

THE 100 WORDS THAT MAKE US CHRISTIAN

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
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## EPIGRAPH

“This is how the conservative and liberal forms of religion will meet, when desire and hope for the kingdom of God and fellowship with the spirit of Jesus again govern them as an elementary and mighty force, and bring their world-views and their religion so close that the differences in fundamental presuppositions, though still existing, sink, just as the boulders of the river bed are covered by the rising flood and at last are barely visible, gleaming through the depths of waters.”<sup>1</sup>

Albert Schweitzer

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 1st complete ed., ed. John Bowden (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2001), 487.

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## THE ABSTRACT

Throughout the history and development of the Christian church, those in authority have attempted to define and clarify what it means to be a Christian. The Reformation challenged the validity of this top-down ecclesiology with its claim that “every true Christian [is] a priest unto God without need of a special mediator other than Jesus Christ.”<sup>2</sup> Several hundred years later, the Church finds itself with thousands of Christian denominations that remain hierarchical in structure with leadership that continues to define what it means to be a Christian from their particular perspective and tradition. As a result, we have a very clear understanding of those things that divide the Body of Christ while simultaneously remaining unclear and loosely committed to those truths that might serve to unite and bind us together. We are a disjointed and fractured body, but a body that is not beyond repair.

To address this challenge, a research project was created utilizing social media and distributed co-creation techniques to enable the formation of a single and hopefully unifying definition of what it means to be a Christian. A web-based platform enabled participants to submit and vote on ideas while at the same time providing a real time method for the aggregation of results. This process minimizes hierarchical and insitutional bias and influence thereby giving voice to the *priesthood of all believers* for perhaps the first time.

The research project was officially announced on November 11, 2009 by Dr. Leonard Sweet on both Facebook and Twitter. Everyone was encouraged to contribute. The collection period was closed on February 28, 2010. During the research period, 174 words were submitted and a total of 1025 votes cast thereby enabling the words to be ranked according to the number of

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<sup>2</sup> Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (New York: IVP Academic, 1999), 371.

votes each word received. The research reveals a unique definition of Christian identity that will hopefully serve to unite and restore the Body of Christ around a richness of meaning that has been heretofore elusive.

## SECTION 1 - The Problem

How would you define the word Christian? Acts 11:26 tells us it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called “Christians.” It is from here we begin to construct our definition: a Christian is a disciple of Jesus Christ. The Oxford Dictionary confirms this basic explanation but further defines the word Christian when used as an adjective: *those professing Christianity or its teachings*. We can use this to expand our working definition: a Christian is a disciple of Jesus Christ who professes Christianity and its teachings. While this gives the impression of moving us closer to a clearer understanding, it actually adds very little in that it circles back upon itself. It would be similar to our saying: a red car is a car that is red... not very enlightening.

The Oxford Dictionary also records an *informal* definition: *having or showing qualities associated with Christians, especially those of decency, kindness and fairness*. However, most of us know *decent, kind and fair* people who would protest vehemently if we attempted to identify them as Christian. And so, a dictionary definition is found somewhat lacking.

The rather complimentary assessment of Christians found in the dictionary also appears to reside some distance from the reality of public opinion. David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons discovered “the three most common perceptions of present-day Christianity are antihomosexual (an image held by 91 percent of young outsiders), judgmental (87 percent), and hypocritical (85 percent).”<sup>3</sup> One of their respondents put it this way: “Most people I meet assume that Christian means very conservative, entrenched in their thinking, antigay, antichoice, angry, violent, illogical, empire builders; they want to convert everyone, and they generally cannot live

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<sup>3</sup> David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity-- and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2007), 27.

peacefully with anyone who doesn't believe what they believe.”<sup>4</sup> In fact, they found “only a small percentage of outsiders strongly believe the labels ‘respect, love, hope, and trust’ describe Christianity.”<sup>5</sup> This verdict from the court of public opinion contrasts quite markedly from the Christian qualities identified in the dictionary of *decent, kind and fair*.

To mediate between these two conflicting understandings, it would be logical seek out a religious authority to help clarify what it means to be a Christian. The challenge with this plan of action begs another question: which religious authority? Best estimates suggest there may be as many as 33,000 Christian denominations on the planet.<sup>6</sup> When consulted, each of these denominations is going to provide a slightly different answer to our question resulting from differing positions concerning baptism methods, music in the service, wine or grape juice in communion, beards, no beards, uncut hair, large hair, predestination, icons, creeds, married clergy, marriage partners, infant baptism, sources of doctrine, and even the validity of other denominations...to name a few. This diversity of views has fragmented and fractured the Body of Christ almost beyond recognition.

Here it is we come face to face with the problem: those of us who are Christian have no clear unifying understanding for what it means to be a Christian...no clear vision as to our Christian identity. The dictionary defines us with a broad generic brush. The court of public opinion attempts to thrust an unwanted and hopefully unwarranted identity upon us. And, denominational divides make it impossible to successfully traverse the theological mine-laden terrain as we search for an authoritative definition.

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<sup>4</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*, 26.

<sup>5</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*, 27.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Ostling, “Researcher Tabulates World's Believers,” Adherents, <http://www.adherents.com/misc/WCE.html> (accessed September 8, 2011).

Sociologists Burke and Stets suggest our identities provide meaning in our lives<sup>7</sup> and people engage in behaviors that verify these identities.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, without a clear understanding of our Christian identity... without some overarching meta-narrative to build upon, we find ourselves deficient in meaning and without a verifiable framework from which to engage the world: as Christians we find ourselves in the midst of an identity crisis.

This project attempts to reveal, restore and recover our understanding of what it means to be a Christian: not through the dictionary, not through public opinion and not by consulting a preferred religious authority. Instead, a methodology known as distributed co-creation<sup>9</sup>, more commonly known as crowdsourcing,<sup>10</sup> was utilized to give voice to this definition. Distributed co-creation gains its strength, in part, from the somewhat counter-intuitive wisdom of the crowd<sup>11</sup> which suggests; “if you set a crowd of self-interested, independent people to work in a decentralized way on the same problem, instead of trying to direct their efforts from the top down, their collective solution is likely to be better than any other solution you could come up with.”<sup>12</sup> In our case, this solution would be better than lexicographers, better than a random poll and better than a particular denomination’s statement of doctrine.

The independent group of people for this project consists of respondents to online requests made by Dr. Leonard Sweet on facebook and twitter in which he asked for volunteers to participate in generating a list of the 100 Words That Make Us Christian. Over a period of several months, words were contributed, commented on and voted upon by the participants. It is

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<sup>7</sup> Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets, *Identity Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2009), 146.

<sup>8</sup> Burke and Stets, *Identity Theory*, 127.

<sup>9</sup> Scott E. Page, *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools, and Societies (New Edition)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Jeff Howe, *Crowdsourcing: Why the Power of the Crowd Is Driving the Future of Business* (New York: Crown Business, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds* (New York: Anchor, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p70.

from their lexicon that our definition emerges. This research enables the priesthood of all believers, for perhaps the first time, to define what it means to be a Christian in their own words: words that identify, words that clarify and hopefully words that unify.

## SECTION 2 - Other Proposed Solutions

### The Problem with Authority

In any search to uncover what it means to be a Christian we are challenged first with the question: who or what is in a position to provide the answer... authoritatively. Jesus is the primary source of any answer we might hope to generate. However, since His resurrection, authority for this determination has modulated between those in positions of power within the Church and those who place the authority of canonical scriptures above that of individuals or tradition. Therein we stumble upon a problem; the Church is populated by individuals who, not being infallible or above human avarice, tend to get it wrong rather consistently. And, while we acknowledge the Scriptures as the inspired word of God, the scriptures lend themselves to interpretation and those who interpret the Scriptures often do so in a variety of contradictory and sometimes self-serving ways. Throughout history, the Church has wrestled with these challenges. Let us now take a brief look back at the problem with authority in the history of the Church... in other words, the struggles over who has authority to determine and define what makes us Christian.

### Ultimate Authority

No one has more authority over something than the one who creates it. If you want to know the motivation for writing a particular book, you ask the author. If you want to know what is meant in scene 3 of a play where the protagonist surprisingly suggests he is actually the antagonist, you consult the writer. If you want to know why a room in a house was positioned in

a particular manner, you consult the architect. The creator of something has authority over their creation.

Thus the Biblical narrative begins by telling the story of how the heavens and the earth were created establishing God as the creator... the ultimate authority in all things. However, it was not long in the story until God's authority was challenged. The book of Genesis tells of the serpent's questioning of Eve concerning God's reason for not wanting them to partake of the Tree of Life. When Eve suggests God told them if they even touch the fruit of that tree they shall die, the serpent replies: "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."<sup>13</sup> Adam and Eve enlisted in this challenge to God's authority. Their failure to resist temptation resulted in an unfortunate event in Christendom known as *the fall*. Consequences from this event have reverberated throughout history. However, Adam and Eve's story is not unique in history. The Bible is replete with stories in which God's people either willingly granted authority to God or found themselves in the unenviable position of the recipient of God's demonstrated authority in what might be called a reminder of who was in charge. These reminders were/are typically enough to encourage God's people to submit once again to the authority of God...for a period of time.

## Authority on Earth

The nation of Israel lived with the Messianic expectation of a deliverer who would reunite and restore Israel to its former glory. The writings of Isaiah give voice to this expectation.

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<sup>13</sup> Genesis 3:4-5.

*For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore.*<sup>14</sup>

Although many scholars view this passage as originally applying to an enthronement celebration for perhaps Josiah or Hezekiah,<sup>15</sup> a canonical reading redirects this authority to Jesus of Nazareth.

Each of the synoptic Gospels in the New Testament tells a variation on the story of Jesus. We gain a better understanding of the over-arching metanarrative by paying attention not only to the elements the Gospels have in common but also the elements that are unique to a particular storyteller. All four Gospels bear witness to the extra-ordinary miracles Jesus performed. They tell of Jesus turning water into wine (John 2:1-11), feeding 5000 people (Matthew 14:15-21, Mark 6:35-44, Luke 9:12-17, John 6:5-14), calming a stormy sea (Matthew 8:23-27, Mark 4:35-41, Luke 8:22-25), and walking on water (Matthew 14:22-33, Mark 6:45-52). They tell of Him casting demons out of a man (Matthew 8:28-34, Mark 5:1-20, Luke 8:26-39), out of a boy (Matthew 17:14-21, Mark 9:17-29, Luke 9:37-42), and out of a young girl (Matthew 15:21-28, Mark 7:24-30). They tell of Jesus bringing a woman's son back to life in the city of Nain (Luke 7:11-16) and the restoration of life to Jesus' friend Lazarus (John 11:1-45). And, they tell stories too numerous to detail of Jesus healing those with physical afflictions. Together they provide us an understanding of the unique authority Jesus exhibited over all creation.

All four Gospels hold another story in common concerning confusion over Jesus' identity. Some people were apparently suggesting Jesus was a resurrected John the Baptist, or perhaps

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<sup>14</sup> Isaiah 9:6-7.

<sup>15</sup> James L. Mays, *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2000), 503.

Elijah or Jeremiah. Jesus asked Simon Peter directly “Who do you say that I am?”<sup>16</sup> Each Gospel records Simon’s answer: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” (Matthew 16:16, Mark 8:29, Luke 9:20 and John 6:69) Interestingly, in three of these Gospels, Jesus seems somewhat reluctant to have his identity known. In fact, He admonishes the disciples to tell no one of this revelation in Matthew 16:20, Mark 8:30 and Luke 9:21. However, John’s Gospel is unique for it contains no such warning. Instead, John seems driven to make Jesus’ identity clear from the very beginning. John does not begin the story of Jesus with genealogy or a birth narrative. Instead, John begins with a proclamation.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.*<sup>17</sup>

After this rather dramatic introduction, John’s Gospel proceeds to have Jesus refer to himself with nearly wild abandon as the Son of God, the Messiah, the judge, the bread of life, and living water. There is none of the hesitancy to make His identity known that is seen in the other three Gospels. Even the miracles Jesus performs in John are referred to as signs...signs that provide evidence concerning Jesus’ identity. (John 2:11, 2:23, 3:2, 6:2, etc.) However, it is Jesus’ claim of God as His father that puts Him at greatest odds with the local religious leaders. Having their authority threatened by Jesus’ claim of higher authority, they plotted His arrest and crucifixion. Little did they know they were enabling the ultimate demonstration of Jesus’ authority and the truth contained within His claims... the resurrection: the exclamation point on the story.

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<sup>16</sup> Matthew 16:15.

<sup>17</sup> John 1:1-4.

At the final post-resurrection meeting of Jesus and the disciples, Jesus presented them with a reminder and a mission.

*“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*<sup>18</sup>

As one having authority in heaven and on earth, Jesus authorized the disciples to continue His ministry, to go out into the world making disciples, baptizing and teaching, and to remember He would be with them always. With this pronouncement, the age of apostolic authority begins.

## Apostolic Authority

In a court of law, testimony typically exists within a hierarchy of importance. First in the hierarchy comes the person directly involved in the disagreement. However, personal interest sometimes clouds the facts, therefore witnesses can add believability. Mosaic Law confirms this practice by stating a single witness is not sufficient to convict an individual of a crime. It is only upon the evidence of two or three witnesses that a charge shall be confirmed.<sup>19</sup> To that end, the Apostles were authoritative witnesses to the testimony of Jesus Christ in accordance with Mosaic Law. Their ongoing testimony continued to present challenges to the religious authorities. For example, when Peter and John were speaking to the people one day, the religious leaders had them arrested and put in jail. Many of the religious elite assembled the next day to question Peter and John. They asked the two of them by what power or under whose authorization they

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<sup>18</sup> Matthew 28:18-20.

<sup>19</sup> Deuteronomy 19:15.

were healing and preaching the resurrection of Jesus.<sup>20</sup> Peter responded: “This man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead.”<sup>21</sup> After the religious leaders discussed the situation amongst themselves, they implored these two disciples to stop speaking or teaching in the name of Jesus.<sup>22</sup> Peter and John, however, reminded the council they were subject to God’s authority above the council and to that end they would not stop.<sup>23</sup> Peter and John were released and the authority of the religious leaders was once again diminished.

Saul of Tarsus was another vigorous opponent of Jesus’ followers. Acting on authority of the high priest, Saul set out on a trip to Damascus to gather up anyone aligning themselves with this new sect and return them to Jerusalem to face the consequences of their actions. After a blinding conversion experience on the road to Damascus and his subsequent healing, Paul abandoned his adversarial intentions and instead began to proclaim throughout the countryside that Jesus was the Son of God... the Christ. During the course of his travels, Paul established numerous churches. At one of these new churches, a disagreement arose over the need for new believers to be circumcised according to the traditions of Moses. Paul disagreed vehemently with this suggestion, but agreed to defer to the apostles on this issue and traveled to Jerusalem to meet with them. This decision on Paul’s part not only underscores the practice that those with Apostolic authority can and should settle disputes within the body of believers, but also gives precedence to those with such authority to make the final determination in issues concerning doctrine... issues concerning what it means to be a Christian. During Paul’s discussion with the Apostles, Peter determined it would be best not to burden the Gentiles with the same laws the

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<sup>20</sup> Acts 4:7.

<sup>21</sup> Acts 4:8-10.

<sup>22</sup> Acts 4:18.

<sup>23</sup> Acts 4:19-20.

Jews had lived with for years... such as circumcision. Instead, Peter suggested these new believers need only refrain from activities concerning idols, protect the sanctity of sex and marriage and serve no food considered offensive to Jewish Christians.<sup>24</sup> A letter reflecting this decision was drafted to send with Paul back to Antioch. To underscore the letter's authority, the apostles and elders determined Judas and Silas would accompany Paul and Barnabas on the return trip<sup>25</sup> ... remember, two or more witnesses add credibility to testimony. With this letter we see a new Church attempting to work out essential doctrine in a thoughtful and authoritative manner. In doing so, they set valuable precedent concerning future disputes... the doctrine of Apostolic authority. Over time the Apostles and those close to Jesus began to die off. In the absence of these eyewitnesses, their written testimony offered a compelling substitute. And thus the various writings and letters of these witnesses rose in prominence as authoritative testimony concerning the Good News of Jesus Christ and the doctrine of the Church.

## Early Writings

Aside from the authoritative writings of these witnesses, a document of unknown authorship known as The Didache rose in prominence. Most scholars place its date or origin somewhere around the turn of the first century.<sup>26</sup> This early manuscript contains many of the concepts we are familiar with from the Gospels in a condensed format. For example: "First, you shall love God who made you; second, love your neighbor as yourself, and do not do to another what you would not want done to you. And of these sayings the teaching is this: Bless those who curse

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<sup>24</sup> Acts 15:19-20.

<sup>25</sup> Acts 15:27.

<sup>26</sup> Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 44.

you, and pray for your enemies, and fast for those who persecute you.”<sup>27</sup> “The way of salvation described in it is a certain lifestyle of faithfulness and obedience to God's commandments and to Christian ministers”<sup>28</sup>...a submission to those in authority. While there was no official canon at this point, documents such as The Didache and the writings of the Apostles gave new followers of Jesus an authoritative model for their behavior.

However, this multiplicity of written and personal sources of authority gave rise to many misunderstandings concerning the beliefs and practices of the early church. For example, Christians were known to call one another *brother* or *sister* and gather weekly in what was called a *love feast*.<sup>29</sup> Suspicions concerning these gatherings gave rise to the belief these events were sexual “celebrations in which Christians ate and drank to excess, put out the lights, and vented their lusts in indiscriminate and even incestuous unions.”<sup>30</sup> In contrast to the wild imaginations that gave birth to these fanciful stories, first and second century criticism of the faith typically revolved around the belief that “Christians were an ignorant lot whose doctrines, although preached under the cloak of wisdom, were foolish and even self-contradictory.”<sup>31</sup> To counter these claims, a group of writers known as the Apologists rose to the occasion and defended Christianity against its detractors.<sup>32</sup> Included within these ranks were the names Tertullian, Origen and Justin Martyr- arguably “the most important second-century apologist.”<sup>33</sup> Their writings helped to clarify proper Christian doctrine for a Church that was learning how to coexist within an antagonistic culture.

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<sup>27</sup> *The Didache: The Lord's Teaching through the Twelve Apostles to the Nations* (n.p.: BooksAndSuch, 2009), Kindle ebook, Locations 40-42.

<sup>28</sup> Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 44.

<sup>29</sup> González, *A Concise History of Christian Doctrine*, 50.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>32</sup> Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 54.

<sup>33</sup> Robert M. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), 50.

## Apostolic Succession

Questioning of doctrinal unity and authority within the Church intensified in the late second century when Gnosticism mounted its challenge to Christianity.<sup>34</sup> The opinions of bishops or the authority of various writings were brought into question because these new groups did not acknowledge that authority.<sup>35</sup> As a result “the faithful were constantly forced to decide which bishops, which church, and which scriptures were true.”<sup>36</sup> To counter this division and dissent, early theologians such as Irenaeus and Tertullian proposed the notion of apostolic succession.<sup>37</sup> In very basic terms, “if a bishop could trace his ordination pedigree (so to speak) back to one of the apostles of the first century, he was a worthy and valid bishop. If he could not, he was not.”<sup>38</sup> Without proper authority or credentials, a bishop was presumed to be without authority.

## The Creedal Solution

In their continued response to theological challenges and confusion, the defenders of the Church generated a series of creeds in hopes of settling these disputes in an authoritative manner. The first of these creeds appeared in Rome somewhere around 150 CE and was known as the Apostles Creed.<sup>39</sup> It’s purpose was to provide a litmus test “whereby Christians could distinguish true believers from those who followed the various heresies circulating at the time.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> González, *A Concise History of Christian Doctrine*, 134.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>38</sup> Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 32.

<sup>39</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity, Volume 1: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation (Story of Christianity)* (New York: HarperOne, 1984), 63.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

Many of the tenets of the creed were in direct response to challenges from Marcion and the Gnostics. For example, phrases such as *of Mary the Virgin* directly challenged the position Jesus simply appeared on the earth as Marcion and others had claimed.<sup>41</sup> In addition, the mentioning of Pontius Pilate was not done so as a way to blame him for Jesus' death, but rather as a way to time stamp the event in history.<sup>42</sup>

## The Leadership Solution

Christianity's continued growth in Rome, Carthage, Alexandria, Antioch and Lyons,<sup>43</sup> did not dissuade emperor after emperor from attempting to eradicate Christianity from the empire.<sup>44</sup> However, the unexpected was about to happen. In October 312 CE, a Roman general by the name of Constantine was preparing to attack Rome in an attempt to unseat emperor Maxentius.<sup>45</sup> The night before the battle, Constantine made an appeal to any god who could aid in Maxentius' defeat. After his request, Constantine reportedly had a vision of a Christian symbol accompanied by the words "In this sign, conquer."<sup>46</sup> He is said to have sent his troops into battle the next day with "the symbol of Christ emblazoned on his battle banners and shields."<sup>47</sup> Constantine's quest to overthrow emperor Maxentius was successful and as Rome's new emperor, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313 declaring "imperial toleration of Christianity."<sup>48</sup> He also ordered the persecution of Christians to cease and any seized property returned.<sup>49</sup> However, Christianity's newfound position of privilege did not put an end to theological infighting. With

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>43</sup> Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 137.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>46</sup> Bass, *A People's History of Christianity*, 132.

<sup>47</sup> Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 138.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>49</sup> González, *The Story of Christianity, Volume 1*, 107.

Arianism threatening to divide the Church, emperor Constantine, in his self-appointed role of thirteenth apostle,<sup>50</sup> ordered the bishops of the church to Nicea to “decide exactly what it is that Christians must believe in order to be considered authentically Christian.”<sup>51</sup> The result of their efforts was the Nicene Creed which remains the dominant statement of faith for much of modern day Christianity.<sup>52</sup>

## The Canonical Solution

While the Church now had creeds to lean upon for proper orthodoxy, they had no similar agreement upon which of the various writings present within the community of faith could be considered authoritative. Some preferred the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible while others relied strictly on the Gospels and more recent writings.<sup>53</sup> In an early effort to solve this dilemma, the Roman Christian church produced the Muratorian Canon around 170 CE.<sup>54</sup> The selection of the books included in this canon were likely those that met the criterion of the *prophetic-apostolic principle*.<sup>55</sup> “The prophetic-apostolic principle simply means books and letters had to be widely recognized throughout the Christian churches as reflecting apostolic authority (if not written by an apostle) and as presenting an important truth for salvation and Christian living.”<sup>56</sup> While the Didache (mentioned earlier) fulfilled a valuable purpose in the development of the

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<sup>50</sup> Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 138.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>53</sup> Lori Anne Ferrell, *The Bible and the People* (New York: Yale University Press, 2008), 7.

