in-the-Bible>; also, http://www.ancient-hebrew.org/vocabulary\_definitions\_eternity.html.) [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
36. . Greek *episcopos*, translated as “overseer,” meant just that. *scopos* means “one who sees” and *epi-* means “over” or “upon.” Hence, *episcopos* means “overseer.” When this Greek word was brought into Anglo-Saxon, the result was *biscop,* where the initial *-e* was dropped, the voiceless *p* became the voiced *b*, and the Greek *-os* ending was dropped. This word, pronounced **bis**-kop, through ordinary English language changes, comes to us as the word pronounced **bi**-shup. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
37. .  The increasing effects of sin-guilt on the Christian consciousness are observable in the history of crucifixes—crosses on which the body of Jesus is depicted. Crosses are evidenced relatively late (2nd century?) as Christian symbols. But by the time Christianity was legalized in the 4th century, the *corpus* (Latin for “body”) had been added to the cross, and the resulting crucifix (“cross on which a person is hung”) became the dominant symbol of Christianity. Crucifixes from this early period depicted Jesus as the conqueror of sin and evil. Though his body was shown as dead, his eyes were shown open and victorious. These, of course, were depictions of Christ the Conqueror, which we have already discussed. Later on, however, and clearly by the 9th century, the crucifix artists tended more and more to depict the corpus in the vivid details of suffering: anguished facial expression, contorted body, crowns of large thorns piercing the scalp, ample streams of blood, the spear wound in the side, and so on. These crucifixes are compelling depictions of the horror of tortured death, and they reflect, I believe, the anguish of Christian sin-guilt in its most dramatic display. (See https://www.britannica.com/topic/cross-religious-symbol. Several crucifixes from this latter era are on display at The Cloisters, a division of the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art.) [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
38. Individual confession of sins, and absolution by a priest, is a system for forgiveness of sin attributed to the Irish monks led by St. Patrick in the fifth century. It spread through Europe as a solution to the problems associated with public confession of serious sins. The sacrament of confession was adopted officially in the Christian Church in the 11th century. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
39. See for example, 1 Cor. 11:1. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
40. .  See Mt 28:16-20, and also Lk 24:46-48 and Acts 1:8-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
41. .  These words were first written in the middle third century by Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, an important city on the Mediterranean coast of North Africa. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
42. .  Although the intention of the councils in writing the Nicene Creed was to produce a commonly-accepted statement of Christian orthodoxy, the commonality which the creed established was not lasting. The creed produced in 324 was amended and expanded by the Council of Constantinople in 381. In it, the definition of the Holy Spirit was expanded to include the clause, “the Holy Spirit,. . . who proceeds from the Father, . . .” The Nicene Creed, thus amended in this and other ways, was accepted as the orthodox formulation of Christian faith. However, beginning in the late 6th century, Latin-speaking churches in the West began to insert a single word, *filioque*, into the creed, so that it read “the Holy Spirit, . . . who proceeds from the Father *and the Son*, . . . “ This addition substantially changed the implied relationships among the three persons of the Godhead, as the original Nicene Creed of 381 expressed them. Nonetheless, against a background of growing conflict between the churches of the West and those of the East, Rome adopted the *filioque* amendment in 1014. This action was a major cause of the Great East-West Schism of 1054, as discussed above on page 122. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
43. .  Defenders of Roman Church theology might reply that the truth of the declarations of these councils is guaranteed because the origin of the declarations is ultimately the Holy Spirit. Their evidence for this claim is scriptural; for example, John 14:26: “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.” Such scriptural affirmations are evidence of truth only for those who already believe them. For *belief* is just what is happening in this case. To *believe* means “to accept that a statement is true on the basis of the testimony of an authority, rather than on the basis of experiential fact.” In contrast, *knowledge* is “to accept a statement as true on the basis of experiential fact.” And so, when my preacher tells me that the Holy Spirit inspires the scriptures, I *believe* that the statement is true because he says so. As soon as I lose confidence in him, however, the foundations of my belief are undercut. Belief, then, is not fact. It is a shaky thing. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
44. .  Perhaps the most stunning interaction between a king and a pope was that between the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry IV, and Pope Gregory VII in January 1077. Before Gregory’s ascension to the papacy, it was customary for the Emperor and the local kings to appoint the bishops and abbots within their realms. Pope Gregory published a directive that only the pope could validly appoint bishops, thereby taking a great deal of income-earning authority away from the civil rulers. The Emperor Henry led an opposition force of noblemen against Gregory’s decree, and for his troubles, Henry was excommunicated from the Christian Church and thus made a pariah. In addition, Gregory gave Henry one year to repent before the pope or else his excommunication would become permanent.

 For his own political motives, Henry acceded to the pope’s demands. He travelled across the Alps in mid-winter from Germany to Canossa, Italy, where Gregory was visiting a nobleperson. When Henry arrived with his wife and first son and his retinue at the castle gate, barefoot (according to legend) and wearing only a hair-shirt, the common medieval symbol of repentance, Pope Gregory denied him admittance to the castle. For three days, the Emperor knelt with his family in the snow during a ravaging blizzard. At the end of that period, Pope Gregory admitted the Emperor to the castle and received his prayer of repentance, afterward revoking Henry’s excommunication.—And so, it is true that even emperors have knelt begging at the feet of Christian popes, such was their power during the Middle Ages. (It didn’t go as well for Pope Clement VII 456 years later when King Henry VIII accepted excommunication from Rome and founded the Church of England.) [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
45. .  *Ashkenaz* is the medieval Hebrew name for Germany, the country in which many Jews of the Diaspora originally settled. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
46. .  The Church’s natural philosophy was a Christian embellishment of the earth-centered model of the universe proposed by the second-century Greek astronomer Ptolemy. In the Roman Church’s model, the earth was at the center of the universe. Around it, encased in spheres of crystal were, in ascending order, the Moon, the Sun, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, and finally, the sphere of Fixed Stars. The spheres in which these bodies were encased moved continuously in an organized, predictable, and perpetual motion, each sphere at its own velocity, and their movement against one another generating the purity of the “Music of the Spheres.” Because observation by the unaided eye detected phase changes only in the moon, it was believed that the heavens above the moon were perfect in the purity of each heavenly body and perfect in their synchronous motion—an obvious work of the Divine Mind. Moreover, each of these bodies acted as a lens or as an angelic guide for the grace of God flowing down to earth from God’s heaven, located beyond the fixed stars, which were understood to be holes in the final sphere of dark material, through which the glory of God shone brightly. It was only when the grace of God passed through the sphere of the imperfect Moon (imperfect because it waxed and waned) that God’s grace encountered imperfection and evil. God’s grace, thus influenced not only by perfection, but also by the disruptions of evil, arrived at the Earth, where it was funneled into the Roman Church, considered to be God’s presence on Earth, and in particular, through the pope, as interlocutor between God and human beings. Thus was God’s grace distributed throughout the earth through the medium of the Roman Church.—Galileo, however, having invented a small telescope, able to view only the planets of the solar system to Saturn, made several observations of change and thus of imperfection beyond the sphere of the Moon. He found that the Sun had sunspots, that Venus also had phases like the Moon’s, that Jupiter had satellite moons, and that Saturn was not round but had “bumps” on each side. (Saturn’s “bumps” were, in reality, its rings, seen blurrily in Galileo’s tiny telescope.)