<sup>54</sup> Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 133.

<sup>55</sup> Hans von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible*, trans. J.A Baker (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 254.

<sup>56</sup> Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 134.

church, it was not included in the canon because it did not meet this prophetic-apostolic criteria.<sup>57</sup>

Irenaeus, Tertullian and Origen later compiled competing lists of what they considered authoritative writings.<sup>58</sup> But, it was Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, who in 367 CE compiled the final list containing the 27 books of the New Testament we know today.<sup>59</sup> His collection was confirmed by the synods of North Africa at Hippo in 393 CE and again by the synod in Carthage in 397 CE.<sup>60</sup>

Notably, like the writers of the various creeds, the compilers of the New Testament were a small group of individuals attempting to decide what was best for the entire Christian Church. This can be an effective scenario as long as those in this position possess absolute authority. However, when something happens to balance the scales of power, this strategy tends to fuel dissent and division rather than silence the voices of opposition as we shall soon see.

## Grasping the Scriptures

Even though there was now authorized canon, access to it was limited. The process of reproducing the Bible was very time consuming. Each one was generated by hand which contributed to their only being found in cathedrals, churches and monasteries.<sup>61</sup> This cloistering away of the Word, fueled the dependency of the populace on the Church for biblical information and interpretation. However, this protective custody would later evaporate as we flash forward several hundred years.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>61</sup> Ferrell, *The Bible and the People*, 27.

The 1200s brought with it Bibles small enough to be carried in the pockets of monks enabling the canon to venture outside the walls of the monastery.<sup>62</sup> And later, in the 1300s, scribes began to focus their attention on the domestic market producing elaborately decorated books containing the Psalms for those of financial means.<sup>63</sup> With this gradual migration of the Bible away from the exclusive possession of the church into the hands of the general populace, the monks and scribes were unknowingly contributing to a journey that would one day land on the steps of a church at Wittenberg.

## Challenges to the Authority of the Church

As the Church continued to grow, its ability to silence the voices that rose up to challenge its authority increased accordingly. The primary tools used by the Church to enforce its authority and expunge dissent were those of excommunication and execution. Two individuals who dared to challenge the authority of the Church in their era and found themselves the recipients of ecclesial retribution were John Wycliffe and John Huss.

John Wycliffe (1328-1384) “made a career denouncing the corruptions of the Church and questioning the legitimacy of the papacy's claim to universal Christian jurisdiction.”<sup>64</sup> Wycliffe had become disillusioned with the wealth, power and what he considered abuses of authority by leaders of the Church.<sup>65</sup> This led him to look “to the people of God as the voice of God’s will in the Church.”<sup>66</sup> He was bold enough to suggest the pope did not teach what was true, that mass

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>65</sup> Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 359.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 359.

was idolotry and that icons within the church encouraged superstition.<sup>67</sup> He further argued “the Church should surrender its riches, serve rather than profit from the poor and acknowledge scripture as its sole source of doctrinal authority.”<sup>68</sup> As such, he promoted translating the Bible into common language so the people could study it for themselves apart from the corrupt teachings of the Church.<sup>69</sup> Wycliffe’s dedication to this cause inspired his colleagues at Oxford to produce an English translation of the Bible.<sup>70</sup> Resultantly, Thomas Arundel, the Archbishop of Canterbury banned the production of Wycliffe Bibles without prior consent of the Church.<sup>71</sup> Wycliffe’s death in 1384 preceeded his excommunication by the Council of Constance in 1415.<sup>72</sup> As if this posthumous condemnation and excommunication were not enough to express ecclessial indignation with Wycliffe, his “remains were exhumed, burned and scattered in the River Swift by the bishop of Lincoln in 1428.”<sup>73</sup>

John Huss (1369-1415) was a well-known preacher and theologian who became the University of Prague’s rector in 1402.<sup>74</sup> The pulpit of the nearby chapel of Bethlehem provided the pulpit from which Huss proclaimed his reformation sentiments.<sup>75</sup> However, unlike Wycliffe, it was not his intention to change the doctrines of the church, but only to restore the church and the clergy to its high calling.<sup>76</sup> In response to the position espoused by both Wycliffe and Huss, the archbishop of Prague banned the works of Wycliffe and ordered preaching should only take

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<sup>67</sup> Chadwick, *A History of Christianity*, 176.

<sup>68</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The Story of Christianity: An Illustrated History of 2000 Years of the Christian Faith* (London: Quercus Books, 2008), 186.

<sup>69</sup> Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 357.

<sup>70</sup> Ferrell, *The Bible and the People*, 63.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>72</sup> Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 358.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 358.

<sup>74</sup> González, *The Story of Christianity, Volume 1*, 348.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 348.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 359.

place in cathedrals, parish churches and monasteries.<sup>77</sup> This restriction on preaching might seem somewhat inconsequential on the surface, however Huss preached from a small local chapel and the archbishop's actions seemed quite like an effort to silence Huss' voice of opposition.<sup>78</sup> This led Huss to determine the Pope was not acting with the best interests of the church at heart.<sup>79</sup> Huss concluded the "Bible is the final authority by which the pope as well as any Christian is to be judged. A pope who does not obey the Bible is not to be obeyed."<sup>80</sup> He continued to preach from his chapel and as a result was called to Rome to defend his actions.<sup>81</sup> Huss refused the call and was resultantly excommunicated in 1411. Huss' ongoing recalcitrance led to his eventual martyrdom by burning at the stake on July 6, 1415<sup>82</sup> as the papacy attempted to silence yet another voice of opposition to its authority.

## Gutenberg's Forbidden Fruit

The voice of opposition is more difficult to silence as technology enables it to reach a larger audience. One such technological advance not only enabled the Bible to be placed in the hands of more and more people, but also fueled a successful challenge to ecclesial authority known as the Reformation. The new technology of the 1400s was Gutenberg's printing press. The ability to expedite the printing process via a press with movable type changed the world to such a degree that we are hard pressed to imagine what our world would be like without it.<sup>83</sup>

Gutenberg's press was rather simple in design and based upon a linen press that was common at

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 349.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 349.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 349.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 349.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 349.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 351.

<sup>83</sup> John Man, *Gutenberg: How One Man Remade the World with Words* (New York: Wiley, 2002), 1.

the time.<sup>84</sup> Even though the process was somewhat labor intensive and time consuming, it enabled the mass production and distribution of information at a reasonable cost.<sup>85</sup> For example, prior to Gutenberg's innovation, it could take up to two months to produce a single book; afterwards 500 copies could be printed in a week.<sup>86</sup>

In the 1400s “the only true truth was that of the Church, which like Big Brother, controlled the media, in the form of scribes (for the written word), priests (for oral transmission) and artists, who served both.”<sup>87</sup> Absolute control such as this provides absolute authority to those in power. The Church first welcomed printing as Gods gift to the church when it better enabled them to raise money for the crusade against the Turks.<sup>88</sup> However, their enthusiasm likely waned when this new technology enabled the voices challenging ecclesial authority to spread their message of opposition with equal ease and greater enthusiasm.

## The Reformation

Martin Luther's voice rose to challenge the authority of Church hierarchy in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Luther received his Bachelor's and Master's degrees from the University of Erfurt.<sup>89</sup> After earning his Doctorate, Luther held the position of professor of divinity at the University of Wittenberg.<sup>90</sup> “Few in history have read the Bible as seriously, or with such powerful political consequences”<sup>91</sup> as Martin Luther. One such consequence was Luther's nailing of his now

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<sup>84</sup> John W. Klooster, *Icons of Invention: the Makers of the Modern World from Gutenberg to Gates*. 2 vols. (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2009) 17.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>86</sup> Man, *Gutenberg: How One Man Remade the World with Words*, 2.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>89</sup> Hart, *The Story of Christianity*, 187.

<sup>90</sup> Chadwick, *A History of Christianity*, 200.

<sup>91</sup> Bass, *A People's History of Christianity*, 163.

famous Ninety-Five Thesis to the door of the church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517.<sup>92</sup>

When Pope Leo X first read Luther's theses he dismissed them as "the ramblings of a drunken German,"<sup>93</sup> suggesting Luther would "think differently when he sobers up."<sup>94</sup> The Pope's dismissive attitude changed dramatically when all of Europe was reading and discussing Luther's challenge on documents enabled by Gutenberg's printing press.<sup>95</sup> Historians suggest Luther's challenge to the ecclesiastical authority succeeded where others had failed due to his ability to duplicate and distribute his writings via the printing press.<sup>96</sup>

The rift between Luther and Pope Leo X deteriorated to the point where in 1521 Luther was excommunicated from the church by the Pope who called Luther a "wild boar."<sup>97</sup> Luther returned the favor by calling the pope the "Antichrist."<sup>98</sup> The final showdown occurred when Luther was summoned to the Diet of Worms in the spring of 1521. Upon his arrival, crowds of supporters greeted Luther and his entourage which was said to have included a sizable number of German knights.<sup>99</sup> At the Diet, Luther was instructed to recant his writings and was allowed to contemplate his response overnight. The next day Luther appeared before the Diet and delivered his answer that contained these now famous words; "I am bound to the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, Here I stand. May

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<sup>92</sup> Stephen J. Nichols, *The Reformation: How a Monk and a Mallet Changed the World* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2007), 28.

<sup>93</sup> Nichols, *The Reformation*, 29-30.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>95</sup> Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 370.

<sup>96</sup> Klooster, *Icons of Invention*, 12.

<sup>97</sup> Nichols, *The Reformation*, 31.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>99</sup> Hart, *The Story of Christianity*, 190.

God help me, Amen.”<sup>100</sup> The Diet allowed Luther to depart...an outcome that was likely contributed to by the presence of Luther’s knightly escort.<sup>101</sup>

Luther stood before those who presumed to have authority over him and held strong to his convictions. In doing so, he inspired the imaginations of all Christendom.<sup>102</sup> However, it was not long before the Diet declared Luther an outlaw which forced Him into hiding for nearly a year.<sup>103</sup> He retreated to the castle at Wartburg under the protection of his benefactor Frederick<sup>104</sup> which afforded him the opportunity to translate the New Testament into German.<sup>105</sup> This New Testament translation was followed by a translation of the Old Testament in 1534.<sup>106</sup> Our modern era leaves us without a single example of an author who can approach Luther’s literary impact in his era. It is said that up to one third of all the books produced in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century were penned by Luther.<sup>107</sup>

Historian Johann Sleidan wrote in 1542: “As if to offer proof that God has chosen to accomplish a special mission, there was invented in our land a marvellous [sic] new and subtle art, the art of printing.”<sup>108</sup> Luther himself spoke highly of printing when he said: “Printing is *summum et postremum donum*, that through which God drives the objectives of the evangelists forward.”<sup>109</sup> Prior to the invention of the printing press, the church enjoyed near exclusive access to the scriptures enabling its position of authority. After the invention and proliferation of

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<sup>100</sup> Nichols, *The Reformation*, 32.

<sup>101</sup> Hart, *The Story of Christianity*, 190.

<sup>102</sup> Chadwick, *A History of Christianity*, 202.

<sup>103</sup> Hart, *The Story of Christianity*, 190.

<sup>104</sup> Man, *Gutenberg: How One Man Remade the World with Words*, 280-281.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>107</sup> Stephan Füssel, *Gutenberg and the Impact of Printing*, English ed. (Aldershot, Hampshire.: Ashgate Pub Ltd, 2005), 163.

<sup>108</sup> Man, *Gutenberg: How One Man Remade the World with Words*, 288.

<sup>109</sup> Füssel, *Gutenberg and the Impact of Printing*, 159.

Gutenberg's printing press, their access was no longer exclusive and their authority no longer absolute.

Erasmus, an influential contemporary of Luther, supported Luther in private but refused to align himself with him or his Reformation publicly.<sup>110</sup> Even though Erasmus agreed with Luther on many of his issues with the Church, Erasmus "considered him a bit of a fanatic and a revolutionary for splitting the church and refusing to obey the emperor's and pope's orders to recant his heresies."<sup>111</sup> However, Erasmus was a strong advocate of placing the Bible in the hands of the people and in 1515 he produced a translation of the New Testament in Greek complete with notes and corrections of mistakes he discovered in Jerome's 384 CE Latin translation.<sup>112</sup> One of the most critical of these errors was found in Matthew 3:2. What came into question was the proper translation of the Greek word *metanoete*. Jerome had translated this as "Do penance!"<sup>113</sup> This translation from Jerome under girded the Catholic tradition of confession and penance, but Erasmus dared to suggest the true meaning of the word was *repent*.<sup>114</sup> With this revelation, Erasmus brought the entire Catholic theology of salvation into question.<sup>115</sup>

Erasmus' Greek New Testament enabled the common people to read for themselves the contrast between the message of the Scriptures and the actions of the Church.<sup>116</sup> Erasmus said: "Would that the farmer might sing snatches of Scripture at his plough and that the weaver might hum phrases of Scripture to the tune of his shuttle, that the traveler might lighten with stories

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<sup>110</sup> Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 364.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 364.

<sup>112</sup> Bass, *A People's History of Christianity*, 158.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> Chadwick, *A History of Christianity*, 200.

from Scripture the weariness of his journey.”<sup>117</sup> His contribution to the success of the Reformation is hard to underestimate.<sup>118</sup> Erasmus believed “sensible persons would agree on change.”<sup>119</sup> Unfortunately, people were not as sensible as Erasmus had hoped nor was the church willing to share authority with this new priesthood of all believers. Both Erasmus and Luther educated this priesthood of believers and empowered them to stand up to ecclesial authority through their example. This example likely inspired many a protesting Reformer as the locus of authority began to shift from a central church empowered by the canon to the non-elite leaders of the church.

## The Denominational Divide

Diffusion of authority within the church carried with it the unfortunate consequence of denominationalism. “Luther never dreamed that his call for reform, his excommunication and the establishment of a rival form of Christianity would eventually lead to the complete splintering not only of Christendom but also of Christian theology.”<sup>120</sup> However, from 1520 onward, “no single church has existed to unify Western Society.”<sup>121</sup> Instead, we became painfully aware of Christianity’s ability to disagree with itself, sometimes to the point of violence.<sup>122</sup> Following in Luther’s unintentional footsteps, people such as Melancthon, Calvin, Zwingli, Spener, Fox and Wesley among others went on to split the church into various branches

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<sup>117</sup> Bass, *A People's History of Christianity*, 159.

<sup>118</sup> Matthew Spinka, ed., *Advocates of Reform From Wyclif to Erasmus (The Library of the Christian Classic)* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), 49.

<sup>119</sup> Chadwick, *A History of Christianity*, 198.

<sup>120</sup> Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 452.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 372.

<sup>122</sup> Ferrell, *The Bible and the People*, 202.

of Christianity. From this rich soil of dissent and reform grew the over 33,000 Christian denominations we have today.<sup>123</sup>

## Reformation Themes in Post-Modernity

Our current era holds at least three elements in common with the Reformation: an unprecedented increase in the capability to communicate knowledge and ideas, greater access to the Bible and Biblical materials, and an ever-increasing cultural tendency to question authority (discussed in the next section).

Prior to Gutenberg's invention of the printing press, the Church maintained a near monopoly over public media. Anyone bold enough to challenge the authority of the church would have had to rely on word of mouth or hand printed flyers to distribute their message thereby diminishing its potential impact. It is not hard to imagine Luther's Reformation might have been confined to Germany or perhaps never gained the traction necessary to start a revolution without the ability to economically print and distribute his ideas. Gutenberg's press did much to level the playing field in the battle for the hearts and minds of the people.

Similarly today, the Internet has enabled and required the restructuring of much of our lives and many business models. Traditional centers of power for industries such as book publishers, film producers, music studios, and retailers have had to re-evaluate their business plans in order to remain viable in the digital environment made possible by the Internet. Political revolutions are energized and coordinated via smartphones as easily as cartoons about cats are shared on social networks. Ideas and propositions that might never have bumped up against one another

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<sup>123</sup> Richard Ostling, "Researcher Tabulates World's Believers," Adherents, <http://www.adherents.com/misc/WCE.html>.

engage and morph in ways that were inconceivable only a few years ago. This technological revolution has also forced the local church to re-evaluate its efforts as tech savvy distant Churches encroach upon their space in the form of online services and multi-site campuses that beam their theology into the local net-scape.

Biblical access has also experienced a similar expansion. Just as the Gutenberg era enabled newfound availability for the Bible, we are experiencing an explosion in Biblical access. Apart from the efforts of organizations such as Wycliffe Bible Translators who have translated the Bible into over 700 languages,<sup>124</sup> anyone with an Internet connection or a smart phone can access websites where a variety of Bible translations and study tools are available. Sites such as <http://www.biblestudytools.com/> enable multiple translations to be read side by side while LifeChurch.tv (a church in Edmond Oklahoma) has created a free Bible app for smartphones that provides more than 100 versions of the Bible for study in several different languages. According to LifeChurch.tv records, it has been downloaded on more than 35 million devices worldwide.<sup>125</sup>

## The Challenge of Post-Modernism

Today, this unparalleled expansion in interpersonal connectivity and access to Biblical materials coincides with a post-modern suspicion of authority (Church included) to replicate a cultural miasma similar to that of the Reformation. While the questioning of the Reformation era dealt with the authority of the Church, post-modernism questions the concept that there is an ultimate truth. It calls into question the “ideals, principles, and values that lay at the heart of the

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<sup>124</sup> <http://www.wycliffe.org/About.aspx>

<sup>125</sup> <http://www.youversion.com/mobile/iphone>

modern mind-set.”<sup>126</sup> Four themes are typically attributed to post-modernity: the “demise of an overarching metanarrative, deconstructionism, virtual reality and pluralism.”<sup>127</sup>

Our post-modern condition is likely the natural consequence of enlightenment thinking birthed in the Renaissance which claimed no scientific theory is beyond revision or above being discarded in light of new findings.<sup>128</sup> In other words... nothing is sacred. As a result, the optimism brought about by the modern era has been replaced with a distressing cynicism.<sup>129</sup> The absence of an overarching metanarrative combined with our embrace of pluralism locates us in the midst of a philosophical cultural morass which informs us as citizens of the Earth that we share no underlying truth, only a collection of varied and equally valid points of view.<sup>130</sup> Post-modernism further suggests the search for ultimate truth is pointless and we should be content with our personal understanding.<sup>131</sup> Consequently, “if no single path in life has a privileged claim to being right, there are no easy answers for any of us; it becomes exponentially more difficult to know ourselves, to be ourselves, to do our thing.”<sup>132</sup> As post-moderns, our quest should be directed toward an ongoing search for truth rather than the expectation we will eventually arrive at a particular understanding of truth.<sup>133</sup>

With no acknowledgement that there is an ultimate truth to be discovered and understood, all views of truth maintain a position of equal validity. No position can claim to be authoritative. Additionally, no individual can claim authority over another individual since one’s perspective is

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<sup>126</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer On Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 12.

<sup>127</sup> Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Releasing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2009), 112.

<sup>128</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991), 21.

<sup>129</sup> Grenz, *A Primer On Postmodernism*, 7.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>131</sup> Richard Roarty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1979), 393.

<sup>132</sup> Sheena Iyengar, *The Art of Choosing* (New York, NY.: Twelve, 2010), 84-85.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 393.

simply an individual perspective that may differ from another individual's perspective.

Authority has no place in post-modernism.

## Concluding Thoughts

As Christians in a post-modern world, we find ourselves adrift in this stormy sea of self-doubt and false assurance. 33,000 Christian denominations present 33,000 different variants on what it means to be a Christian while innumerable individuals clamor for attention in the global theological debate as they attempt to advance their particular perspective on Christian truth. However, truth is not some ephemeral theory or concept that rises to prominence one day and falls from favor the next. That is a theory, not a truth. Our search for one with authority and the source of truth returns us to the foot of the cross. "Truth is sure and strong, and when it seizes us, we inevitably become vulnerable. The truth ought to surprise us and make us weak at the knees."<sup>134</sup> Truth has a name, its name is Jesus and His truth is not for the faint at heart. The revelation of that truth will drop us to our knees.

God spoke and worlds were created. God's Word walked the face of the Earth and a new eternity came into being. Eyewitness's to Jesus' ministry, crucifixion and resurrection did their best to carry on His ministry and preserve the story for history. The Church attempted to meet its theological challenges through ecclesial hierarchies, creeds and excommunication of those it considered heretical. And, canon was agreed upon so we could have an authoritative reference on which to lean for our theological understanding. However, in spite of 2000 years of

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<sup>134</sup> Dan B. Allender, *Leading with a Limp: Take Full Advantage of Your Most Powerful Weakness* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2008), 159.

theological writings, position, platforms, and mission statements, we still struggle for words to define what it means to be a Christian.

When Jesus began, He entrusted His message and His truth into what He considered the capable hands of common fishermen and a tax collector. 100 Words returns our ears to the words of the fisherman...the common men and women of today: those who walk the difficult paths of life with Jesus by their side, those who seek their meaning not in the dictionary but in the Word of God, those who persevere in spite of the verdict pronounced upon them in the court of public opinion, and those who listen to and thoughtfully contemplate the theological maelstrom that swirls in their midsts but always place the voice of Jesus ahead of personal interest and at the forefront of their understandings. It is to these voices we turn our attention as we uncover their 100 Words That Make Us Christian.

## SECTION 3 - THESIS

### Introduction

Over the centuries, time can take its toll on an original masterpiece. Colors can become less vibrant, lack of proper care can allow it to deteriorate and unintentional damage by those responsible for its care can render a masterpiece almost unrecognizable. However, with proper technique, a deteriorating masterpiece can be restored to its former glory. Distributed co-creation (more commonly known as crowdsourcing) enables a restorative perspective on our identity as Christians that not only honors our heritage but fits well into our post-modern environment. But first, let's begin by examining the ways in which two large successful organizations with a strong, enduring and recognizable identities have been able to define and retain the core elements of their identity.

### The Benefits of a List

- U.S. Marine Corps

The Oxford dictionary defines a Marine as “a member of a body of troops trained to serve on land or at sea, in particular a member of the U.S. Marine Corps.” This dictionary definition is completely accurate while completely lacking in meaning. Visiting the official U.S. Marine Corps web site can reveal a much clearer understanding of what it means to be a Marine. Contained within their site is a page that identifies the core values shared by all marines: honor,

courage and commitment.<sup>135</sup> However, the Marines do not leave us with three words from which we can arrive at a variety of meanings, they define the meaning of each word as shown below.

“**Honor** - Marines are held to the highest standards, ethically and morally. Respect for others is essential. Marines are expected to act responsibly in a manner befitting the title they’ve earned.

**Courage** - Courage is not the absence of fear. It is the ability to face fear and overcome it. It is the mental, moral and physical strength ingrained in every marine. It steadies them in times of stress, carries them through every challenge, and aids them in facing new and unknown challenges.

**Commitment** - Commitment is the spirit of dedication and determination found in every Marine. It is what compels Marines to serve our country and the Corps. Every aspect of life in the Corps shows commitment, from the high standards of excellence to vigilance in training.”<sup>136</sup>

This short list of 3 words with accompanying definitions provides a richer understanding of what it means to be a Marine than can be garnered from a reading of the dictionary definition or even the list alone.

- Boy Scouts of America

The Oxford Dictionary defines a Boy Scout in the following manner: “a member of an organization of boys, esp. The Boy Scouts of America, that promotes character, outdoor activities, good citizenship, and service to others.” This definition does go a little further than the dictionary definition of a Marine by providing a small list of attributes associated with a Boy

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<sup>135</sup> [http://www.marines.com/main/index/making\\_marines/culture/traditions/core\\_values](http://www.marines.com/main/index/making_marines/culture/traditions/core_values)

<sup>136</sup> [http://www.marines.com/main/index/making\\_marines/culture/traditions/core\\_values](http://www.marines.com/main/index/making_marines/culture/traditions/core_values)

Scout. However, the Boy Scouts do not build their organization on the attributes of the dictionary definition. They have an identity statement of their own called the Scout Law. It reads as follows: “A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent.”<sup>137</sup> Those seeking the entry level rank of Tenderfoot in the Boy Scouts must be able to recite the Scout Law from memory. Anyone who was ever a Boy Scout can likely recite that oath years after their original scouting experience. The official Boy Scout web site calls the Scout Law “words to live by.”<sup>138</sup> And, just like the Marines, the Boy Scouts of America are not content to only provide a list of identity words; they also provide detailed definitions of those words to further enhance understanding.<sup>139</sup>

To help clarify what it means to be a member of each of these organizations, a list of core identity words is accompanied by a definition of what those words mean to the organization. In doing so they are able to paint a clear picture of their identity and values for those inside and outside their organizations.

- Biblical List

Lists are not the invention of our analytical western minds, lists are also found in the Bible. Perhaps the most famous Biblical list occurs in Exodus 20. In this passage, the Lord summons Moses to the top of Mount Sinai. While Moses is there, God delivers what we know as the Ten Commandments. This list of commandments provided the children of Israel an understanding of God’s expectations of them. It likely performed the same role as the creeds we find later in Christianity.<sup>140</sup> In Micah 6:8 we find another list in which God exhorts the nation of Israel: “He

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<sup>137</sup> Boy Scouts of America Handbook, <http://www.bsahandbook.org/>, 24-25.

<sup>138</sup> <http://www.scouting.org/Youth.aspx>

<sup>139</sup> Boy Scouts of America Handbook, <http://www.bsahandbook.org/>, 24-25.

<sup>140</sup> Harold W. Attridge, ed., *The HarperCollins Study Bible: Fully Revised and Updated*, Rev Upd ed. (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperOne, 2006), 117.

has told you, O mortal, what is good: and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" While a rather short list, it is a list none-the-less.

The New Testament also provides clarity on various topics through the use of lists. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus attempts to upend the cultural understanding of what it means to be blessed through the list we know as the Beatitudes (Matthew 5). With each stanza, Jesus unravels their understanding of blessing and paints a new picture of what it means to be blessed in the Kingdom of God. Paul also uses lists to clarify and explain fairly often. In his letter to the Romans, Paul lists of some of the qualities he would expect to find in a Christian (Romans 12:9-21). And, in 1 Corinthians, Paul records what is likely one of the most popular sections of the Bible for wedding ceremonies... his list of what it means to love.

*Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.* 1 Corinthians 13:4-8

- Practical and Poetic Lists

A list can be both practical and poetic. A practical list can be utilitarian in nature such as a list of items to get at the grocery store or a list of things to do for the day. A menu in a restaurant would be an example of a practical list, but if this menu were included in a book highlighting the menus from the best restaurants in the world, it would acquire a kind of poetic value.<sup>141</sup> Lists in the Bible can be both practical and poetic. The items contained in a Biblical list provide insight

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<sup>141</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Infinity of Lists: An Illustrated Essay* (New York: Rizzoli, 2009), 374.

into the subject, but when understood in context...in relation to one another, we arrive at a much deeper and more richly colored poetic understanding of the subject (see 1 Corinthians above). The Oxford Dictionary defines love as *an intense feeling of deep attraction*. Paul's list paints a more practical and poetic picture of what it means to love. It is in this same way a list of the 100 Words That Make Us Christian can provide both practical and poetic insight into what it means to be a Christian.

## Definition vs. List

These examples underscore the added value a list can bring to clearer understanding beyond that which a standard definition can provide. A definition, by definition (a statement of the exact meaning of a word, Oxford Dictionary) must reduce meaning into a concise concept that points the reader in the right direction. However, a list adds color and depth, shades and shadows as it brings greater meaning to our understanding much in the same way a color image provides more detailed information beyond the limitations of a black and white image.

The ancient creeds such as the Apostle's Creed or the Nicene Creed function in much the same way as a definition by trying to briefly provide the criteria for what a disciple of Jesus Christ must believe. However, they do not provide much clarity into what a Christian is beyond someone who believes the right things. Therefore, to add depth and understanding to those characteristics we share as Christians, this project attempts to generate a list of words to help clarify our core values beyond a creedal statement of beliefs.

## The Size of the List

One of the first criteria to be determined is how big such a list of words should be. The U.S. Marines' list contains 3 words and The Boy Scouts' list contains 12. A list of either size seems too small a catalogue from which to deepen our understanding of what it means to be a Christian.

In American culture, we tend to organize and categorize in increments of 5 or 10 as evidenced by the units of our monetary system: 1 cent, 5 cents, 10 cents, 25 cents, 50 cents (not so much anymore), 100 cents = \$1. From there we move on to \$1, \$5, \$10, \$20, \$100, \$500, \$1000 etc. Working under this base 10 heuristic, a list 10 words does not seem enough and 50 words seems somehow awkward. However, a list of 100 words seems appropriate, manageable and should provide a large enough selection of colors (words) on our palette from which to paint a more detailed picture of what makes us Christian.

## Words Matter

Words have always been of primary and primordial importance in the history of Christianity. The Bible begins with a story about the first words.

*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.*

*Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. Genesis 1:1-3*

Our world begins with a lesson on the importance of words... the right words from the right source makes all the difference in the world. God speaks words and creation responds.

*Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over*

*all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."*

Genesis 1:26

Genesis 2 tells a second creation story.

*...then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. Genesis 2:7*

God speaks and things happen. God speaks creation into existence but is not hesitant to reach down into the *dust of the ground* to shape and mold His creation, bringing it to life with His very breath. God's words are action words... words with a purpose... words that accomplish His will. Humankind is both spoken and formed into existence. Words alone will never be enough for us. Action alone will never inspire us. We are children of the Word in action.

*God speaking through the prophet Isaiah "Every word out of my mouth does what it says."*

Isaiah 45:23

*"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."* Isaiah

55:10-11

God's words have purpose and shall not return empty.

John 1:1 introduces us to Jesus as the *Word* of God: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* Jesus is the living Word of God. In this instance, *Word* is the English translation for the Greek word *logos*. *Logos* is much richer in meaning than

strictly as an English equivalent for the term *word*. Perhaps a list of some of the meanings associated with the word *logos* might aid in our understanding. Logos encompasses the ideas of an explanation, a principle, a reason, a narrative, the history, a discussion or debate.<sup>142</sup> Jesus is this all-encompassing expression of God. This *Word* or *logos* will accomplish and is accomplishing that which God intends. Words are foundational to a Christian. The Christian faith is built upon the Word and is communicated and understood in words. Our list defining what it means to be Christian is a list of 100 such foundational words.

## Luther Stumbles Over a Word

Much of Christian debate over the centuries has centered on the meaning and intent of words. Gutenberg added fuel to this debate when he enabled us to print and distribute our words with greater ease. “In many ways the sixteenth century was an extended argument over words - the meaning of words, whose words had the greatest power, the role of words in faith, and the political impact of words.”<sup>143</sup> Luther struggled with the words of the Bible. Perhaps none more than this passage from Romans. *For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.”* (Romans 1:17) These words troubled Luther for he knew he was not righteous.<sup>144</sup> If Luther was not righteous, he had no faith and without faith Luther was eternally damned.<sup>145</sup> However, Erasmus’ Greek translation opened a new understanding of these words to Luther. Martin Luther wrote the following in explanation.

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<sup>142</sup> Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia: Q-Z* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Pub Co, 1995), 1107.

<sup>143</sup> Bass, *A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story*, 157.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

“There I began to understand the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, “He who through faith is righteous shall live.” Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me.”<sup>146</sup>

Luther had discovered “the true joyous tidings of the gospel: that human beings are not saved by their efforts to make themselves good in the eyes of God (an impossibility in any event), but by Gods free gift of forgiveness.”<sup>147</sup> Luther’s revelation had to do with words and the meaning of those words.<sup>148</sup> This new understanding no doubt heightened his abhorrence of the Church’s practice of selling indulgences and contributed to his nailing of the Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg in protest. Western Christianity split over a disagreement as to whether the word *faith* was a active or a passive verb.<sup>149</sup> Unfortunately, we have come to equate words with theological perspectives, forgetting that words contain the power to change hearts and inspire actions,<sup>150</sup> actions that can lead to revolutions.

## The Semiotics of Words

Words have meaning, but only because we assign meaning to them. Words are comprised of the individual characters we have agreed upon from which to form our words. Various cultures have differing characters or letters. In the case of the English language, there are 26 letters.

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<sup>146</sup> Martin Luther and John Dillenberger, *Martin Luther: Selections From His Writings* (New York: Anchor, 1958), 11.

<sup>147</sup> Hart, *The Story of Christianity: An Illustrated History of 2000 Years of the Christian Faith*, 188.

<sup>148</sup> Bass, *A People's History of Christianity*, 164.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

From these 26 letters we can create a near endless string of combinations to help us express what we want to communicate. These combinations of letters have assigned meanings. The study of these meanings is one variant in a field of study called semiotics (a fancy sounding word). In its most simple explanation, semiotics is “the study of signs.”<sup>151</sup> Signs can take the form of words but can also be images, sounds, gestures or objects...anything that can stand for something else.<sup>152</sup> A sign contains two elements: the signifier and the signified. Together they are a sign. For our purposes we will confine ourselves to the semiotics of words.

For example, the Oxford dictionary defines the word “smoke” as “a visible suspension of carbon or other particles in the air, typically one emitted from a burning substance.” While this is the definition of the word “smoke”, smoke can be a sign of different things. Smoke from a chimney is not cause for concern. Smoke coming from under the eaves of a house is cause for concern. Both of these examples are about smoke, and yet both would impact the viewer quite differently. The meaning contained in the word smoke is contextual. Understanding the meaning of the smoke would be better understood by looking at the signs or what was signified by the smoke.

But “smoke” can also be a verb: one smokes a cigarette. It can also be a noun: “Hey, do you have some smokes?” It can also be an adjective: “That car is smokin.” In this case the car is not on fire... no cause for concern. Of course if the sentence referred to smoke coming from under the hood... cause for concern.

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<sup>151</sup> Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: the Basics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 1.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

We string words together to make sentences. These sentences contain meaning, although their meaning is not always as obvious as it seems on the surface. The following example illustrates the challenge with interpretation...with understanding what is signified.

“Suppose a grandfather says to his granddaughter. I didn’t eat Grandmother’s chocolate cake.”<sup>153</sup> Here are several possible interpretation of his answer.<sup>154</sup>

“I didn’t eat Grandmother’s chocolate cake. (Paul ate Grandmother’s chocolate cake.)

I didn’t *eat* Grandmother’s chocolate cake. (I sat on Grandmother’s chocolate cake.)

I didn’t eat *Grandmother’s* chocolate cake. (I ate Susan’s chocolate cake.)

I didn’t eat Grandmother’s *chocolate* cake. (I ate Grandmother’s fruitcake.)

I didn’t eat Grandmother’s chocolate *cake*. (I ate Grandmother’s chocolate cookie.)”

Our interpretation of the words is variable and depends on a great many things. To complicate things further, that which is signified by a sign can change over time.<sup>155</sup> For example, the word “bad” used to have a pretty clear meaning. But now “bad” can be a good thing. The word “fly” used to mean an act similar to that of a bird. But, once again “fly” is a complementary term. The word “text” used to refer to the words of a book or the actual book. Now millions are *texting* all over the world. Words are signs. What is signified is contextual and cultural.

More germane to our area of concentration, the word “Christian” heretofore was associated with the qualities of *decency, kindness and fairness*. However, as Kinnaman’s research reveals,

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<sup>153</sup> Sean Hall, *This Means This, This Means That: A User's Guide to Semiotics* (London: Laurence King Publishers, 2007), 30.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>155</sup> Chandler, *Semiotics*, 62.

the word “Christian” means “very conservative, entrenched in their thinking, antigay, antichoice, angry, violent, illogical, empire builders; they want to convert everyone, and they generally cannot live peacefully with anyone who doesn't believe what they believe.”<sup>156</sup> Words have meaning. Words can have different meanings depending on the context and experience. And, the meaning of words can change.

The meaning of words can change while retaining their emotional impact. For example, the dictionary defines the word “fire” as *combustion or burning, in which substances combine chemically with oxygen from the air and typically give out bright light, heat and smoke* (Oxford Dictionary). Again, this is technically correct, but it reflects a more modern understanding of fire removed from its historical meaning. Initially, fire was likely a life or death word...with fire there was survival...without fire, survival was more difficult. Fire would have inspired an emotional response. Fire was a cooked meal. Fire was comfort on a cold night. Fire was a defense against the wild ones lurking in the woods. Today, fire is available to many of us with the flick of a switch. Fire is common and commonplace. As such, fire has lost its emotional response in much of the world. Unless of course one is “fired” from their place of employment, in which case much of the original emotion is re-attached. When one is fired, survival is more difficult, cooked meals may become scarce, the nights could become cold and one’s defense against the creditors lurking in the woods would be diminished. It is easy to see how the term fired came to be associated with the emotion and security of the fire. The emotional meaning words carry can get re-purposed for a new culture and context.

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<sup>156</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*, 26.

Walter Benjamin proposed “technological society is dominated by reproductions of original works - tokens of the original type.”<sup>157</sup> In our modern world we typically make judgments concerning an original based upon the reproduction we have experienced. For example, most of us have not seen the original Mona Lisa but we have seen reproductions in books or computer screens. Our opinion of the original is formed out of an understanding we assembled observing the copy. However, when we look at the copy we do not see the textures, experience the size, or see the colors accurately. We do not form our opinions in the context of the museum surrounded by other great works of art or smell the smells of the museum. We make our judgment of the Mona Lisa based on the quality of the reproduction we have experienced.

Suppose we had an accurate reproduction of the Mona Lisa and we then place this reproduction on the copier and make a copy. We then repeat the process using the copy as the original. As we continue this process, each copy will be a little less clear... a little less accurate in the way it represents the original. If we carry the process on long enough, the copy will bear little or no resemblance to the original. The original Mona Lisa will be unrecognizable from our copy of a copy of a copy of a...

It is in the same way we form our opinions and manifest what it means to be a Christian. We are removed from the original by distance and time. Those representations of a Christian we interact with today or claim that we are, are copies...copies that have lost clarity and detail through the copying process over the centuries...copies that render the source unrecognizable. It is only when we look to the original that we can observe and understand what is signified by the

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<sup>157</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hanna Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1992), 211-244, quoted in Sean Hall, *This Means This, This Means That: A User's Guide to Semiotics* (London: Laurence King Publishers, 2007), 50.

word Christian. The 100 Words That Make Us Christian can hopefully return our attention and our gaze to that original source.

## A Diverse Body

Diversity, disagreement and division within the church are not modern phenomena. Paul addressed the issue in his letter to the church at Corinth. The city of Corinth had been completely destroyed by the Romans in 146 BCE and later rebuilt as a Roman colony.<sup>158</sup> It was a port city and as such attracted travelers from beyond its borders. The intermingling of people from these diverse cultures in combination with the juxtaposition of wealth and poverty in this center of commerce made for a diverse populace and it was in this cultural milieu Paul's new church was struggling. Paul spent over a year in Corinth teaching these new believers the ways of Christ but later found out they had fallen victim to division and immorality.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians identifies his concerns. Early in the epistle, Paul writes: "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose" (1 Cor. 1:10). Divisions were fracturing the church. Members of various congregations were aligning themselves with their founder or perhaps the theology of a particular person saying: "'I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ'" (1 Cor. 1:12). Paul reminded them there was only one church to which they belonged. To clarify his point, Paul utilized the metaphor of the body.

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<sup>158</sup> Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia: Q-Z* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Pub Co, 1995), 775.

Through the use of this metaphor (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12) Paul paints a picture of the church as a united body... a body composed of a diverse collection of parts. Diversity within the body enables rather than prevents proper functioning. As such, diversity does not weaken or destroy the church but instead strengthens it. This lesson from Paul is one the church continues to struggle with and one that would serve us well to re-learn.

## Diversity Defined

Diversity in our context does not reference many of the categories that might first come to the politically correct mind. For our purposes, diversity means, “cognitive differences ... differences in how people see, categorize, understand, and go about improving the world.”<sup>159</sup> Dr. Scott Page groups these differences into four categories.<sup>160</sup>

“Diverse Perspectives: ways of representing situations and problems

Diverse Interpretations: ways of categorizing or partitioning

Diverse Heuristics: ways of generating solutions to problems

Diverse Predictive Models: ways of inferring cause and effect”<sup>161</sup>

People see the world in diverse ways. They organize what they see and experience in different cognitive categories. They approach problem solving in differing ways. And, they view the causes and effects of their decisions from differing perspectives. Due to these diverse perspectives, almost everyone is advantaged over everyone else in some manner due to the

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<sup>159</sup> Scott E. Page, *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools, and Societies (New Edition)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), xiv.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

unique information they bring to the table.<sup>162</sup> The toolbox as a container for these various problem solving tools is a good metaphor to aid in our understanding of how diversity contributes to effective problem solving.

## A Diverse Toolbox

Each of us likely has a toolbox of some sort at home. The tools in our toolbox enable us to take on certain projects. In many instances we could determine the area of someone's expertise by inspecting the contents of their toolbox. This analogy can apply to our cognitive capabilities as well. Each of us possess a cognitive tool box containing a variety of tools.<sup>163</sup> To some degree, these toolboxes define us; they enable our capabilities and make obvious our limitations. "They determine how we do in school, how we play with others, the careers we choose, how much money we make, whether we are capable of having much fun, and how smart people think we are."<sup>164</sup> All things being equal, the more tools we carry around in our cognitive tool box, the better able we are to successfully solve problems and find creative solutions.<sup>165</sup>

However, effectiveness in finding solutions from a diverse perspective has nothing to do with intelligence... at least not in the traditional IQ measured sense. Various descriptions of intelligence are challenging our tradition IQ metric. Dr. Howard Gardner has proposed an approach that identifies 7 different types of intelligence.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> F.A. Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society," *American Economic Association* 35, no. 4 (Sep., 1945): 521-522.

<sup>163</sup> Page, *The Difference*, 103.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>166</sup> Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, Third Edition ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

- Linguistic Intelligence
- Musical Intelligence
- Logical-Mathematical Intelligence
- Spatial Intelligence
- Bodily-Kinesthetic Intelligence
- Intrapersonal Intelligence
- Interpersonal Intelligence

Gardner acknowledges these “intelligences are fictions - at most, useful fictions - for discussing processes and abilities that (like all of life) are continuous with one another.”<sup>167</sup> He goes on to say “they do not exist as physically verifiable entities but only as potentially useful scientific constructs.”<sup>168</sup> In terms of diversity, they provide us with a variety of ways to consider intelligence.

Psychologist Robert Sternberg approaches the idea of intelligence from a different perspective utilizing a multidimensional metric: analytic intelligence, creative intelligence and practical intelligence.<sup>169</sup> Analytic intelligence can be equated with our more standard understanding of IQ.<sup>170</sup> Creative intelligence relates to an individual’s ability to consider past experiences when formulating new ideas.<sup>171</sup> And, practical intelligence concerns the ability to apply one’s knowledge toward the solution of real-world problems.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Gardner, *Frames of Mind*, 74.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Robert J. Sternberg, *Beyond IQ: a Triarchic Theory of Human Intelligence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

<sup>170</sup> Page, *The Difference*, 109.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

From the research on intelligence, one might be tempted to conclude that getting a group of *intelligent* individuals working together to solve a problem would be an appropriate strategy.

However, to be effective, this strategy comes with some counter-intuitive conditions.