 These observations demonstrated to any viewer that the heavens above the Moon were also imperfect, and thus that the whole model of the universe which had given universal importance to the pope was simply not correct. The Church leaders were skeptical, threatened, and furious. This episode earned for Galileo only the opportunity to recant his observations and thereafter, house arrest with no ability to publish. Nonetheless, the truth will out, and it did. The supremacy of the papacy was now in the eye of the beholder. [end] [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
47. .  Since that declaration, papal infallibility has been invoked only twice: to declare the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary the mother of Jesus, and to declare the doctrine of the Assumption of Mary into heaven, both by Pope Pius XII in the twentieth century. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
48. .  For this datum and others throughout this account, see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic\_ church\_and\_slavery; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish\_missions\_in\_California; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery\_in\_the\_United\_States. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
49. .  “Kristallnacht, A Nationwide Pogrom,” <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005201>, accessed on 11/26/17. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
50. “Voyage of the St. Louis,” www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005267, accessed on11/26/17. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
51. . See http://articles.latimes.com/2013/apr/07/opinion/la-oe-medoff-roosevelt-holocaust-20130407 [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
52. . hpps://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\_of\_Christian\_denominations\_by\_number\_of\_members. But for counter-argument, see https://www.ncregister.com/blog/scottericalt/we-need-to-stop-saying-that-there-are-33000-protestant-denominations. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
53. .  http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/chapter-1-the-changing-religious-composition-of-the-u-s/. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
54. . See “Two-thirds of bishops let accused priests work” and “Catholic Bishops and the Sex Abuse Scandal,” *Dallas Morning News*, June 12, 2002. This report is no longer directly accessible from the newspaper, but it is available at http://www.bishop-accountability.org/resources/resource-files/databases/DallasMorningNewsBishops.htm. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
55. “At the same time, the church's financial clout took a nosedive as well. Angry, disillusioned parishioners were leaving in droves, and donations — from collection plates and from large institutions — were drying up. After the crisis, the annual Boston Catholic Appeal plummeted to half of what it was.” https://www.npr.org/2017/12/23/572945832/fallen-kings-how-cardinal-laws-reign-cemented-the-church-s-fading-power. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
56. .  https://www.ncronline.org/news/accountability/researchers-find-drop-giving-areas-hit-sex-abuse-scandal?\_ga=2.84318105.183851539.1533274760-1788709982.1533274760 [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
57. . https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic\_Church\_sex\_abuse\_cases\_by\_country [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
58. Notably by the Church Father, Athenagoras of Athens, in his “Plea for the Christians” to Marcus Aurelius, in the second half of the second century: “And when we [Christians] say that those women who use drugs to bring on abortion commit murder, and will have to give an account to God for the abortion, on what principle should we commit murder? For it does not belong to the same person to regard the very fetus in the womb as a created being, and therefore an object of God’s love, and when it has passed into life, to kill it.” (Chapter 35 in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Anti-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers*, Vol. II, *Justin Martyr and Athenagoras,* Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1868, p. 419.) [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
59. .  The “right to choose” argument to abort a child is that a woman has a right to choose whether or not to abort a fetus within her, since the fetus is contained within her body and therefore is subject to her control. She alone can properly determine the point in time when what is growing within her is a “child” to be born from her or a “fetus” which can be removed from her on her decision alone. The Catholic Church joined with many Evangelical, Pentecostal, and non-denominational churches to object strongly to this argument, asserting that upon conception (when sperm meets egg) the resulting self-developing structure, the “fetus,” is a human entity which, if left to develop naturally, would be born a human being. Therefore, the fetus must be treated with the dignity and respect due to all human beings.

 Personally, I held the same position as the Catholic Church taught when I did my part in the “abortion wars” of the time. And as I stood in the protest groups in front of abortion clinics, jostled by police and with the opposition shouting, “You can’t legislate morality,” into my face, I felt justified and very Christian in the sternness of the position I was defending.