## Diversity Trumps Homogeneity

Most of us have heard the *saying great minds think alike*. While this may be an effective strategy to endear one person to another at a dinner party, thinking alike works to the disadvantage of effective problem solving. Research is showing “collections of people with diverse perspectives and heuristics outperform collections of people who rely on homogeneous perspectives and heuristics.”<sup>173</sup> In other words, a group of individuals with diverse toolboxes outperforms a group of people with the same or similar toolboxes. C.S. Lewis perhaps summed it up best when he said : “Two heads are better than one, not because either is infallible, but because they are unlikely to go wrong in the same direction.”<sup>174</sup>

For example: a group of MBAs engaged to solve a problem are going to have a certain set of tools in common. These tools would be valuable if called upon to forecast the profit to loss ratios for an upcoming product launch. However, these common tools would not provide a comprehensive look at all the possible variables related to their forecast. The MBAs would not likely know the musical artist who was secured to endorse their new product had lyrics in an upcoming album that were going to be offensive to a large group of the population thereby decreasing product sales by their association with this artist. Perhaps if the shipping clerk in the

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>174</sup> C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays On Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Pub Co, 1994), 202.

cubicle downstairs had been consulted, they could have avoided the unforeseen public relations debacle in which they were about to be engaged.

For an example closer to home, suppose a group of pastors who have been to seminary and earned their MDivs got together to ascertain the best way to enlist volunteers in outreach to the community. Their training predisposes them to a theological perspective. While this perspective and understanding may inspire their actions, it is possible a better way to engage volunteers might come from the organizational theory professor at a local university. Diverse perspectives can enable better solutions to complex problems.

When faced with a challenge to its authority or its theology, the church has historically gathered together a collection of like minded and similarly trained members of the church hierarchy to discuss, debate and issue a decision. This strategy makes the church vulnerable to the same potential oversights of the previous two examples. Like minds see things in the same way.

Dr. Scott Page, explains this in his Diversity Trumps Homogeneity Theorem: “If two collections of problem solvers contain problem solvers of equal individual ability, and if those problem solvers in the first collection are homogeneous and those in the second collection are diverse, that is, they have some differences in their local optima [their toolbox], then the collection of diverse problem solvers, on average, outperforms the collection of homogenous problem solvers.”<sup>175</sup> As individuals, we all fall victim to a sort of error blindness<sup>176</sup> meaning that we are unaware and therefore blind to those beliefs we hold to that are actually false.<sup>177</sup> Whether we maintain an amateur’s confidence or an experts proficiency in a particular area of expertise, it

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<sup>175</sup> Page, *The Difference*, 157.

<sup>176</sup> Kathryn Schulz, *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*, Reprint ed. (New York: Ecco, 2011), 18.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*

is often this area in which our error blindness is most obvious to those around us.<sup>178</sup> As long as the error is invisible it can limit the potential outcome. A homogenous group of problem solvers increases the likelihood of a poor outcome because the group likely shares similar zones of error blindness. When working with a homogenous group, “two heads are not better than one in this case - they are one.”<sup>179</sup>

## Diversity Trumps Ability

If we find ourselves in need of solving a problem in an area where we have no expertise, we might seek out someone who knows more about the topic, perhaps even an expert. For example, a leaky water pipe might encourage us to seek out a plumber. Or, if our car needs an alignment to drive straight down the road we might seek out an auto mechanic. These are effective and proper strategies when solving simple problems. However, as the dilemmas become more complex, the value an expert brings to the table tends to be overated.<sup>180</sup>

Research suggests a rather counter-intuitive strategy: the better problem solvers can be those without experience in the area of the problem.<sup>181</sup> Their greatest contribution can be that of a fresh perspective.<sup>182</sup> Before anyone reading this entertains the idea of having a convenience store clerk with a fresh perspective perform their heart surgery, we should acknowledge that diversity trumps ability only under certain conditions.

Dr. Page’s research on diversity led him to propose The Diversity Trumps Ability Theorem: “Given conditions 1-4, a randomly selected collective of problem solvers outperforms

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<sup>178</sup> Allender, *Leading with a Limp: Take Full Advantage of Your Most Powerful Weakness*, 183.

<sup>179</sup> Page, *The Difference*, 153.

<sup>180</sup> James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds* (New York: Anchor, 2005), 32.

<sup>181</sup> Howe, *Crowdsourcing: Why the Power of the Crowd Is Driving the Future of Business*, 46.

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

a collection of the best individual problem solvers.”<sup>183</sup> Here are the conditions Dr. Page identifies.

- Condition 1 - The Problem is Difficult<sup>184</sup>

If the problem is easy, there is a high likelihood several people in the group would individually know the answer. However, “diversity benefits kick in when the problems we face are hard - designing products, curing diseases, improving our educational system.”<sup>185</sup> The problem must be difficult.

- Condition 2 - The Calculus Condition<sup>186</sup>

The Calculus Condition states, “All of the possible problem solvers must have some ability to solve the problem.”<sup>187</sup> When looking to solve a chemistry problem, we need those in our group who have an understanding of chemistry. When needing heart surgery, we would assume the convenience store clerk would be eliminated from this category.

- Condition 3 - The Diversity Condition<sup>188</sup>

The Diversity Condition speaks to the differentiation between random and diverse. A random group has no better chance at arriving at a solution than would a group of “monkeys on typewriters trying to peck out a little Shakespeare.”<sup>189</sup> The diversity condition requires the group of problem solvers be a collection of diverse individuals who can make an improvement or offer

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<sup>183</sup> Page, *The Difference*, 162.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*

a valid contribution to the process. No individual needs to be able to find the solution on their own, they just need to be able to offer a suggestion for improvement.<sup>190</sup>

- Condition 4 - Good-Sized Collections Drawn from Lots of Potential Problem Solvers<sup>191</sup>

“The initial population of problem solvers must be large and the collections of problem solvers working together must contain more than a handful of problem solvers.”<sup>192</sup> The old saying *two heads are better than one* is now better restated as *many heads are better than one or a few*. In what may seem a counter-intuitive insight, increasing the quantity of diverse problem solvers by adding those who know less about the subject actually improves the likelihood of creating better solutions.<sup>193</sup> “A large and diverse pool will consistently come up with better solutions than the most talented, specialized workforce.”<sup>194</sup>

## Diversity Trumps Polls

A poll is a method for checking the pulse of the general populace on a particular issue or a set of issues. Polls can be useful when investigating something with general interest to a large population group such as whether you prefer ketchup or salsa as a condiment. It is also appropriate for research such as Kinnaman and Lyon’s in which they were attempting to poll a younger generation to see what they think of Christianity. The randomness of a poll benefits this type of question.

However, when trying to solve a difficult problem, this randomness works against arriving at the best solution. The solving of a difficult problem requires a diverse set of problem solving

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds*, 30.

<sup>194</sup> Howe, *Crowdsourcing*, 54.

tools that a random selection process does not guarantee. Random is random and as such “the foolish and the wise alike get a single, equally weighted vote.”<sup>195</sup>

## Diverse Criteria

James Surowiecki, in his book *The Wisdom of Crowds*, proposes four conditions for wise crowds: “diversity of opinion (each person should have some private information, even if it's just an eccentric interpretation of the known facts), independence (people's opinions are not determined by the opinions of those around them), decentralization (people are able to specialize and draw on local knowledge), and aggregation (some mechanism exists for turning private judgments into a collective decision).”<sup>196</sup> Dr. Page, in his book *The Difference*, lumps Surowiecki’s first three conditions into one category by suggesting Surowiecki’s first three conditions simply “imply a diversity of predictive models.”<sup>197</sup> However, both Surowiecki’s and Page’s perspectives contribute to a better understanding of the role diversity plays in effective problem solving. Surowiecki’s conditions are as follows.

- Diversity of Opinion

While the benefits of diversity have been discussed previously, let's add an additional criterion to ensure a group of problem solvers contains a diverse range of opinions: *we cannot select the members of the group*. When we select members for a group, we impose our personal bias on the group thereby reducing diversity. In addition, when we select the members of a group we run the risk our opinion might have more influence than is warranted due to our position of privilege within the group. A more effective strategy would be to allow members of

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>196</sup> Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds*, 10.

<sup>197</sup> Page, *The Difference*, 177.

the problem solving group to self-select. Self-selection not only contributes to the likelihood of a diverse group of problem solvers, but research has shown self-selection encourages participation.<sup>198</sup>

- Independence

Independence encourages effective problem solving in that independent problem solvers are less likely to be influenced by other members of the group through discussion or deliberation. Deliberation can limit diversity because it encourages consensus.<sup>199</sup> Consensus typically implies agreement, however agreement can be arrived at through a variety of counter-productive means. Strong personalities can influence the direction of the discussion. Minority opinions can simply retreat from the discussion. Deliberation can also lead to groupthink. Groupthink can cause members of the problem solving group to avoid controversy or to overlook weak arguments.<sup>200</sup> Deliberation in a situation where groupthink exists can have the effect of limiting the exploration of possibilities rather than creating a larger pallet of options from which to choose.<sup>201</sup> Therefore, keeping the participants independent of one another discourages groupthink and contributes to better problem solving and decision-making. “The smartest groups, then, are made up of people with diverse perspectives who are able to stay independent of each other.”<sup>202</sup>

- Decentralization

Decentralization has to do with leadership. When the decision group is decentralized, power and decision making is more likely to be shared and migrate toward those with independent

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<sup>198</sup> Karim R. Lakhani and Jill A. Panetta, "The Principles of Distributed Innovation," *Innovations: Technology, Governance, Globalization* 2, no. 3 (2007): 105.

<sup>199</sup> Howe, *Crowdsourcing*, 175.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>201</sup> Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds*, 37.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

knowledge of the situation as compared to being made by the influential leader of the group.<sup>203</sup>

Decentralization also tends to counter any tendencies toward groupthink since it is harder for a decentralized group of individuals to influence one another's thoughts or actions.

- Aggregation

For a decentralized group to generate intelligent results, there must be a means to aggregate everyone's input.<sup>204</sup> Aggregation allows those who know the answer to reveal it<sup>205</sup> and those who know parts of the answer to contribute to the process of uncovering the answer.<sup>206</sup> The Internet is a great enabler of information gathering and aggregation due to the fact software solutions can be developed which enable contribution and the hierarchical ranking of solutions.

## Incentives and Entry Barriers to Effective Problem Solving

We previously discussed how self-selection encourages participation.<sup>207</sup> Self selection is encouraged through the use of two inter-related criteria.

- Incentives

Innocentive is a company that enables and promotes incentivized problem solving. ([www.innocentive.com](http://www.innocentive.com)) Utilizing the Innocentive platform, individuals or organizations post challenges on the Innocentive web site and offer a financial reward to the person or persons who propose the best solution. The amounts of the financial rewards vary from challenge to

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 70-71

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>205</sup> Page, *The Difference*, 180.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Lakhani and Panetta, "The Principles of Distributed Innovation," 105.

challenge. Here are 3 of the 111 challenges posted on Innocentive's website on October 25, 2011.

- Fast Rope Glove Device - \$15,000
- Improving the Nutritional Value of Plant Tissues - \$50,000
- Model the Functional Molecular Networks in a Cancer Cell - \$100,000

Apart from the financial motivation, Innocentive also encourages more altruistic motivations for participation.<sup>208</sup>

- Start making a difference, become a Solver today!
- Hone your mind, become a Solver today!
- Demonstrate your expertise, become a Solver today!

Apparently this incentive approach works. The site tells of a recently posted challenge to overcome the problems associated with effectively identifying water that had passed through a solar disinfection process as safe to drink.<sup>209</sup> To incentivize the challenge, the Rockefeller Foundation offered a \$40,000 reward to the successful problem solver.<sup>210</sup> In this instance, a team of graduate students from the University of Washington submitted the winning solution.

Innocentive has recently introduced a platform called Prodigy that enables those working on a particular challenge to receive instant feedback on their proposed solutions from others who are also working on their own solution to the challenge. In this way, independent problem solvers are able to compare, score and observe their solutions relative to one another on the InnoCentive

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<sup>208</sup> <http://www.innocentive.com/why-solve2>

<sup>209</sup> <https://www.innocentive.com/sunlightuv-light-dose-indicator>

<sup>210</sup> Tim O'Brien (InnoCentive), email message, 10/31/11.

website.<sup>211</sup> Based upon this feedback, potential solvers are then able to re-work their solutions and re-submit their proposals.<sup>212</sup> Connecting and enabling the diverse group of participants to rank and make contributions to one another's proposed solutions enables better solutions to rise to the surface.

- Entry Barriers

Unfortunately, incentives can also encourage those who are not the most qualified to participate. To overcome this, Dr. Page suggests the creation of some kind of an entry barrier to both encourage those who believe they can make a valuable contribution to participate and to dissuade those with less confidence in their abilities from diminishing the possibility of arriving at the best solution.<sup>213</sup> While an entry barrier will result in the loss of some diversity, these losses are offset by an increase in accuracy.<sup>214</sup> An entry barrier could be as minimal as requiring the contributor to register their identity or as severe as requiring an entry fee prior to participation. Anyone who has ever read the comments section of a public news website would likely agree the quality of postings would be greatly enhanced if the contributor had to minimally contribute their real name rather than operating under the moniker of "newsmonkie." (No offense if there is a real "newsmonkie" out there.) Entry barriers can discourage those less qualified and reduce noise in the system.

Financial prediction markets such as the Iowa Electronic Markets (<http://tippie.uiowa.edu/iem/index.cfm>) and Intrade (<http://www.intrade.com/v4/home/>) operate in much the same manner as the stock market does by requiring participants to invest financially

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<sup>211</sup> <http://www.innocentive.com/innocentive-introduces-significant-enhancements-prodigy-analytical-challenges>

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

<sup>213</sup> Page, *The Difference*, 235.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 232.

through the buying of shares; an entry barrier. The price of the shares reflects the confidence the participants have in a particular outcome. Higher confidence equates to a higher share price while lower confidence equates to a lower share price. Topics in these prediction markets include everything from weather and entertainment issues to election results. The financial aspects of information markets encourage those with confidence in their predictions to invest more and those with less confidence to refrain from participation.<sup>215</sup> In these ways incentives and entry barriers both tend to encourage better predictions or solutions.

## Proximity and Digital Space

The idea that groups can solve problems better than individuals should come as no surprise to us since, as a species, we have historically banded together to increase our chances of survival.<sup>216</sup> Those who were better at hunting provided meat for the tribe and those who were better at raising crops contributed through those means. As societies became more organized, we clustered into larger groups and worked together to develop better methods of accomplishing our work. Through these interactions or intellectual collisions, better ideas and solutions were able to rise to the surface.

Proxemics is a term coined by anthropologist Dr. Ed Hall and refers to the theories of distance and proximity as an aspect of culture.<sup>217</sup> Dr. Hall has proposed four social spaces in which humans interact with one another: intimate, personal, social and public.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>216</sup> Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 14-15.

<sup>217</sup> Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension* (New York: Anchor, 1990), 1.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 114.

- Intimate Space

Intimate space ranges from physical contact to 18 inches.<sup>219</sup> This zone is typically reserved for those who know each other well. In this zone, “olfaction, heat from the other person's body, sound, smell, and feel of the breath all combine to signal unmistakable involvement with another body.”<sup>220</sup>

- Personal Space

Personal space varies from close personal space (1.5 feet to 2.5 feet) to distant personal space (2.5 feet to 4 feet).<sup>221</sup> This distance might be what we would call *within arms reach*. The co-locating of two individuals within each other’s personal space would signal the nature of their relationship in both the professional and personal sphere.<sup>222</sup>

- Social Space

Social space varies from a close social distance of 4 to 7 feet to a far social distance of 7 to 12 feet.<sup>223</sup> The arrangement of desks in an office and the table and chairs in a conference room tend to conform to this social distance. Rooms in our homes typically correspond to Dr. Hall’s spaces as well. The living room might encourage sitting at a social distance, while the dining room provides for a more personal distance. It might also explain why the kitchen seems to always be a popular social gathering place.

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 121.

- Public Space

Public space has a close distance of 12 to 25 feet and a far distance of 25 feet or more.<sup>224</sup> At these distances communication is difficult if not impossible without some technical aid. As theatrical performance halls have gotten larger, video screens have been added in a likely effort to bring the viewer back into a comfortable viewing distance of the performance... a return to a more appropriate space or distance.

However, the human animal is capable of moving beyond its physical capabilities and space through the use of what Dr. Hall calls *extensions*.<sup>225</sup> Through the development of these extensions, “man has been able to improve or specialize various functions.”<sup>226</sup> For example, a shovel extends our ability to dig. A hammer and saw extend our ability to build while the computer extends the capabilities of the brain.<sup>227</sup> American anthropologist Westin La Barre went so far as to suggest “man has shifted evolution from his body to his extensions and in doing so has tremendously accelerated the evolutionary process.”<sup>228</sup>

As such, the Internet serves as an extension. An ever-growing population of Internet users connect and collaborate in a new space apart from Dr. Hall’s four zones. It is a space where the idea of proximity gets blurry. It is a space we can call digital space. Digital space is paradoxical. Digital space is close and yet far. It is private and yet public. In digital space all you need to be in close proximity to another person is a computer with Internet access. Digital spaces allow those well beyond Hall’s physical public space to interact as if they share personal or social space. This capability enables collective problem solving as never before. It is in

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 123-124.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 4.

digital space that we can either leverage the benefits of diversity or allow the cost of diversity to rear its ugly head. As was true in the case of Gutenberg's invention, the genie has been let out of the bottle... there is no going back.

This network of networks "enables organizations and individuals to reconfigure the links between information and individuals across time and space."<sup>229</sup> According to the Pew Research Foundation, 78% of adult Americans have Internet access.<sup>230</sup> Additionally, as of 2009, 27.1% of the world's population are Internet users.<sup>231</sup> Digital space will become more and more diverse as it becomes more of a global space. Digital space is diverse. Harnessing the diversity found in digital space can enable better decisions and solutions.

## Collaborative Network Organization or Distributed Co-Creation

It has been said: "No matter who you are, most of the smartest people work for someone else."<sup>232</sup> While this statement references to the work environment, it reflects a truth in the global economy of ideas: all the best ideas and solutions likely reside somewhere else. Our challenge is to figure out how to more effectively access and utilize those ideas and solutions. One way we can pursue better solutions via digital space is through what is known as a *collaborative network organization*.

According to professor William Dutton, there are 3 types of collaborative network organizations or CNOs.<sup>233</sup> The 1.0 network organization involves the broadcasting or sharing of

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> <http://pewInternet.org/Static-Pages/Trend-Data/Internet-Adoption.aspx>

<sup>231</sup> <http://www.google.com/publicdata/explore?>

<sup>232</sup> Lakhani and Panetta, "The Principles of Distributed Innovation," 97.

<sup>233</sup> William Dutton, "The Wisdom of Collaborative Network Organizations: Capturing the Value of Networked Individuals," *Prometheus* 26, no. 3 (2008): 216.

information.<sup>234</sup> The 2.0 network organization includes the use of social networks to enable group formation and communication.<sup>235</sup> And, the 3.0 network organization includes the ability to work together through networks that enable cooperative actions;<sup>236</sup> Dr. Page calls this final process *distributed co-creation*.<sup>237</sup>

Wikipedia is a good example of a distributed co-creation project. It would be natural to assume the social anarchy of the Internet might negate any confidence one might place in the accuracy of the articles on Wikipedia, however, research conducted by Nature magazine shows the accuracy of Wikipedia is comparable to that of the Encyclopedia Britannica.<sup>238</sup> Nature's research found there were "2.92 mistakes per article for Britannica and 3.86 for Wikipedia."<sup>239</sup> In addition, Nature surveyed over 1000 of its own contributing authors and discovered more than 70% said they consult Wikipedia while more than 80% said they found the depth of coverage, relevance and accuracy of the information found on Wikipedia to be *satisfactory* or *excellent*.<sup>240</sup> This is not too bad for a collection of information contributed and monitored by a self-selected army of unnamed and unknown volunteers. The key for Wikipedia's success hinges on the fact that those who are most qualified tend to edit and correct the postings of those who are not. This updating of information is an ongoing process.

The organizations Dutton identifies as Type 1 are "artifacts of an earlier age when information was scarce and decisions, for the sake of efficiency, trickled down from on high."<sup>241</sup> However, information is no longer scarce. Information can move up, down or sideways with

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> Page, *The Difference*, xvii.

<sup>238</sup> [http://news.cnet.com/2100-1038\\_3-5997332.html](http://news.cnet.com/2100-1038_3-5997332.html)

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

<sup>240</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Press\\_releases/Nature\\_compares\\_Wikipedia\\_and\\_Britannica](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Press_releases/Nature_compares_Wikipedia_and_Britannica)

<sup>241</sup> Howe, *Crowdsourcing*, 276.

equal ease. Dutton's Type 3 collaborative networks create the opportunity for better problem solving by enabling those with diverse perspectives and heuristics the ability to effectively collaborate.

Perhaps Apple Corp. had it partially correct when their marketing slogan encouraged us to *think different*. However, thinking different is not the optimal solution, we need to think different together. To those who engage the wisdom of the crowd toward distributed co-creation there awaits not only an adventure in learning but perhaps solutions to the difficult and persistent challenges that continue to plague us...such as attempting to define what it means to be a Christian.

## Concluding Thoughts

Historically, the Church approached the problem of authority concerning doctrinal issues from a hierarchical perspective: those in positions of leadership determined and sometimes enforced proper theology upon the larger body of disciples. This top-down heuristic has remained the model for the Church for centuries. While it simplifies and expedites the decision making process, it also tends to alienate those without power as their voices are ignored or silenced. The ability to print empowered the general populace to read the scriptures for themselves. It also enabled the voice of a single monk's opposition to the practices of church hierarchy to be heard throughout Christendom. Unfortunately, Luther's Reformation set the standard for how disagreements within the church would be settled in the future; dissent results in division.

Paul encountered Christianity's predilection toward disagreement early in his ministry and proposed an antidote to this division through the body of Christ metaphor. The metaphor

describes the Church as a human body in which a diversity of parts enable the body to function. It further illuminates the folly associated with an individual part of the body seeking to function apart from the body. However, the church seems resistant or unable to learn this lesson. As a result, we now have close to 33,000 Christian denominations.<sup>242</sup> Diversity of opinion continues to serve as a reason for expulsion or withdrawal from the corporate body.

Current research into optimal decision making methodology is reinforcing Paul's teaching on diversity; diverse perspectives and understandings enable better decisions. Just as diverse parts enable the body (the Church) to function properly, diverse viewpoints enable better solutions and understandings.

If we embrace the Biblical model of the body of Christ, all the diverse parts of the body of Christ have something to contribute to our understanding of what it means to be a Christian rather than serve as reasons to divide the church. In our attempt to determine what it means to be a Christian, both Paul and current research suggests we should abandon top-down hierarchical pronouncements and allow the diverse members of the body of Christ to contribute to a clearer understanding of the topic. Hopefully this project can serve as a starting point for the re-unification of a fractured Church into the gloriously diverse body of Christ it was meant to be.

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<sup>242</sup> Ostling, "Researcher Tabulates World's Believers," Adherents, <http://www.adherents.com/misc/WCE.html> (accessed September 8, 2011).

## SECTION 4 - ARTIFACT DESCRIPTION

### Introduction

A central question that permeates the Christian narrative and our experience as Christians is the question of authority. This question caused Adam and Eve to doubt what God said, it caused Pharaoh to doubt the message of Moses, it led David's sons to rebellion, it caused the Pharisees to interrogate and attempt to eliminate Jesus, it caused Popes and Bishops and individuals seeking the truth of God to fracture a unified body into thousands of pieces.

Ultimately God, the creator, has authority in these and all matters. God endowed Jesus with that authority on Earth and Jesus passed that authority on to a group of fishermen and a tax collector. Jesus must have felt this group of individuals, inspired by the Holy Spirit could get it right. The 100 Words project suggests this group is still capable of getting it right.

In this paper, we have discussed the advantages diversity brings to the table when attempting to solve difficult problems. Defining who we are as Christians is a difficult problem. This projects attempts to engage a diverse, Holy Spirit inspired Body of Christ to reclaim what it means to be a Christian utilizing distributed co-creation methodology via a self-selected collaborative network.

## Research Criteria and 100 Words

### • **The Advantage of Lists**

Criteria - A list enables a clearer understanding than a single definition.

100 Words - A list of 100 words will be generated via a collaborative network to provide depth of insight. Each word will be accompanied by a definition to enhance understanding.

### • **Diversity Enhances Problem Solving**

Criteria - Complete understanding in all things is given to no one. Therefore engaging a diverse group to solve a problem encourages better solutions.

100 Words - A diverse group will be engaged to create the list of the 100 Words That Make Us Christian.

### • **Diversity Trumps Ability**

Dr. Scott Page proposed the Diversity Trumps Ability Theorem as follows: “Given conditions 1-4, a randomly selected collective of problem solvers outperforms a collection of the best individual problem solvers.”<sup>243</sup> Page's four criteria and their application to the 100 Words are as follows.

Condition 1 - The Problem is Difficult

The benefits of diversity are realized more fully when the problem is difficult.

100 Words - Attempting to generate a unifying definition of what it means to be a Christian has not been successfully undertaken yet... the problem is difficult.

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<sup>243</sup> Page, *The Difference*, 159.

### Condition 2 - The Calculus Condition

The Calculus Condition requires that each of the problem solvers must have some degree of ability in the area of the problem.

100 Words - It is the assumption that only those individuals who have some understanding of Christianity would contribute to the project. The ability to vote and rank the words hierarchically increases the likelihood that lesser contributions will decline in standing allowing the more thoughtful to rise to the top.

### Condition 3 - The Diversity Condition

The Diversity Condition requires that the group of problem solvers be a collection of diverse individuals who can make an improvement or offer a valid contribution to the process

100 Words - The 100 Words project is not a random sampling, but a question put to individuals who have expressed their interest in Christian thoughts and ideals by connecting with Dr. Sweet via Twitter and Facebook. Those connected directly with Dr. Sweet were likewise encouraged to engage their connected peer groups in the project as well.

### Condition 4 - Good-Sized Collections Drawn from Lots of Potential Problem Solvers

The population of problem solvers must be more than a handful or potential solvers.

100 Words - The solicitation to become involved with this project was initially broadcast by Dr. Sweet to his Twitter and Facebook network. Dr. Sweet maintains the maximum number of 5000 friends on Facebook and currently has over 17,000 followers on Twitter. No records exists for how many followers Dr. Sweet had at the launch of this project. However, if we conservatively estimate it was as little as  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the number of followers he has today, we would have an initial population of over 10,000 potential problem solvers: from this group 299 self-selected to participate. This is more than a handful of problem solvers.

• **Diversity Trumps Homogeneity**

Dr. Scott Page, explains this in his Diversity Trumps Homogeneity Theorem: "If two collections of problem solvers contain problem solvers of equal individual ability, and if those problem solvers in the first collection are homogeneous and those in the second collection are diverse, that is, they have some differences in their local optima [their toolbox], then the collection of diverse problem solvers, on average, outperforms the collection of homogenous problem solvers."<sup>244</sup>

Criteria - A diverse collection of problem solvers outperforms a homogenous group.

100 Words - As we look at the potential group of 100 Words contributors we can conclude the following. Church leaders would be a more homogenous group than church members. Church leaders of a particular denomination would be a more homogeneous group than church leaders of a variety of denominations. Church members of a single denomination would be more homogeneous than members of a variety of denominations. Therefore, church leaders and

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 157.

church members from a variety of denominational groups would be a diverse group of problem solvers. Contributors to the 100 Words project likely fall into this last diverse category.

- **Diversity of Opinion**

Criteria - The benefits of diversity have been discussed previously.

100 Words - The 100 Words contributors are a diverse group. There were no criteria for participation or contribution, therefore enabling a more diverse group to participate. The only reduction to potential diversity engaged by 100 Words was the requirement a contributor have an Internet connection and a web browser.

- **Independence of Problem Solvers**

Criteria - The group of problem solvers must think and act as independently as possible.

100 Words - To the best of our knowledge, there was no interaction between contributors other than their ability to comment on a posting and vote for their favorites.

- **Decentralization**

Criteria - Decisions by those conducting the experiment must be confined to those concerning the methodology for collecting the data.

100 Words - The researchers for the 100 Words project confined their efforts to securing and designing a platform that would enable a diverse group of problem solvers to reach their best solutions.

- **Method of Aggregation**

Criteria - A reliable and egalitarian method of aggregations must be employed.

100 Words - The platform utilized for the 100 Words project enabled each registrant to not only contribute a word and a definition (if they so desired) but it also allocated 10 votes to each registrant thereby enabling them to cast votes for their favorite words. The limited number of votes encouraged the participants to consider their votes wisely.

- **Incentives**

Criteria - An incentive will encourage problem solvers to participate.

100 Words - Participants to the 100 Words project were incentivized by the opportunity to have their contributions included in the book about the project and results.

- **Entry Barriers**

Criteria - An entry barrier can improve performance of the problem solvers.

100 Words - Entry barriers were minimized in this project. The only disincentive to those perhaps less qualified or intent on vandalizing the project was that their names would be published along with their less than helpful contribution.

- **Self-Selection**

Criteria – Self-selection contributes to the likelihood of a diverse group of problem solvers and encourages participation.

100 Words - No selection criteria was engaged. All participants were self-selectors.

## Fulfillment of Criteria

It is under these criteria and conditions the 100 Words project was structured and completed.

# POST SCRIPT

## Summary of Execution

### Research Platform

Ideascale <http://ideascale.com/>

A web-based application that enables registered users to submit ideas, vote on the ideas while providing a real time method for compilation of results

### Data Collection Period

Initiated - November 2009

Closed - February 28, 2010

### Collection Statistics

229 Participants

1025 Votes Cast

175 Words Submitted

### Planned Publications

The 100 Words That Make Us Christian - Devotional Study

Who We Are - The 100 Words That Make Us Christian

## Efficacy of Approach

This methodology exceeded expectations. The platform enabled customization of the data collection site, easy and efficient data collection, and a viable method of aggregation.

## Lessons Learned

This project underscored the value looking deeply at a single issue. We only achieve some degree of clarity when our focus is focused. Interesting trails discovered on the journey can serve to distract. Or, they can serve to inspire future projects. This project has inspired a list of future projects. One of those is a book about what this particular list of words says about us as post-modern Christians. For example: the word Bible is not on the list, what does this say about Christian identity today? Additionally, identity is formed in conjunction with culture. What impact does growing up in a culture that is hostile to Christianity have on the formation of Christian identity? For the opportunity to learn the lesson of camping out on a single topic rather than consuming the notated version is something for which I will be eternally grateful.

## Conclusion

It is my hope that this project serves to elevate the supremacy of Jesus Christ to the position of primacy in the identity of those of us who call ourselves Christian. As one looks at the list of 100 Words, the majority of words refer to characteristics most of us would associate with those of a good person. The words that separate this list of words from a list of good characteristics are the Jesus words. There are 10 such word on this list depending on where you draw the line.

Jesus  
Trinity  
Redeemed  
Christ Resurrection Cross  
Atonement  
Messiah  
Incarnation  
Ekklesia

These Jesus words return our gaze to the cross. We can embrace the other 90 words as good and worthy to be emulated. However, it is only when our identity centers on the manifestation and incarnation of Jesus Christ that we and those other 90 words gain meaning.

## SECTION 5 - ARTIFACT SPECIFICATION

Dear Editor,

I am pleased to bring you this nonfiction book titled *100 Words That Make Us Christian* by (soon to be Dr.) Thomas Ingram and Dr. Leonard Sweet. This project was birthed in the fall of 2009 when Dr. Sweet asked how we could somehow enable the corporate Body of Christ to re-imagine and specify the 100 words that define a Christian in our current culture. Historically, these definitions have been proclaimed from the highest levels of church leadership. In contrast, this definition would arise from those living in the trenches of post-modern Christianity.

Crowdsourcing techniques were used to enable the formation of this definition. Research is showing that groups of people, referred to as crowds, arrive at better decisions than individuals. Several recent books have helped popularize this methodology: *Crowdsourcing* by Jeff Howe, *The Wisdom of Crowds* by James Surowiecki and *Here Comes Everybody* by Clay Shirky among others. Crowdsourcing techniques were utilized to develop the *100 Words That Make Us Christian*.

Crowdsourced contributors submitted 175 words and cast 1025 votes during the data collection period. The book is a study of the meaning contained within each of the 100 Words and how this meaning contributes to living life as a Christian in a post-modern culture. The audience for this book ranges from those in professional ministry who are interested in checking the pulse of post-modern Christianity to those simply interested in an insightful devotional study to better help them understand their personal faith journey. The book will also offer an online component in which readers can contribute their personal creed or manifesto utilizing the 100 Words. Dr. Sweet and I co-author this new book with the working title of *100 Words that Make Us Christian: An Online Experiment in Crowdsourcing to Uncover the Meaning of Christianity*.

I appreciate your time and look forward to hearing your insights and response concerning this project.

Tom Ingram

**Working Title:** *100 Words That Make Us Christian: An Online Experiment in Crowdsourcing to Uncover the Meaning of Christianity*.

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### **Overview:**

Throughout the history of the Christian church, those in authority have attempted to define and clarify what it means to be a Christian. The Reformation challenged the validity of a top-down ecclesiology by advancing the principle "every true Christian [is] a priest unto God without need of a special mediator other than Jesus Christ." Ironically, hundreds of years later we have thousands of denominations and independent churches that remain predominantly hierarchical and continue to define Christian identity out of and for their particular perspective and tradition.

In order to address the challenge presented by having no clear and unifying inter-denominational vision of what defines a Christian, a method was devised to enable just such a definition to be revealed utilizing social media and crowdsourcing techniques. By crowdsourcing this new definition, hierarchical and institutional biases are minimized thereby giving voice to the *priesthood of all believers* for perhaps the first time ever.

Dr. Leonard Sweet officially announced a data collection site for our project via Facebook and Twitter on November 11, 2009. Participants were encouraged to contribute to the project and spread the word in their arenas of influence. The collection period was closed on February 28, 2010. During the course of the research, 175 words were submitted and a total of 1025 votes cast enabling the words to be ranked according to the number of votes each word received. The research reveals a unique definition of Christian identity that can hopefully serve to unite the Body of Christ around a richness of meaning that has been heretofore elusive.

### **Purpose:**

- Explore the depth of meaning that is found in a definition of what it means to be a Christian developed outside of Church hierarchy.
- Contribute to the reader's understanding of their own Christian faith of the faith of others.
- Encourage a re-unification of the Body of Christ around shared meanings.

**Promotion and Marketing:** It is hard to ignore the value of having an established and well-known author and voice in modern Christianity as co-author of the book. Leonard Sweet brings insight and inspiration to a project few other authors today can match.

Since the research was promoted, enabled and created via social media, these avenues should be a big part of its promotion and marketing as well. Those who contributed to the data collection will also be encouraged to help with the promotion of a book in which they participated. Positioning the book as an introduction to the conversation should also serve to hopefully inspire and add to the viral and contributive nature of the book as the online conversation continues via

social media and the dedicated web site for the 100 Words Project. (<http://www.100-words.com/>)

**Competition:** While there is an abundance of books that present a single author or multiple author's view of living out the Christian life, (how to books if you will) one is hard pressed to find a book that deals with the nature of Christian identity from the perspective of the "priesthood of all believers." In this sense, it would be unique and without direct competition.

**Endorsements:** The authors of 100 Words are willing to contact the following authors for endorsement.

- Frank Viola
- Reggie McNeal
- John Stackhouse
- Margaret Feinberg
- Mark Batterson
- Dan Kimball

**Book Format (non-fiction):** After presenting an introductory chapter addressing the how's and why's of the project, the remainder of the book will be a study of the meaning behind the top 100 words revealed in our experiment.

**Format:** The book will be written in a devotional format that looks at the depth of meaning revealed by each of the top 100 words.

Example - First Word – HEAR

*HEAR seems an unlikely candidate for the #1 position on our list of 100 Words. Even a cursory glance at the complete list reveals several words that would seem to have greater claim to that position. However, upon further reflection, the justification for this primary position seems somewhat more inevitable. Many scriptures reinforce the primacy of the word HEAR in our Christian walk, but perhaps none more than Romans 10:17 (NRSV) "So, faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ." Our faith begins in the hearing.*

The study of the word HEAR then continues to reveal the importance of the word HEAR in creation, to Moses, to the announcement of Jesus birth etc... Each word study/devotional follows a similar path as it seeks to reveal the richness of meaning contained in each of the 100 Words.

### **Intended Readers:**

Primary Audience

- General Christian Audience - Those seeking a deeper understanding of their faith
- Professional church leaders - a resource for sermons, and insights into this generation
- Lay leaders in the church - a resource for teaching, and personal growth
- New media voices in the church - an experiment in social media
- Academia - post-modern Christianity

**Manuscript:** The manuscript is approximately 33% complete... 20,000 out of a target 60,000 words with the entire project completed within 3 months of signing contract.

**Author Bios:****Thomas E. Ingram**

Since becoming a follower of Jesus Christ in 1983, Tom has been an active participant in the local church community serving in many lay leadership roles as well as teaching and leading youth programs. Tom has spent most of his professional career in various aspects of the music and television production industry. He has worked in the creative trenches of production as well as led a team of production professionals for a national television network. Tom's extensive experience merged with his Christian faith when Tom produced a series of television commercials for churches across the country several years ago. This series of commercials resulted in Tom receiving the Covenant Award for the National Network/Syndication Division from the Southern Baptist Convention.

In an effort to become more purposefully engaged in the work of the Church, Tom left television and music production and returned to school. He has earned a Masters of Business Administration in Leadership and is currently completing a Doctor of Ministry degree in Semiotics and Future Studies under the mentorship of Dr. Leonard Sweet. Tom also serves as Dr. Sweet's teaching assistant for his cohort.

Tom also currently mentors and coaches men in their efforts to pursue God's purpose for their lives as part of ministry called Your One Degree (<http://youronedegree.com/>). Additionally, Tom leads various small groups. Helping individuals discover and live out who they are in Christ has been and continues to be a passion in Tom's life.

Tom has been married to his wife Nancy for 24 years. They have two children: Alissa (22) and Emily (16).

**Dr. Leonard Sweet**

In 2006 and 2007, Dr. Sweet was voted by his peers "One of the 50 Most Influential Christians in America" by ChurchReport Magazine. Currently the E. Stanley Jones Professor of Evangelism at Drew University, Madison, NJ and a Visiting Distinguished Professor at George Fox University, Portland, Oregon, Len has been Vice President of Academic Affairs and Dean of the Theological School at Drew University for five years. Previous to Drew Len served for eleven years as President and Professor of Church History at United Theological Seminary, Dayton, Ohio. Prior to 1985, Len was Provost of Colgate Rochester/Bexley Hall/Crozer Divinity School in Rochester, New York. Involved in leadership positions in the United Methodist Church, Len has been chosen to speak at various Jurisdictional and General Conferences as well as the 1996 World Methodist Congress in Rio de Janeiro. He also serves as a consultant to many of America's denominational leaders and agencies. He is a member of the West Virginia Annual Conference.

Author of more than two hundred articles, over twelve hundred published sermons, and dozens of books, Len is the primary contributor (along with his wife Karen Elizabeth Rennie) to the web-based preaching resource, sermons.com. For nine years he and his wife wrote Homiletics,

which became under their watch the premier preaching resource in North America. In 2005 Len introduced the first open-source preaching resource on the Web, wikiletics.com.

Founder and President of SpiritVenture Ministries (SVM), in 1995 Len launched Sweet's SoulCafe, a spirituality newsletter for postmoderns purchased by Broadman&Holman Publishing. His privately published notebook ChartNotes sold-out even before it was published. Len has served a term on the council of the American Society of Church History, was an associate editor of the Journal of the American Academy of Religion for ten years, and is a member of numerous professional groups. An honors and Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the University of Richmond, he earned his Master of Divinity degree from Colgate Rochester Divinity School and Ph.D. from the University of Rochester. The recent recipient of honorary doctorates from the University of Richmond (Virginia), Baker University (Kansas), Otterbein College (Ohio), Coe College (Iowa), and Lebanon Valley College (Pennsylvania), Len has held distinguished lectureships at various colleges, universities and seminaries, and has presented academic papers before major professional societies. He is a frequent speaker at national and international conferences, state conventions, pastors' schools, retreats.

Len is increasingly being asked to lecture around the world, and has spoken in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Brazil, England, Wales, South Africa, South Korea, Iceland, Scotland, and most recently, China, Indonesia, and Latvia.

### **Publishing Credits:**

#### **Dr. Sweet -**

- *The Seraph Seal*, Thomas Nelson (June 7, 2011).
- *Nudge: Awakening Each Other to the God Who's Already There*, David C. Cook (August 1, 2010).
- *Jesus Manifesto: Restoring the Supremacy and Sovereignty of Jesus Christ*, Thomas Nelson (June 1, 2010).
- *Postmodern and Wesleyan?: Exploring the Boundaries and Possibilities*, Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City (June 1, 2009).
- *The Dawn Mistaken for Dusk: If God So Loved the World, Why Can't We?*, Zondervan (May 11, 2009).
- *So Beautiful: Divine Design for Life and the Church*, David C. Cook (April 1, 2009)
- *AquaChurch 2.0: Piloting Your Church in Today's Fluid Culture*, David C. Cook (September 1, 2008).
- *11: Indispensable Relationships You Can't Be Without*, David C. Cook (April 1, 2008).
- *The Church of the Perfect Storm*, Abingdon Press (March 2008).
- *The Voice from on High: God Announces His Son as Israel's Liberating King*, Thomas Nelson (September 18, 2007).

- *The Gospel According to Starbucks: Living with a Grande Passion*, WaterBrook Press (January 16, 2007).
- *The Three Hardest Words: In the World to Get Right*, WaterBrook Press (March 21, 2006).
- *Out of the Question...Into the Mystery: Getting Lost in the GodLife Relationship*, WaterBrook Press (September 21, 2004).
- *Summoned to Lead*, Zondervan (June 1, 2004).
- *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives*, Zondervan/Youth Specialties (October 7, 2003).
- *Jesus Drives Me Crazy!*, Zondervan (June 1, 2003).
- *Carpe Manana*, Zondervan (February 1, 2003).
- *A Is for Abductive*, Zondervan (January 1, 2003).
- *SoulTsunami*, Zondervan (October 1, 2001).
- *Post-Modern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century Church*, B&H Books (July 15, 2000).
- *Soul Salsa: 17 Surprising Steps for Godly Living in the 21st Century*, Zondervan Publishing House (May 1, 2000).
- *AquaChurch: Essential Leadership Arts for Piloting Your Church in Today's Fluid Culture*, Group Publishing (June 1999).
- *A Cup of Coffee at the Soul Cafe: Finding the Energy of a Deeper Spiritual Life*, Broadman & Holman Publishers (April 1998).
- *11 Genetic Gateways to Spiritual Awakening*, Abingdon Press (February 1998).
- *The Evangelical Tradition in America*, Mercer University Press (June 1, 1997).
- *The Jesus Prescription for a Healthy Life*, Abingdon Press (March 1996).
- *Strong in the Broken Places: A Theological Reverie on the Ministry of George Everett Ross*, Univ of Akron Press (November 1995).
- *Faithquakes*, Abingdon Press (March 1995).
- *Health and Medicine in the Evangelical Tradition: "Not by Might Nor Power"*, Trinity Press International (August 1994).

- *Communication and Change in American Religious History*, Eerdmans Pub Co (December 1993).
- *Quantum Spirituality: A Postmodern Apologetic*, United Theological Seminary (December 1991).
- *The Lion's Pride: America and the Peaceable Community*, Abingdon Press (December 1987)
- *The Minister's Wife: Her Role in Nineteenth-Century American Evangelicalism*, Temple University Press (1983).
- *New Life in the Spirit*, Westminster John Knox Press (January 1, 1982).
- *Black Images of America, 1784-1840*, Norton (1976).

**Thomas Ingram** - 100 Words is Tom Ingram's first book project with many more to come.

### **Future Projects:**

#### **Dr. Sweet**

Currently working on the following books

- 1) I Am a Follower
- 2) A Theology of Football
- 3) Dark, Sacred Night
- 4) Buy This, Birth That
- 5) Giving Blood
- 6) A Jesus Kind of Human
- 7) Viral

#### **Thomas Ingram**

1) *100 Words: The Message Contained Within the 100 Words* (Non-fiction; Christian Living, Theological Student)

Status: This is a work in progress with research nearly complete. Target is 60,000 - 70,000 words.