 It was only later in life, in my less contrarian and more thoughtful approach to living, that I listened to the words of the Pro-Choicers from decades before: “You can’t legislate morality.” Those words struck me as true. I admitted for the first time that I had not considered compassionately the situations that young women who become unexpectantly pregnant find themselves in, in terms of their ability to care for their child, of their own maturity and wisdom, of the pressure to continue their schooling, of the frustration of their life plans and their career dreams, of their desire to raise children at the time, and of their ability to finance themselves and their children. They must pit all these pressures against their expectation of the deep sadness which they will incur if they kill the child within them or of the moral horror of doing so.

 I concluded that in a society whose people do not collectively take a consensus position on a moral issue, no legislative position on that issue which would reflect the thinking of the people is possible. There is no way that justice can be delineated in the impossibly tangled situation such a woman finds herself in. She must carve out her own path, as best she can. I knew what I personally held about abortion—that if I were in the situation of advising a woman (a daughter, for example) about aborting a child, I would seek not to speak. But if pressed, I would advise her on general principles to let the child live and be born. But I also knew that that is my personal morality, the teachings of churches notwithstanding. And if I allowed myself to hold a position on this moral issue, I must also grant to every other person their exclusive right to hold the position which they can live with. And so, I found myself in the same camp as Mario Cuomo, the governor of New York State at the time, who as far as I know was the first to articulate an “intelligent defense” not of elective abortion, but of the “right to choose.” That position, in my mind, is this: It is true that you cannot legislate morality. (Laws against murder, for example, have been shown in scientific studies to have no impact at all on whether or not a person pulls the trigger.) My conclusion was and is that if the woman is too emotional or distracted or if she bases her thinking on premises with which I disagree, she will—and she has a right to do so—make what I consider to be an error of judgment if she chooses to abort. But if in her emotions or distractions or in the premises of her thinking, she chooses not to abort, I will stand with her. In our current setting, in which the nation has not decided the morality of elective abortion, the position that the moral choice is solely the woman’s is the only just position. The responsibility is hers; therefore, the moral choice must be hers. [end] [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
60. Consider, for example, this recent reflection on the 2016 Trump presidential campaign by David L. Holmes, professor emeritus of religious studies at Virginia’s College of William and Mary and author of[two books](https://www.amazon.com/Faiths-Founding-Fathers-David-Holmes/dp/0195300920/ref%3Dsr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1484931547&sr=8-1&keywords=faiths+of+our+founding+fathers) on the[faiths of presidents](https://www.amazon.com/Faiths-Postwar-Presidents-Religion-American/dp/0820346802/ref%3Dasap_bc?ie=UTF8): “Billy Graham’s son, Franklin, head of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, commented on the leaked NBC tape where Trump talks salaciously to Billy Bush about violating women. ‘It’s not the kind of thing you pass by and think insignificant,’ Graham said.’ It’s very serious. But,’ Graham told evangelicals, ‘Hillary Clinton and her followers live in a non‑Christian world, and her pro‑abortion stance and the effect she’d have on the Supreme Court are more important than Trump’s moral lapses.’ Graham recommended that all evangelicals view a vote for Trump as a vote against Hillary Clinton and matters such as *Roe v. Wade*.” (David L. Holmes, quoted by Meghan Murphy-Gill in “The faith of Donald Trump: What difference does the faith of an American president make?” http://www.uscatholic.org/articles/201701/faith-donald-trump-30910.) -- The speaker is quoting Graham as abandoning public policy which arises out of personal faith and understanding of biblical teaching—the mainstay of Evangelical religion. Graham is portrayed as endorsing sheer opportunism, rather than faith-based policy. He is portrayed as saying, in effect, “It doesn’t matter whether the President’s motives for opposing *Roe v. Wade* arise from a pure Christian heart or a duplicitous, self-profiting one, as long as the *Roe v. Wade* decision is attacked.” This is not quite an endorsement of model leadership, but rather of political and personal opportunism, which will affect a generation of children growing up under its influence. [end]

 [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
61. See Jn. 10:34, where the character, Jesus, quotes Psalm 82:6. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
62. As I read it, this is Murray Weinstein’s point in the Foreword to this book.

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