Synopsis: This follow-up to the initial 100 Words book will take a more comprehensive look at what is revealed by this particular set of words rather than a study of the individual words... a 50,000' view. For example, the word Bible did not make the list. What does this say about post-modern Christian identity? What words on the list are exclusively associated with Christianity and what is the meaning behind the inclusion of these particular words? Are social justice concerns on the rise or does the list reveal a faith pre-occupied with self and individual concerns? This book is like a visit to the doctor for a spiritual health check-up as we put the 100 Words into the centrifuge to uncover their collective message. This check-up will reveal areas where we, as Christians, are doing good as well as potential areas of concern. Knowing these areas of concern will enable us to take action to return ourselves to spiritual health. By looking at the comprehensive list of 100 Words, we learn that all 100 Words point to Jesus.

2) *Become What You Believe - Now That You Know Who You Are, What Do You Do?* (Non-fiction; Christian Living) (Follow-up to the 100 Words books)

Status: This is a work currently in the conceptual development stage. Target is 60,000 - 70,000 words.

Synopsis: As Christians, we have three questions to answer. Jesus asks us the first question; “Who do you say that I am?” If we answer that Jesus is the Son of God we are then faced with a second question; “Then who am I?” The two 100 Words books attempt to answer that question. Once we know who we are we are then faced with a third question; “What do I do?” How do we live out this life as a Christian? Psychologists and sociologists have done a great deal of research into the nature of identity...how it is formed, how it is influenced by culture. But, perhaps the most interesting is the concept of an identity hierarchy... meaning that each of us engage in a variety of roles or identities as we live our day to day lives. For example, an individual may in one day be a daughter, wife, mother, real estate agent, provider, counselor etc. The identity that is primary influences all the other identities. This book will present the argument that our Christian identity should be primary above all others thereby influencing and directing our actions in all areas of our life.

3) *Is Your Big “But” the Problem* (Non-fiction; Christian Living)

Status: This work is conceptual at this point. Target is 60,000 - 70,000 words.

Synopsis: As we engage in our day to day lives we are presented with many opportunities. How many times have you asked someone to do something or been asked to do something and the response was; “I would but...” Our “buts” get in the way. Sometimes our “buts” keep us out of trouble when they define the line between doing something we do not believe in or support. However, many times our “buts” are fueled by our doubts, fears, and insecurities. This situation is not new and the Bible is full of “big but” stories... those who tried to opt out of what God was calling them to do: Moses, Gideon, Noah, etc. For some, their “big but” kept them from God’s purposes while others overcame their “big but.” This book will look at the “big but” stories in the Bible as a way to inspire the reader to get over their own “big but” and pursue God’s purpose for their lives.

## APPENDIX A - The Artifact - The 100 Words That Make Us Christian

### The First Twenty Words

## 1 - HEAR

*Hear* seems an unlikely candidate for the #1 position on our list of 100 Words. Even a cursory glance at the complete list reveals several words that would seem to have greater claim to that position. However, upon further reflection, I suspect the possible reason behind this will become evident.

The Biblical narrative begins in the book of Genesis with the words “*In the beginning*” (Genesis 1:1) and moves quickly through the events of creation as God speaks our world into existence. God looks into the void and speaks light, water, earth, and all living things into existence. Creation *hears* and responds. God then speaks to His human creations and tells them to “*be fruitful and multiply*” (Gen 1:28) with the following words of caution; “*You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die*” (Genesis 2:16-17).

It is not long before another voice is *heard* in the garden. It is a voice that successfully tempts the pinnacle of creation to disregard God’s instructions and follow another voice. This story illuminates a pattern that repeats itself throughout history; God provides, the people disobey and ultimately God’s grace forgives. Our challenge, as humans, has always been and apparently will be to *hear* and respond to the primal and preeminent voice of our creator above all others.

The story of Moses travels this familiar path. In the midst of a self-imposed exile, Moses *hears* God’s voice calling to him from a burning bush. Moses *hears* and, as a result, leads Israel out of captivity and they begin their journey to the Promised Land. God continues to speak with Moses on the journey, helping him lead this rebellious nation in its season of adolescence. Moses continues to *hear* and obey the voice of God until Moses, in a frustrated moment, chooses

to disobey God by striking a rock with his staff to bring forth water rather than speaking to it as God had directed (Num. 20:1-8). As a result, Moses *heard* disappointing news from God; *“Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them”* (Num. 20:12). Moses had *heard* but did not heed and for that, just like in the story Adam and Eve, there were consequences. The Hebrew Bible is filled with similar stories of God speaking or sending prophets to speak for Him as He attempts to direct and inspire the nation of Israel.

In a similar vein, a New Testament story of creation begins the Gospel of Luke when God sends an angel to speak to Mary and Joseph concerning the identity of their soon to be son. They *hear* and successfully enter into God’s eternal drama. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke tell of God speaking a new reality into the world, when at the baptism of Jesus, God announces; *“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased”* (Matthew 3:17). As the Son, Jesus becomes the voice of God, speaking the new Kingdom, the redeemed creation, into existence. God speaks and creation responds. We would be well served to *hear* Jesus’ voice calling to us; *“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life”* (John 5:24). Our immediate and eternal reality hinges on our ability to *hear* and believe.

An old aphorism tells us we have two ears and one mouth so that we will listen more than we talk. While there is some general truth to this, we also have two ears for a much more practical reason. Two ears enable us to perceive the source of what we hear. In our modern culture we are bombarded with a cacophony of voices attempting to tell us who we should be and what we should do. This noise can drown out the voice of God so that we cannot *hear* from our primal and primary source. 2 Timothy 4:3-4 warns us; *“For the time is coming when people*

*will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away into myths.*” Myths are just as enticing today as they were throughout history. The noise of these alternative myths is typically the same as it was in the Garden of Eden; there is something other than God that can fulfill us. Advertisers draw upon this myth every time we are told we need a new car, new clothes, tummy tucks, noninvasive face-lifts or a glance at that web site no one will know about to feel good about ourselves. Long-term exposure to this noise has damaged our ability to *hear* the voice of God. We are a people in need of *hearing* aids. But, our hearing can be restored as we relearn how to recognize the voice of God calling us back to the garden.

As the first word in the 100 Words list, *hear* reminds us to listen; to hear the voice of God who calls out to us from the figurative burning bushes today. In John 10:27-28 Jesus states “*My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish.*” If we will listen, we will *hear* and we will recognize the voice of God that echoes throughout the Bible and speaks to us today. In the book of Revelation, Jesus’ voice rises above the noise of modernity as He says, “*Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches*” (Rev 3:20-22). May we forever *hear* and recognize the voice God above all other voices as it calls to us from beyond eternity.

## 2 - GRACE

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,  
That saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see.*

In 1779, John Newton wrote the now classic song: Amazing Grace. His anthem of human redemption presents an interesting parallel to the manner in which God's grace is revealed in the Bible. In spite of our lostness and our wretchedness, each of us is invited to join in the chorus of our redemption.

The earliest instance of the word grace (Heb: NEj) in the Hebrew Bible occurs in the story of Noah. Apparently God's displeasure with humanity has risen to the point that God regrets ever having created humans. As a result, God plans to wipe them from the face of the earth. However, in the midst of all this wretchedness, God finds a wretch worth saving.

*"But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD"* (Genesis 6:8 KJV). Noah was among the lost, but finds grace as he is seen by the Lord. As a result, Noah and his entire family are saved from destruction and judgment because of the grace Noah found in the eyes of the Lord.

The characters of the Hebrew Bible are typically in a position of not knowing whether grace will be extended. The phrase *"if I have found grace"* occurs repeatedly as a petition from someone of lesser means to one with greater power.

For example, in the book of Exodus, Moses went to the tent of meeting to converse with God. While in the midst of the conversation Moses petitioned God:

*“Now therefore, I pray thee, if I have found grace in thy sight, shew me now thy way, that I may know thee, that I may find grace in thy sight...” Exodus 33:13 KJV*

Moses continues to petition God and gets his answer.

*“For wherein shall it be known here that I and thy people have found grace in thy sight? is it not in that thou goest with us? so shall we be separated, I and thy people, from all the people that are upon the face of the earth. And the LORD said unto Moses, I will do this thing also that thou hast spoken: for thou hast found grace in my sight, and I know thee by name.”*

Exodus 33:16-17 KJV

God responds to Moses and agrees to accompany them on their journey toward the Promised Land. The presence of God or *God with us* is evidence that they have found grace in God’s eyes.

The Gospel of Matthew begins by telling us the genealogy of Jesus and how He came into being...then, Matthew introduces us to Jesus.

*“...and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.”*

Matthew 1:23 KJV

Jesus is *God with us*. Jesus is the answer to the conditional request that arises throughout the Hebrew Bible; *“if I have found grace in your eyes.”* In Jesus, God’s grace eats, sleeps, and walks with His people. Grace has wrapped itself in flesh and bone and moved into the neighborhood.

Gods grace remains something we cannot earn; however it has become something that we can receive. As we accept Jesus Christ, we receive the gift... Emmanuel... *God with us*. *God with us* in the joyful times of our lives. *God with us* in painful times of our lives. *God with us*

throughout eternity. We need no longer wrestle with the statement: “if I have grace favor in your eyes.” Jesus is the answer. Jesus is *Emmanuel*. Jesus is *God with us*.

It seems fitting that we close with the final refrain of the New Testament as recorded in the book of Revelation 22:21 KJV.

*“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.”*

And, Amen.

### 3 - LOVE

I don't think we would be far from the truth if we were to say the most popular theme for books, music, films, art, conversations, texts or status updates is love. If we search for the word "love" on Google, we find almost 3 billion results. Love in film...770 million... Love in music... 2.3 billion. Love in books... 992 million.

Our search for love in life is a bit more difficult and time consuming even though online dating services try to simplify and speed up this quest. Even the terminology we associate with our search for love implies that we aren't necessarily successful in our search, we just *fall in love*. Some fall in and out of love at the drop of a hat, while others never seem to stumble into love. Apparently, love is the result of some kind of cosmic battle between gravity and ourselves.

While love can be difficult to find, we seem to know love when we find it even though defining it proves somewhat more difficult. We love our family, we love our spouse, we love our children, we love our friends but we also love chocolate, all-you-can eat buffets, fast cars, and anything on sale. We love what we do and we love a day off.

In 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 Paul tells us something about love...

*Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

This scripture gives us a good idea of how love should play itself out in the world, but in the end we are hard pressed to define love. One thing we do know: we love...love.

The search for love seems to be wired into our human operating system. In the greatest love story ever told, the Bible, God creates Adam. Adam has dominion over all the things of this world and yet God determines that Adam needs one more thing. Adam needs a companion, someone to love, for it is not good for man to be alone. So, out of God's love for Adam, Eve is created from Adam's flesh.

In the grand design of life, every infant is created in love. These objects of affection emerge from the womb grasping and flailing about as they search for the alleviation of their aloneness... someone to love... someone who loves them. We begin our search for love early. After we reach maturity, we, like Adam, need to find a companion.

We have learned about love from those around us. They have given us a roadmap but have not clearly marked the destination. Occasionally, this roadmap takes us off on a wild goose chase to a place apparently having nothing to do with love. This search takes us down many roads. Some roads turn out to be dead ends. Some roads seem promising but prove only to have been a detour. Some roads lead us in the right direction and help us to see love a little clearer but in the end stop short of our destination.

This search is not for the faint of heart and many grow weary of the search altogether... abandoning the quest for love. Some settle for something else and call it love. Others attempt to redirect the quest toward a less elusive endeavor in hopes that success or power or prestige will quench the fire, but in the end the embers smolder, for we are created out of and designed for love. Love is in the desire that brought us into existence. It is in the breath that first breathed life into Adam and it is in the newborn infant's first breath of life.

In the New Testament, the Gospels of Matthew and Mark tell of a confrontation between the Pharisees and Jesus. In an attempt to get Jesus to say something incriminating, they ask Jesus which of God's commandments is the most important. Rather than engage in a religious debate, Jesus sums up the law in a manner that left them apparently without rebuttal.

*Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence.' This is the most important, the first on any list. But there is a second to set alongside it: 'Love others as well as you love yourself.' These two commands are pegs; everything in God's Law and the Prophets hangs from them."* Matthew 22:37-40 The Message

So, if everything in the Law and the Prophets gravitates toward love, it surely seems like we need a good definition, or at least a good example of love. The Gospel of John gives us our working model for love.

*"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."* John 15: 9-13 NIV

We are lovable because God's love was breathed into us in creation. And, we are lovable because we were/are redeemed in love on the cross of Calvary. We are loving because we have no other defensible response to the boundless love poured out on us from eternity.

We are to love as Jesus loves... as the Father loves Him. Jesus is the longitude and latitude of our search for love. No matter our wrong turns or missed turns or the quantity of our re-turns,

our spiritual GPS will always recalculate our route to the foot of the cross. It is only when we lay down our lives at the foot of the cross that we will have truly reached our destination.

## 4 - JESUS

The Bible opens with the story of creation.

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Genesis 1:1*

The Gospel of John in the New Testament opens with a pre-creation story that serves as our introduction to Jesus.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (John 1:1-5).*

In the beginning, Jesus was the Word of God, was with God and was God. All things came and come into being through Him. Jesus is the Word that *was and is and is to come* (Rev 4:8). Jesus is the Word that dwells among us, in us and binds us together. Jesus is the physical manifestation of the Word... the sum of our 100 Words...the summation of all in the grand equation of life. All of our 100 Words point to that which Jesus is...

### **Jesus is...**

Jesus is the voice we **hear** calling us into fellowship.

Jesus is the revelation of the **grace** of God.

Jesus is the **love** of God.

Jesus is the **blessing** of God for all humanity.

Jesus is the **mystery** of God in human form.

Jesus is the reason for our **faith**.

Jesus is our **shalom**.

Jesus is the enabler of our **fellowship** with God.

Jesus is always **scandalous** to the world.

Jesus is a member of the **trinity**.

Jesus is the living water that keeps us from being **thirsty**.

Jesus is the one who restores our **relationship** with God.

Jesus is the reason we are **redeemed**.

Jesus is the **Christ**.

Jesus is calling us to an **irreligious** faith.

Jesus is the embodiment of **forgiveness**.

Jesus is the **reconciliation** of humanity with God.

Jesus is the living **truth** of God.

Jesus is our **companion** in the struggle of life.

Jesus is the **resurrection**.

Jesus is inviting us to join Him in the **dance** of life.

Jesus is our salvation found at the foot of the **cross**.

Jesus is the source of our **atonement**.

Jesus is the one who makes all things **possible**.

Jesus is the **Messiah**.

Jesus is first **fruit** of the harvest.

Jesus is **hospitable** to the outcasts.

Jesus is the **meal** served at the Lords supper.

Jesus is the one who **inhabits** our worship.

Jesus is asking us to follow Him with **humility**.

Jesus is the one who calls us to be **repentant**.

Jesus is calling us to live and serve one another in **community**.

Jesus is the healing antidote to the **apathetic**.

Jesus is the proclamation of **justice** for humanity.

Jesus is the bridegroom in the **great romance** with His church.

Jesus is the originator of **inclusive**.

Jesus is God in **human** form.

Jesus is the redemption of the **garden**.

Jesus is the **restoration**.

Jesus is our **joy**.

Jesus is the **incarnation**.

Jesus is calling us to be **servants**.

Jesus is the **eternal** Word of God.

Jesus is **emptied** on our behalf.

Jesus is the one in whom we **trust**.

Jesus is the answer to our **prayer**.

Jesus is calling us to be **disciples**.

Jesus is the key to **real** life.

Jesus is the source of our **generosity**.

Jesus is **transparent**. The Father is seen in Him.

Jesus is calling us to a radical **transformation**.

Jesus is the reason to **surrender** our will.

Jesus is **steadfast** in His love.

Jesus is hope in the life of the **sojourner**.

Jesus is calling us to be the **salt** of the earth.

Jesus is the inspiration to the **saints**.

Jesus is calling us to **repent**.

Jesus is **generational**... a living connecting thread.

Jesus is known to those who are **called**.

Jesus is the first **and** the last...the beginning **and** the end.

Jesus is comfortable making us **uncomfortable**.

Jesus is the lamb of **sacrifice**.

Jesus is the reason for our **ekklesia**.

Jesus is calling us to **kindness**.

Jesus is **seeking** us.

Jesus is the source of our **purity**.

Jesus is the **new** wine poured out for humanity.

Jesus is full of **mercy**.

Jesus is the voice calling us to **listen**.

Jesus is **life** everlasting.

Jesus is the **gospel**.

Jesus is the source of our **faith, hope and love**.

Jesus is the physical **embodiment** of our redemption.

Jesus is the bread and wine; the body and blood of **communion**.

Jesus is the one who **calls** us to become disciples.

Jesus is the sacrificial **blood** of the new covenant.

Jesus is the **welcome** at the door of eternity.

Jesus is the one in whom we are **justified**.

Jesus is calling us to **self-sacrifice**.

Jesus is the perfect one in whom reside the **imperfect**.

Jesus is the **baptism** of redemption.

Jesus is our companion in the **journey** of life.

Jesus is hope to the **cast off**.

Jesus is the eternal **harmony** in the song of life.

Jesus is the **hope** of our salvation.

Jesus is the **peace** that passes understanding.

Jesus is the reason that we **pray**.

Jesus is what causes us to be **fruitful**.

Jesus is the reason we can say **no**.

Jesus is one in **three** in one.

Jesus is calling us to be a **peculiar** people.

Jesus is life most **full**.

Jesus is hope to the **sinner**.

Jesus is the **Word**.

Jesus is God's **glory** incarnate.

Jesus is the answer to the **metaphysical** questions of existence.

Jesus is our inspiration to **create**.

Jesus is our hope **until** the end of time.

Jesus is preparing to return **suddenly**.

**Jesus is...**

## 5 - BLESS

In modern church culture we are not only dressed for success, we are seemingly blessed by success. We say we are blessed when we get a job or a promotion. We say we are blessed when we have good health or are cured from some malady. TV preachers encourage the vulnerable to plant a financial seed in order that they might receive a financial blessing... from God. We even go so far as to say we are blessed when our team wins a football game or we get a good parking spot close to the door of the movie theater. Being blessed has come to mean success, health, money, friends, new car, or new clothes. Blessing is apparently evidenced in abundance and good fortune. But is this truly what it means to be blessed?

The Gospel of John tells us of an encounter between Jesus and a Samaritan woman. Jesus was passing through Samaria while on the road to Galilee from Judea. He stopped to rest and sat by Jacob's well while His disciples went to get food. While Jesus was resting, a Samaritan woman came to draw water from the well and Jesus asked her for a drink. Rather than just give Jesus a drink, the woman entered into the following exchange.

*The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a*

*spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” John 4:9-15*

The symbolism within the story enriches its meaning in many ways. Several items are of interest to us in our study of the word bless. First, Jesus is sitting beside Jacob’s well. Jacob figures prominently in Hebrew history. Not only did God change Jacob’s name to Israel, but Jacob was also the father of the twelve men who later led the twelve tribes of Israel. In addition, a well is the source of life in the desert... without a source of water, there is no life. Jesus sitting by the source of life in the desert that bears Jacob’s name is no coincidence in the story.

Jesus suggests that he is the source of living water, and the woman, who seems to think He is talking about liquid water, questions Jesus whether He is greater than Jacob, the patriarch of the nation of Israel who provided this well. Jesus tells her that a drink of this well water (the water of the past, the Jacob water) will not satisfy her. When she drinks of this water, she will need to return again and again to the well to quench her thirst. Jesus then tells her that He is the source of living water and that whoever drinks of this living water will never thirst again. So, you may be asking how this story relates to our study of the word bless.

The nation of Israel’s idea of blessing was not that different from our concept of blessing. Their general opinion was “blessed are they that are rich, and great, and honorable in the world; that spend their days in mirth, and their years in pleasure; that eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and carry all before them with a high hand.”<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> Matthew Henry. *Commentary of the Whole Bible*. (Grands Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), 1219.

If we, like them, pursue this cultural kind of blessing it will always leave us lacking and unfulfilled. We will always be in pursuit of another blessing as if our bucket was full of holes. To assuage this incessant thirst, we will need to return to the well in search of a new blessing.

However, in Matthew 5, Jesus empties the bucket containing the cultural meaning of blessing of its contents.

*When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.*

*Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:*

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

*“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

*“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

*“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

*“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*

*“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

*“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

*“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.*

*Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”* Matthew 5:1-12

“Now it is the wretched who are first in line for God's abundant blessings, reflecting the overall reversal brought about by God's liberation of the world.”<sup>246</sup> This new happiness “reverses all human values; happiness is no longer attached to wealth, to having enough, to good reputation, power, possessions of the goods of this world.”<sup>247</sup>

We read those words and it is easy to view them as being directed toward someone else, someone in the midst of a difficult time in their lives. It is easy to view them from a distant and detached geography and assume a stance that allows for *their* blessing in *their* distress. We are comfortably blessed in our abundance and they are also blessed in their infirmities... bless their hearts.

However, Jesus was not providing an out or alternative for the less fortunate, Jesus was redefining and revolutionizing what it means to be blessed. What we consider blessed and what Jesus considers blessed are at odds.

So, how are those of us who are firmly planted in the rich soil of abundance able to experience blessing? Must we give away our resources and seek to live a life of misery? Not necessarily; however, we are called to enter into the misery and in that misery we find ourselves in the midst (or heavenly mist) of God's blessing.

It is when we walk alongside the downtrodden and diseased that we partake in the blessing of God. It is when we comfort those who mourn that we experience the blessings of God. It is when we stand beside the source of the living water that we are splattered with the blessing of God.

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<sup>246</sup> Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, ed., *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 734.

<sup>247</sup> Ceslas Spicq. *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*. Edited by James D. Ernest. 3 vols. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 438.

We show mercy and receive God's mercy in return. We heal a relationship and are restored to the family of God. We stand beside the marginalized and ridiculed and we see them in the light of heaven. When we do this in spite of the consequences, when we stand on the side of truth, we stand in good company. We stand alongside those throughout history who were equally blessed... blessed to be in the presence of God.

## 6 - MYSTERY

We all love a good mystery. Our minds race as we try to think past the unfolding events of the story... trying to guess or predict the outcome. Every twist and turn in the plot heightens our anxiety and adds to the suspense. Part of what enables us to enjoy a good whodunit is that we know at some point the tension will resolve, the unknown will be revealed. But, what if the mystery did not end? What if the story was ongoing? What if we were living in the midst of the mystery, unaware of the arrival time or the nature of the calamities that might befall us? Welcome to the mystery that inhabits our day-to-day lives.

God has been and always will be a mystery to us. They say that the Lord works in mysterious ways. At times God feels so close that we could almost touch Him and at other times so far away. At times the presence of God shines brightly on our surroundings and then other times our paths are obscured by the anguish of a dark, dark night. We rejoice when we see our prayer request fulfilled and we despair when our prayer remains seemingly unanswered. Our God is indeed a mystery. This is not a new insight.

*The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the revealed things belong to us and to our children forever, to observe all the words of this law. Deuteronomy 29:29*

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, God was revealed in the laws, in the prophetic utterances, and in the observances that populated the stories passed from one generation to the next. God was revealed in these things and yet God remained a mystery because ultimately... *the secret things belong to the Lord.*

However, our story takes an unexpected turn in the New Testament. The books of Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell of a particular encounter between Jesus and his disciples. Jesus was known to speak in parables and apparently the disciples were curious as to why. So, they came to him and asked him directly.

*And the disciples came, and said unto him, "Why speakest thou unto them in parables?" He answered and said unto them, "Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given."* Matthew 13:10-11 KJV

What is it that distinguishes the disciples from the rest of the crowd? Why are they allowed to know the mysteries? Perhaps it hinges on their relationship with Jesus. Apparently those who are in relationship with Jesus come to know not only the meaning of the parables but the *mysteries of the kingdom of heaven*. The hidden mysteries are revealed in relationship with Jesus. To those not in relationship with Jesus, the parables and the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven remain concealed.

Later, in Colossians, we uncover another clue to aid in our unraveling of the mystery. Paul states:

*"I want you woven into a tapestry of love, in touch with everything there is to know of God. Then you will have minds confident and at rest, focused on Christ, God's great mystery. All the richest treasures of wisdom and knowledge are embedded in that mystery and nowhere else. And we've been shown the mystery!"* Colossians 2:1-4 The Message

In this passage, Jesus is revealed as the living incarnation of God's great mystery...*the richest treasures of wisdom and knowledge that exist nowhere else*. However, Jesus is not some historic character whose remains and remnants are there for us to poke, prod and dissect in a

forensic analysis like they do in the crime dramas. Jesus is the eternal and living expression of the mystery of God.

It is not so much that the mystery *was* revealed in Jesus as it is that the mystery *is* revealed in Jesus. We have been shown and are being shown the mysteries of God through the living Christ. It is in Him and in relationship with Him that the mysteries are being revealed and are revealing the nature of God to us.

As we become disciples of Jesus, we become those who know the mystery. And in knowing the mystery (in knowing Jesus) we enter into a relationship, a dialog with that mystery. It is not that we now have complete understanding, it is that we are in the process of understanding through a relationship with the mystery of God, with the *wisdom and knowledge that exist nowhere else... within Jesus.*

This mystery is beside us, within us, and in front of us. It resonates within each and every cell of our bodies. As we become part of the body of Christ, we become partakers of and take up residence within the mystery.

So, the mystery is revealed,

we live in the mystery,

and in the living in the mystery,

the mystery is revealed further

enabling us to live deeper in the mystery

thereby leading to more revealing etc, etc, etc.

It reminds me a bit of the M.C. Escher drawing in which the stairs are never ending, always moving up. While the drawing is an optical illusion, this is the reality of our mystery.

Ours is not a mystery that will be resolved at the end of the television program or at the end of the novel. Ours is a mystery that challenges us to accept the mystery, to live in the mystery, to embrace the mystery and to celebrate the mystery.

*“For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”* 1 Corinthians 13:12 The Message

We have seen and know the mystery in part as if gazing at a steam covered bathroom mirror. We see a shape and know something is there but we cannot quite make out the details. However, at the end of time, we will know, just as we have been fully known... known in our relationship with the mystery...in our relationship Jesus Christ.

Embrace Jesus and embrace the mystery.

## 7 - FAITH

Faith is a key word to the understanding of what it means to be a Christian...so much so that we at times even refer to it as the Christian *faith*. We accept what we believe in faith, we walk in faith, and we live by faith.

Faith inspires us. Faith encourages us. Faith renews us.

We have faith. We build on our faith. We trust in our faith.

Perhaps the most disconcerting news concerning faith comes to us in Hebrews 11:6 which tells us “*without faith it is impossible to please God.*” So, if faith is apparently so elemental and essential in the life of a Christian, what is faith?

The book of Hebrews gives us a definition of faith.

*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval.* Hebrews 11:1-2

The Message uses slightly different language.

*The fundamental fact of existence is that this trust in God, this faith, is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It's our handle on what we can't see. The act of faith is what distinguished our ancestors, set them above the crowd.* Hebrews 11:1-2 The Message

Throughout the Bible, God's people were called to trust...to have faith that God would be with them no matter the circumstances and no matter the outcome. It is their stories that inform and inspire the faith we are called to live. Through the exercising of their faith they received God's approval. I use the term exercising intentionally, because faith does seem to grow when

tested... when exercised. If by faith our ancestors in the faith were both approved and distinguished, how did faith manifest itself in their lives?

Chapter 11 of the book of Hebrews reminds us of those who walked in faith before us... reminds us of the stories of our faith-full ancestors. Faith provided them with the conviction:

...to walk away from and to walk toward

...to be comforted in their uncomfortableness

...to build a life boat on the news of a storm

...to believe that a nation can be birthed from tired loins

...to leave their homes in search of a promised land

...to walk through the deep waters on dry land

...and more

The author of Hebrews continues...

*"I could go on and on, but I've run out of time. There are so many more— Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, the prophets.... Through acts of faith, they toppled kingdoms, made justice work, took the promises for themselves. They were protected from lions, fires, and sword thrusts, turned disadvantage to advantage, won battles, routed alien armies. Women received their loved ones back from the dead. There were those who, under torture, refused to give in and go free, preferring something better: resurrection. Others braved abuse and whips, and, yes, chains and dungeons. We have stories of those who were stoned, sawed in two, murdered in cold blood; stories of vagrants wandering the earth in animal skins, homeless,*

*friendless, powerless—the world didn't deserve them!—making their way as best they could on the cruel edges of the world.*

*Not one of these people, even though their lives of faith were exemplary, got their hands on what was promised. God had a better plan for us: that their faith and our faith would come together to make one completed whole, their lives of faith not complete apart from ours.”*

Hebrews 11:32-40 The Message

In the reading of this, I am reminded of Monarch butterflies. Monarchs are migrational. They journey back and forth between their northern home and their southern home. An interesting aspect of this migration is that their journey is a multi-generational journey... those who start the journey do not necessarily finish it. Multiple generations come and go in midst of the journey. Their lives are seemingly for the journey, not for the destination.

Are we willing to set our destination point beyond the horizon of our experience? Are we willing to work toward that which we will likely never attain? Are we willing to be part of that generation that is essential for the journey but never sets foot on the promised land?

Faith is more than having faith for a new job, a new car, a meaningful relationship or even a healing. Faith is for the journey. Faith is what moves us toward God's vision of the/our future. Faith enables us to hear and follow His voice calling us into His future. It enables us to remain steadfast on the journey in spite of the consequences or the outcome.

What will be our great stories of faith on our journey?

## 8 - SHALOM

The most common translation for shalom is the word *peace*. The Oxford dictionary defines peace as the “freedom from disturbance; quiet and tranquility.” A literal interpretation of the word peace could lead us to believe that inanimate objects such as a rock would have peace. Shalom, however, speaks to something much deeper than a state of quiet and tranquility. Shalom refers to a “spiritual peace through restored relations of harmony with God.”<sup>248</sup> It has “many dimensions of meaning: wholeness, completeness, well-being, peace, justice, salvation, and even prosperity.”<sup>249</sup> Shalom is anything but a *freedom from disturbance*. Shalom comes into existence through disturbance.

The book of Genesis tells the story of creation. In the story, God created the heavens and the earth, plants animals and humankind. Each step along the way God looked at His creation and said that it was good. If ever there was a place in which we could say shalom existed, this was it. Unfortunately, shalom was disrupted when man was tempted to question God. As a result, the shalom that existed in the garden was destroyed and humankind was banished from the garden.

However, God is not one to give up easily on His creation. The Bible tells of God’s people repeatedly wandering away from God and God bringing them back into relationship... back into shalom. This back and forth process continued until the arrival of Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God. Through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, shalom is being restored. Humanity now had the opportunity for shalom once again, for “spiritual peace through restored relations with God.”<sup>250</sup> However, this shalom is not a passive existence. Shalom is a state in which we

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<sup>248</sup> R.K. Harrison and Howard F. Vos, *New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, Rev&Upd ed. (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1988), 980.

<sup>249</sup> Willard M. Swartley, "The Relation of Justice/Righteousness to Shalom/Eirēnē," *Ex auditu* 22, (2006): 29.

<sup>250</sup> Harrison & Vos, *New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, 980.

can now exist in our relationship with God, but it is also a calling to restore. Shalom is both a state of being and a calling. It requires our active participation in the restoration of shalom for others. Shalom requires our *disturbance* of the status quo.

If we accept this idea that our calling is to live in a state of the restoration of shalom for God's kingdom, we need to include all of God's creation. We must seek to live in shalom with God's earth through efforts to restore and sustain it. We must treat the earth with the respect that is due to all of the good works of God. Just as we celebrate and enjoy its good fruits, we must endeavor to ensure that the earth will continue to feed those generations that follow us.

We have shalom with God through Jesus. We are called to shalom with others and with the earth. Walter Brueggemann states "the origin and the destiny of God's people is to be on the road of shalom, which is to live out of joyous memories and toward greater anticipations."<sup>251</sup>

Shalom is destroyed in division and strife

but is found in forgiveness.

Shalom is sacrificed in selfishness

but is generated in generosity.

Shalom is ignored in ignorance

but is restored in the redeemer.

Shalom is served in service to others.

Shalom is embraced around the common table of fellowship.

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<sup>251</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision: Biblical Reflections on Shalom (Shalom Resource)*, 2 ed. (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1982), 16.

Shalom is shared in seeking justice for the less fortunate.

We live out of shalom and we live towards shalom. We live in reconciliation and are drawn toward bringing about the reconciliation of others with not only God but with ourselves. Shalom places us and yet calls us toward the future.

## 9 - FELLOWSHIP

In Genesis 2:18 God said, *“It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.”* Being in isolation is not good. Being in fellowship is good.

As Jesus began his ministry, one of the first things he did was to select a group of twelve disciples. Jesus called them into fellowship, for he knew that *“it is not good that the man should be alone.”* Jesus called them not only into fellowship with him, but into fellowship with each other... into fellowship with the divine but also into fellowship with all the human drama of fellowship.

These disciples watched and learned from Jesus in fellowship. But they also watched and learned from each other in fellowship. They watched and learned as Jesus taught, healed, walked, slept, prayed and ate. They came to know the one they believed to be the Messiah. They also, no doubt, discussed amongst themselves the meaning of the mystery they found themselves living in. They must have questioned and argued and encouraged and failed together in fellowship. When Judas realized the consequences of his betrayal of Jesus, he fled the fellowship to find his relief alone, hanging from a tree... a sort of self-inflicted eternal time-out.

Even after the crucifixion, the disciples sought safety and solace in their fellowship. But, Jesus did not leave the disciples alone very long feeling out of fellowship with Him. He visited them on several occasions and paid special attention to restore two of the disciples. Thomas was not present at the first visitation and had his doubts when the others told him of seeing Jesus. He said that he would not believe *“Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”* (John 20:25). Jesus must have wanted to bring Thomas into fellowship with the other believing disciples because 8 days later Jesus appeared again to the group and addressed Thomas directly: *“Put your finger here*

*and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe”* (John 20:27).

A few days later, Jesus appeared to Peter, Thomas, Nathaniel, James and John. However, Jesus seemed to single out Peter for one last restoration to fellowship. When Jesus was arrested, Peter had denied that he even knew Jesus to save his own skin just as Jesus told Peter he would. After doing this, scripture tells us that Peter broke down and wept. What must this have felt like... to betray the one you had just said you would die for? No doubt, Peter carried this betrayal deep within his heart. Things like this can easily keep someone out of fellowship. But Jesus had other plans for his friend.

*When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.”* John 21:15-17

With each question, Jesus erased one of Peter’s denials and brought him back into fellowship. But each step back was accompanied with a command to feed and care for Jesus’ sheep. On a local scale, Jesus sheep could be considered to be the disciples or even His followers, however on a more global scale they could be considered all of mankind.

Jesus met Peter and Thomas at their points of need to restore them into fellowship. Jesus came to earth to meet us at our point of need to restore us into fellowship with God. In restoring us to God, Jesus also brings us into fellowship with one another. Just as the disciples had to wrestle to understand Jesus, they also had to wrestle to understand each other. However, they learned to stick together... to remain in fellowship. At times they no doubt grew weary of their fellowship. But in other times their fellowship gave them the strength to endure. They are the model for our fellowship for we know that *“it is not good that the man should be alone.”*

## 10 - SCANDALOUS

Scandals seem to populate the news consistently these days. We hear of profitable business schemes that turn out to be illegal and people with power and influence engaging in destructive behavior that disrupts their families, their marketability or their elect ability. Eventually we seem to get numb to the selfish ways in which some of us tend to self-destruct. Being scandalous can also be fashionable if you are a celebrity and it involves individual style or lack thereof on television or in public eye.

But, what about a different kind of scandalous... a scandalousness that exists to serve others or to push wrongs into the light of day... or scandals so great that they would send the cultural scandal mavens scurrying for shelter. We don't hear so much about that kind of scandal these days, especially not in church even though the Christian faith was born in scandal.

- Jesus' earthly family tree was populated with prostitutes, adulterers, murderers, and Gentiles.
- He was conceived out of wedlock to an unmarried couple.
- He was born on the wrong side of the tracks.
- He claimed to be the Son of God.
- He dined with outcasts.
- He fellowshiped with those living on the fringes of society.
- He healed lepers with a touch and blindness with dirt and spit.
- He challenged the religious authorities at every turn.
- He turned the social order upside-down.
- He claimed to have the power to call down angels to come to his defense and rescue... but in the end he accepted his fate and died a merciless death.

- He was buried and then rose from the dead three days later... just as he had predicted

The life of Jesus was scandalous in every way by most every cultural standard and yet today we lift him up as the Son of God while doing our best to avoid scandal.

As followers of Jesus, one would think we would endeavor to imitate the life of Jesus in all its scandalousness. However, typically the most scandalous thing a church can be caught doing is dumping unread prayer requests in the trash or perhaps selling healing cloths or trinkets. Has the church, and by that I mean the followers of Jesus, turned away from the call to scandal in exchange for a life of comfort and acceptability?

Is our life or our church scandalous?

- We have no control over our family tree, but do we accept the out-laws along with the in-laws in our families?
- Do we embrace and offer care to those who were conceived or are pregnant out of wedlock or do we stand and judge condescendingly from afar?
- Are we gracious and welcoming to those whose lot in life has landed them on the wrong side of the tracks or do we remain safe and secure in our gated communities?
- Do we openly claim to be not only a child of God but a follower of Jesus Christ or do we expose our Christian identity only in the presence of other Christians?
- Do we open our pantries and engage in table fellowship with those less fortunate or do we store away our resources with a me-first attitude?
- Do we engage and have relationships with those living on the fringe of society or do we just walk by with headphones on hoping not to make eye contact?
- Are we willing to get our hands dirty in the caring for those we would rather not touch or be around?

- Do we challenge the cultural and religious status quos or do we embrace them for the safety in compliance?
- Are we willing to engage our culture for change rather than retreat to our sanctuaries for safety?

Are we willing to embrace and live out the scandalous lifestyle of Jesus? Are we scandalous followers of Jesus or is the fact that we call ourselves followers of Jesus...scandalous?

## 11 - TRINITY

Trinity is not a word that appears in the Bible and yet it is essential to our understanding of what it means to be a Christian. While the actual term is not used, the idea or concept of the Trinity is proposed.

*“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”* Matthew 28:19

*“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.”* 2 Corinthians 13:13

While these scriptures define the identity of those within the Trinity as we have come to understand it, the establishment of the doctrine of the Trinity was not without controversy in the early church. In 325 CE, the Emperor Constantine ordered all the Christian bishops to Nicea to work out “what one must believe in order to be considered authentically Christian.”<sup>252</sup> “Three hundred and eighteen bishops were present at the opening ceremonies.”<sup>253</sup> At the center of the controversy was the understanding of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Did one pre-date the others? Did the Father suffer on the cross? At one point, “Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia stood before the council and read a clear and blatant denial of the deity of the Son of God, emphasizing that he is a creature and not equal with the Father in any sense.”<sup>254</sup> Before Eusebius could read through his statement, “some of the bishops were holding their hands over their ears and shouting for someone to stop the blasphemies.”<sup>255</sup> Apparently a riot ensued which had to be ended by command of Emperor Constantine. It sounds like the stuff television executives would

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<sup>252</sup> Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform*, 149.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

pay dearly to get their hands on. “The dispute was settled (for the time being) with the creation of the Nicene Creed. The critical word in the creed was the word homoousios in the phrase “of one substance (homoousios) with the Father” affirming that the Father and Son are homoousios... they share the same essential attributes of deity. If the Father is eternal, so is the Son. If the Son is Omnipotent, so is the Father”.<sup>256</sup>

But this did not settle the issue. A second ecumenical council was called in 381CE that did their best to put an end to this controversy surrounding the understanding of the Trinity. Their challenge was to “explain the Trinity in a way the clearly distinguished it from [the] heresies and protected the mystery at its heart without leaving it as a sheer contradiction.”<sup>257</sup> “The Council of Constantinople reaffirmed the doctrine of Nicea regarding the divinity of the Son, and added that the same ought to be said about the Holy Spirit.”<sup>258</sup> And, so it was.

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father (and the Son). With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified.*

However, the doctrine of the Trinity remains one of the great paradoxes. How does one explain the unexplainable? How do we clear up that which shall always remain beyond our understanding... to explain it without removing its essence... its mystery... the paradox?

In Sunday schools across the country we attempt to explain the Trinity through a water analogy. It goes something like this: just as water has three aspects (liquid, steam, ice) so does the Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit). What we don't typically know is that analogy has its roots in the theology of Basil the Great from the mid fourth century. Basil's thinking stated that “the

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>258</sup> Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity, Volume 1: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation (Story of Christianity)*, 188.

rays of the sun are as old as the sun itself. There never was a time when the sun existed without its rays (radiance). Yet the sun generates (begets) its radiance. So the Father eternally generates the Son of God, and the Son of God is eternally begotten of the Father.”<sup>259</sup>

Some say that belief in the Trinity makes Christians polytheists... worshipers of more than one God. But, as Christians, we believe that God, as expressed in the Trinity, is one God. The Trinity is 3 in 1. It is 1 in 3. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are distinct and yet the same. They are separate and yet united. It is a paradox. It is not the only paradox in Christianity.

Paul understood a paradox of living the Christian life that hits a little closer to home for most of us and wrote about it in Romans 7:15. *“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”* Paul continues discussing his dilemma and then settles it in the final verse. *“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin”* (Romans 7:25).

Our minds are willing but our flesh is weak. Our belief is strong but our behavior is questionable. Our faith is rooted in paradox, which helps us accept the fact that we, like Paul, typically fall so very short of the ideals of our faith.

Christianity is birthed in paradox. It exists in paradox. It lives and breathes paradox. At the heart of our faith is the Trinity. The thought of it inspires as well as confuses. Fortunately we have a savior, Jesus, who was both fully human and fully God and fully aware of our circumstances.

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<sup>259</sup> Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 182.

## 12 - THIRSTY

Most of us reading this book do not know what it means to be truly thirsty. We do not know what it means to have to ration our water; to worry that there will not be enough to go around. We do not need to be concerned that the water we drink might be contaminated or make us sick. We are not living day to day on the verge of dehydration. We do not walk several miles each day with a bucket on our head to retrieve water. We get up and walk to the closest sink and pour ourselves a nice, clean drink of water whenever we want. We even go to the grocery store and buy several kinds of vanity water... imported water... flavored water... carbonated water. It is easy for us to take water for granted. This is not the case in much of the world and it was not the case in ancient Israel.

In the desert, water is a valuable commodity. There is no life without water. As such, the Bible contains various stories of water... of water covering the earth, of water turning to blood, and of water drowning the Egyptian army after the nation of Israel flees from captivity.

Shortly after the newly emancipated Israel leaves Pharaoh's army resting at the bottom of the Red Sea, they travel for three days without finding water. When they did find water it was bitter. Moses then "*cried out to the Lord; and the Lord showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet*" (Exodus 15:25). Their need for water was temporarily fulfilled, but as Israel journeyed toward the Promised Land, water was an enduring quest.

The book of Numbers tells of how the people of Israel were complaining due to their lack of water. God spoke with Moses and told him to speak to a particular rock and bring forth water.

However, Moses was frustrated with his people and in anger he struck the rock with his staff instead, bringing forth water. This had dire consequences for Moses.

*But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them." Numbers 20:12*

John 4 tells of another water story. Jesus is resting by a well in Samaria. A Samaritan woman comes to the well and Jesus makes a simple request of her for a drink of water. She responds by asking why Jesus (being a Jew) was asking a Samaritan woman for a drink. Suffice it to say that the Jews and the Samaritans had their differences. Jesus responds as Jesus does.

*Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." John 4:10*

The woman, still thinking that Jesus is talking about the wet kind of water responds in a rather mocking fashion by pointing out that Jesus has no bucket to draw this water and the fact that the well is deep. Jesus then responds again...as Jesus does.

*Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." John 4:13-14*

Eventually the woman figures out that Jesus is not talking about the kind of water she came to the well in search of. Instead, she has come face to face with Jesus the Messiah. She got splashed with a little living water that day.

In our modern culture we have access to clean water 24/7 and it is easy to take water for granted. Our thirst for water can be easily quenched. Typically we don't think much about water and likely get a little irritated when it is not handy.

However, let us never lose our passion for the eternal fountain of living water or take our access to it for granted. Let us all gather around Jesus and find our thirst for truth and life quenched at this *spring of water gushing up to eternal life*.

## 13 - RELATIONSHIP

Social scientists are coming to believe that our identities are “actively composed in relationship to others.”<sup>260</sup> This implies that our concept of who we are is constructed over time through interactions. We come to know who we are in relationship with others.

Some of our identities are defined through fixed relationships: mother, father, son, daughter, sister, and brother. There are others that are expressed in relational action: caretaker, nurturer, provider, teacher, helper, and encourager. Some are learned through an educational relationship: surgeon, scientist, lawyer, and architect. While others are uncovered in relationship: gifted, insightful, and thoughtful. And some identities are thrust upon us through relationships: child abuse victim, accident victim, divorced, widowed. But, in any event, we become who we are through relationship... relationships that either build us up or tear us down.

So, if we construct our identity in relationship, which ones have influence? What relationships do we give permission to build the foundation of our identity? Initially in life, the circle of influencers is pretty small. It starts with our parents and then expands to include our extended family. As we get older, that circle of influence continues to grow to include friends and neighbors, classmates, co-workers, bosses, and acquaintances. And, we would be remiss if we failed to acknowledge the influence of the stream of electronic images and messages we consume each day through the media.

However, with this ever-expanding catalog of relationships, each relationship has varying degrees of influence since we do not spend the same amount of time or place the same value on each of them. It is understood that “people seek ways to establish and maintain social situations

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<sup>260</sup> James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium, *The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1999), 124.

and relationships in which their identities are verified.”<sup>261</sup> In other words, we seek out those to spend time with who confirm who we think we are. If we think that we are intelligent, we would tend to seek out relationships with those who confirm this identity. Or if we feel that we are a loser, we would want to spend our time with those who confirm our suspicions.

The flip side of this coin is that we tend to avoid or abandon those relationships that do not confirm this self image. If we think that we are intelligent and no one around us agrees, we try to find someone who thinks we are intelligent. Or if we feel that we are a loser and those around us see unlimited potential for goodness in us, we might seek out relationships that confirm for us that we are losers.

We can also take on identities that are encouraged or abandon identities that are not encouraged in our relationships. For example, if you show an interest in learning to play a musical instrument, with the encouragement a good teacher and those around you, you could become a musician. But, if those around you did not encourage you to pursue this path or ran from the room screaming each time you attempted to play an instrument, you would likely abandon this endeavor.

So, if our identity is formed in relationship, what relationship should be the primary informer of who we are? The Bible is a story of the relationship between God and His creation. It is a love letter from God to His people telling them not only who He is but who they are as well... telling them of their relationship to Him.

In Genesis 1:26 NRSV God says “*Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.*” A couple of elements here are key to understanding relationship. First God said “*us*”.

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<sup>261</sup> Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets, *Identity Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2009), 59.

There is more than one to “*us*”... in this case a “3”... Father, Son and Holy Spirit existing in relationship to one another. Secondly, God said that they would make mankind in “*our likeness*”. It is not too difficult to extrapolate that an aspect of this likeness can be taken to mean in “relationship.” God exists in relationship... within the Trinity...Father, Son and Holy Spirit...a holy relationship. We are to be in relationship with God and others as God is in relationship.

God’s relationship with humanity has always been messy. The Bible tells of the many failings of humanity but also tells of the enduring relationship between God and His creation. Even after all our conscious or unconscious attempts to destroy our relationship with God, God ultimately restores the relationship through His son Jesus. Through Jesus we are in good relationship with our creator.

As we attempt to work out our identities, we need to pay special attention to who God says we are. We are His children... an identity defined by a fixed relationship... a bond that can not be broken. Everything else that we are is variable, but not this relationship. As we listen to all the voices in the world attempting to tell us who we are, let us never forget our primary identity...that of a child of God.

## 14 - REDEEMED

It seems that in times of financial difficulty, our interest in saving money and getting the most for what money we have increases. Coupons are a way that many of us stretch our dollars. Coupons also provide us with some insight into the word redeemed.

After looking at a stack of coupons, it is apparent they all seem to have some things in common beyond the offer of financial savings for the purchase of a particular product. They come with a set of rules and conditions for use. Here are some of those rules.

- *Manufacturer will redeem this coupon in accordance with the terms of the redemption policy.*

- *Not valid in combination with other offers.*

- *Limit one per transaction.*

- *Coupon may not be bought, reproduced, transferred or sold.*

- *Must be redeemed before expiration date.*

So, if we redeem our coupon in the right way and within the designated time period we can take advantage of savings the coupon is offering. But, if we show up at the grocery store with a hand drawn coupon of our own creation and attempt to redeem it, we are not longer the redeemer but just a person holding a piece of paper with some writing on it. Our homemade coupon does not meet the criteria for redemption. The only coupon that is valid for redemption is the one issued by the manufacturer.

Ironically, it seems that we more readily accept the rules associated with coupon redemption than we do with human redemption. We willingly accept that the product manufacturer has the ability to reject our coupon if we do not redeem it within the parameters they have set forth. But, many of us tend to think that if we are just a good person or do good things in life that we will be redeemed by God in the end. But, in life, as in coupons, there are rules or criteria for redemption

Note the comparison between the rules for coupons we willingly accept and the rules for our redemption that we tend to reject or at least rebel against.

- *Manufacturer will redeem this coupon in accordance with the terms of the redemption policy.*

God has a redemption policy. It centers on Jesus and is only valid when we center our lives around Jesus.

- *Not valid in combination with other offers.*

There is one single offer of redemption through Jesus. Nothing can be added to or taken away from it.

- *Limit one per transaction.*

Our redemption is a one time only event. There is no need for repetitive redeeming.

- *Coupon may not be bought, reproduced, transferred or sold.*

Our redemption is an individual event. We cannot buy it (as Martin Luther pointed out), reproduce it, transfer or sell it to someone else.

- *Expiration date.*

For all practical purposes, we need to make claim on our redemption before our expiration date.

So, the question remains, why would we so willingly accept the rules for redemption associated with coupons while resisting the rules associated with our personal redemption. One possible explanation is that we do not like the idea that we have a manufacturer. We tend to balk at the idea that we are created beings made in the image of God. We may easily find ourselves in discussions of whether we have grandpa's nose or mom's ears, but then just as easily reject the idea that the life coursing through our veins comes from God.

God is our manufacture and determines the terms of our redemption. Jesus is the redeemer and it is only through Him that we find ourselves redeemed in accordance with the redemption policy.

## 15 - CHRIST

The story of Jesus is the story of Christ. Or perhaps more accurately, it is the story of the revealing of Jesus as the Christ. The word Christ means, “anointed”. So, when we refer to Jesus as Jesus Christ, we are acknowledging and proclaiming Jesus as the anointed one of God.

The Gospel of Mark is believed to be the earliest of the Gospels, and begins with the following: “*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*” (Mark 1:1). While Mark chooses to begin the story by announcing the identity of the lead character, the understanding of this identity unfolded in the living of the story. As the disciples came to learn from and live with Jesus they came to know who Jesus was... Jesus Christ, the Son of God. All four of the Gospels include the story of when Jesus questions Peter as to Jesus’ identity.

*“And he saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am ? And Peter answereth and saith unto him, Thou art the Christ.”* Mark 8:29 KJV

But then quickly in the following verse Jesus gave the disciples the following admonition.

*“And he charged them that they should tell no man of him.”* (Mark 8:30 KJV) The reason for this cautionary note remains the subject of debate.

Later, while teaching the disciples, Jesus cautions them to be on the look-out for false Christs.

*“For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.”* Matthew 24:24  
KJV

The Message phrases it a little differently.

*“Fake Messiahs and lying preachers are going to pop up everywhere. Their impressive credentials and dazzling performances will pull the wool over the eyes of even those who ought to know better.”* Matthew 24:24 The Message

Who or what are these false Christs... false anointed ones? I think we are in less danger of someone proclaiming to be Christ than we are of elevating something other than Christ to primary or anointed status in our lives. When we follow an idea rather than the person of Jesus, we settle for a false Christ. When we follow a defender of the poor rather than Jesus, we settle for a false Christ. When we follow a provider of justice rather than Jesus, we settle for a false Christ. This is not to diminish those actions, but they are actions and not an identity. Jesus was not the Christ because he was a provider of justice. He was not the Christ because he was a defender of the poor. He was not the Christ because his ideas or teachings were worthy of imitating. We are followers of Jesus because he is the Christ, the anointed one, the Son of God.

In 1964, Dr. Milton Rokeach published a book entitled *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti*. The book tells the story of how Dr. Rokeach attempted to study identity by bringing together delusional psychiatric patients who maintained the same identity. After surveying 25,000 patients in the mental hospitals, Dr. Rokeach settled on three individuals who “were reported to believe that they were Christ.”<sup>262</sup>

In an afterward to the book written some 20 years later, Dr. Rokeach said that “while I had failed to cure the three Christs of their delusions, they had succeeded in curing me of mine - of my God-like delusion that I could change them by omnipotently and omnisciently arranging and rearranging their daily lives with the framework of a ‘total institution.’”<sup>263</sup> Dr. Rokeach had to

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<sup>262</sup> Milton Rokeach, *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti* (New York: NYRB Classics, 2011), location 851, Kindle ebook.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid., location 6731.

climb down off of his throne and abandon his role as the anointed one... the self-appointed redeemer who could change these three men's lives. He then goes on to suggest that many of us are trying to be God-like in our own lives. Bertrand Russell perhaps says it best when he says: "Every man would like to be God, if it were possible; some few find it difficult to admit the impossibility."<sup>264</sup>

Each of us can be guilty of taking on the role of Christ. When we try to become the solution to the problem or the answer to the question we self-ordain ourselves as the anointed ones. When we do this we preach a false gospel. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we must learn to live and act like Jesus but not elevate ourselves or our cause above Christ. Our cause is to be a disciple, a follower of the one true Christ, the anointed one, Jesus.

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<sup>264</sup> Bertrand Russell, *RC Series Bundle: Power: A New Social Analysis (Routledge Classics)* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 3.

## 16 - IRRELIGIOUS

So, how does the word irreligious make it onto the list of the top 100 words that define what it means to be a member in good standing of one of the world's great religions? It seems a bit contradictory. How can members of a "religion" be irreligious? The answer hinges on our definition of what it means to be religious.

According to Funk & Wagnall, being *religious* means, "feeling and manifesting religion." And, they define *religion* as "any system of faith and worship." So we are religious when we manifest a system of faith and worship. Many across our world today would consider themselves religious. No doubt the Pharisees in Jesus' time considered themselves to be religious and yet when Jesus appeared claiming to be the fulfillment of their messianic prophecies, they rejected him and ultimately orchestrated his execution. Jesus even told them he did not come to abolish their religion: "*Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill*" (Matthew 5:17). And yet, the message and actions of Jesus seemed to infuriate the Pharisees. What was it about Jesus that inspired such a reaction in the "religious?"

Jesus had a way of pointing out the inconsistencies in the behavior of the Pharisees and embarrassing them in public. This no doubt contributed to and fueled their desire to eliminate Him. Matthew 23 illustrates this with some of Jesus' most critical polemic of the Pharisees.

*Now Jesus turned to address his disciples, along with the crowd that had gathered with them. "The religion scholars and Pharisees are competent teachers in God's Law. You won't go wrong in following their teachings on Moses. But be careful about following them. They talk a good*

*line, but they don't live it. They don't take it into their hearts and live it out in their behavior. It's all spit-and-polish veneer.” Matthew 23:1-3 The Message*

So much for tip-toeing around the issue. Jesus continues,

*“Instead of giving you God's Law as food and drink by which you can banquet on God, they package it in bundles of rules, loading you down like pack animals. They seem to take pleasure in watching you stagger under these loads, and wouldn't think of lifting a finger to help. Their lives are perpetual fashion shows, embroidered prayer shawls one day and flowery prayers the next.” Matthew 23:4-5 The Message*

It is easy to see how the religious leaders might take offense at this but Jesus doesn't stop there. He now addresses the Pharisees directly.

*“I've had it with you! You're hopeless, you religion scholars, you Pharisees! Frauds! Your lives are roadblocks to God's kingdom. You refuse to enter, and won't let anyone else in either. "You're hopeless, you religion scholars and Pharisees! Frauds! You go halfway around the world to make a convert, but once you get him you make him into a replica of yourselves, double-damned.” Matthew 23:13-14 The Message*

Do you see a theme here? If the Pharisees were giving Jesus the benefit of the doubt before, that likely ended this day. But if Jesus did not come to abolish their religion, what was he up to? It appears that Jesus' quarrel was with those who take great pains to appear pious and religious rather than their teachings. The Pharisees were indeed religious, very religious... religious about their religion. They religiously practiced and adhered to the letter of the law and missed the point completely.

This brings us to a second definition of the term religious found in the Funk and Wagnall's dictionary: "devout, conscientious, strict in performance." We can be religious about many things and engage in them religiously. Some of us exercise. Some of us adhere to a strict schedule each day. Some of us count the calories of each meal. It seems that the older we get, the more committed or religiously we follow our daily rituals. I remember going to visit one of my great aunts we had not seen in a long time who lived out of town. After visiting with her for about 20 minutes or so at her nursing home she said, "Well, it's 5:00, time for dinner" and left us. Glad we drove for 5 hours for that...

Doing things religiously can give us a sense of security and comfort. But, when we practice something religiously, it is also about control...it is about us...it is about what we can do. Being religious identifies us as the central character in our life drama... in control of our health, in control of our schedules, in control of our diets and ultimately in control of our salvation. Like the Pharisees, we can become religious about our religion. But, Jesus did not come to make religious people. Jesus came to bring us back into relationship... a relationship that requires us to abandon many of our religious endeavors. In this way as Christians we become irreligious.

## 17 - FORGIVENESS

The Lord's Prayer

*Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.*

*Thy kingdom come . Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.*

*Give us this day our daily bread.*

*And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*

*And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:*

*For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen* Matthew 6:9-13 KJV

Jesus taught this prayer to his disciples... an instruction... an example of how to pray. The prayer acknowledges who God is and makes three requests of God; *give us this day our daily bread, forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil*. However, one of those requests is contingent upon *our* actions... *forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors*. It includes a qualifier... a request of God to forgive us only in the way that we forgive others. From this conditional prayer, we should expect forgiveness in the same measure in which we extend forgiveness. If we don't extend forgiveness, we should not be surprised to find ourselves lacking in forgiveness... from God. But forgiveness is hard. We seem to like to withhold forgiveness from someone as a way to punish them somehow... to let them know how wronged we were by their words or their actions. But, according to the prayer, it is ourselves that we punish.

The Gospel of Matthew tells of an exchange between Peter and Jesus in which Peter asks Jesus a question about forgiveness.

*Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." Matthew 18:21-22*

The Bible tells us nothing of the wheres or the whys of the story, but human nature is likely not that different now than it was then. So, let's look at the story creatively. Suppose someone walks into the your living room and asks a "hypothetical" question like "if I were to lose your car keys... how mad would you be" or "how many more days do we have to put up with the barking of our neighbor's dog?" These questions are referencing real situations and I am guessing that Peter's question was also about a real situation... possibly even a situation with someone in the room. Peter could have been asking his question as a way of calling that person out in front of Jesus... we'll never know. But, Jesus essentially told Peter that there should be no end to his forgiveness. In any case, this is likely not the answer Peter wanted to hear.

The Gospel of Mark tells another forgiveness story.

*When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, "Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the*

*paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic— "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home." And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"* Mark 2: 1-12

This story has typically been highlighted as a way to illuminate the deity of Jesus Christ, which it does. But, there is something curious about the story. Upon seeing the man lying on the mat paralyzed... in obvious need of healing... what did Jesus say? *"Son, your sins are forgiven."* Why did Jesus overlook the obvious malady of the man and forgive his sins? Did Jesus say this simply to get under the skin of the Pharisees in the room, because it obviously did? Or was Jesus making a point? Was Jesus announcing to the room that forgiveness of sin was of much greater importance than physical healing? After all, Jesus only healed the man of his paralysis later to prove that he had the authority for forgive sins... seemingly an afterthought.

Stories in the Bible usually contain several layers of meaning. So, lets look a little deeper. Why was the man paralyzed? The story does not say. Was he born this way... paralyzed from birth? Did he have an accident? Did he come willingly or against his will? Or...was his paralysis metaphorical? Was their friend paralyzed due to lack of forgiveness? Was it the memory of things the friend had done... acts he had committed... acts committed upon him by others that left their friend immobile, unable to function... paralyzed?

In our own lives, guilt or shame can paralyze. It can keep us away from the relationships that should be most important to us... family, friends, and ultimately away from God. The Lord's Prayer tells us that we will be forgiven as we forgive others. Is our withholding of forgiveness for someone holding captive the forgiveness we so desperately need? Are we the ones who are

paralyzed... locked in a cage of our own construction? If we take the first step and forgive as we want to be forgiven, then perhaps we will hear Jesus say to us “stand up, take your mat and go home.”

*“Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:  
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen”*

Matthew 6:9-13 KJV

## 18 - RECONCILIATION

Reconciliation implies that there has been a separation. One is not reconciled to someone that you have never met: you are introduced. It is after this introduction that relationships can go awry. Actions can anger, words can wound, or perhaps we betray someone that is close to us. When this happens a separation or an estrangement typically ensues. One of the most poignant stories of separation and reconciliation in the Bible involves Peter and Jesus.

On the eve of Jesus' betrayal and capture, Jesus delivers a message to his disciples.

*And Jesus said to them, "You will all become deserters; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.'" Mark 14:27*

Peter responds emphatically.

*"Even though all become deserters, I will not." Mark 14:29*

Jesus then delivered what was likely very disheartening news for Peter.

*Jesus said to him, "Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times." But he said vehemently, "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you." And all of them said the same. Mark 14:30-31*

As if to emphasize their commitment to Jesus and His mistaken judgement of their character, Peter and the others pledge that what Jesus says is not true.

It is interesting that in light of what they have seen, learned and witnessed in Jesus' presence the previous three years that they take issue with this particular utterance as being untrue. The more we think about this, the more preposterous their self-important protest becomes. Peter and

the others were telling the one they believed to be the Messiah, the Christ, the living incarnation of God in the flesh that he was wrong about their upcoming denial.

But isn't this similar to our human condition? God tells us that we need Him, that our situation is hopeless, and without Him our path is a path of destruction. And in response, we say that is not true, that we can handle it, that we are in control of our actions and circumstances. This was Peter's proclamation, and Peter, like ourselves, finds out that Jesus was right.

Peter's bravado was short lived that night. It was not long before Jesus was seized and taken before Caiaphas, the high priest. Peter follows Jesus "*at a distance*" (Mark 14:54). While Peter stood by a fire for warmth that evening as the interrogation of Jesus was taking place inside, he was asked two times about his relationship with Jesus and each time Peter denied that he even knew Jesus. Then it happened... just as foretold.

*About an hour later, someone else spoke up, really adamant: "He's got to have been with him! He's got 'Galilean' written all over him." Peter said, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about." At that very moment, the last word hardly off his lips, a rooster crowed. Just then, the Master turned and looked at Peter. Peter remembered what the Master had said to him: "Before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times." He went out and cried and cried and cried. Luke 59-62 The Message*

I like the way The Message translates this last verse... "*He went out and cried and cried and cried.*" I'll bet he did. It is hard to imagine the depth of anguish contained in that moment. Peter had lived with Jesus for three years. Peter was the disciple who when questioned by Jesus over His identity had responded: "*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God*" (Matthew

16:16). Hours earlier he had even vowed to die with Him. And yet, when confronted and challenged by a servant girl... a servant girl, Peter denied that he even knew him.

Fortunately for Peter, this was not the end of the story. After Jesus' resurrection, He appeared to the disciples for a third time on the beach while they were out fishing. They came to shore and joined Jesus for breakfast. When breakfast concluded, it was reconciliation time.

*After breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Master, you know I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." He then asked a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" "Yes, Master, you know I love you." Jesus said, "Shepherd my sheep." Then he said it a third time: "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was upset that he asked for the third time, "Do you love me?" so he answered, "Master, you know everything there is to know. You've got to know that I love you." John 21:15-17 The Message*

Peter had denied Jesus three times and in response Jesus gave Peter three opportunities to affirm his love for Him. With each of these confessions, Peter's burden of guilt and shame must have lightened. It is a powerful moment. But, the ultimate confession lies in Peter's third response: *"Master, you know everything there is to know."* Earlier when Jesus told Peter what would happen... Peter's denial of Jesus... Peter balked and in essence told Jesus that He did not know what He was talking about. Peter's last confession was his admission that yes Jesus, you know everything there is to know. Jesus had forgiven Peter and perhaps more importantly Peter knew that Jesus had forgiven him. Peter was reconciled to Jesus.

One of the key elements of this story is that Jesus pursued Peter in an effort to bring about Peter's reconciliation. Jesus was never estranged from Peter, however Peter's shame was likely a heavy burden that would forever be a stumbling block to Peter's reconciliation with Jesus. But, Jesus pursued Peter to restore and reconcile their relationship just as Jesus pursues us today to restore and reconcile our relationship with Him. He does this in spite of our failures, shortcomings and rejections of Him in the past. Whatever we have done or said or thought about Him, Jesus pursues us to provide the pathway back to Him. For Peter it was three small questions. For each of us it is likely different. Whatever lies on our paths to reconciliation with Jesus, rest assured that as we find ourselves tossed about on the waves and crashing on the rocks of life, Jesus is waiting on the beach for us to come ashore... waiting for our reconciliation.

## 19 - TRUTH

After His capture and subsequent interrogation by the Chief Priest Caiaphas, Jesus was taken to the Governor's palace where He was brought before Pilate.

*Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"* John 18:37-38

Since humanity's entrance upon the stage of history, the existential imaginations of many a thoughtful person have struggled with this question: *"What is truth?"*

In the Gospel of John, Jesus makes one of the boldest, if not the boldest statement ever made concerning truth.

*"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*  
John 14:6

Jesus dares to suggest that He alone is the way, and the truth, and the life, and that no one can access God the Father except through Him. With this statement, Jesus draws a line in the sand so deep that it has caused many to stumble and fall, unable to go any further in their efforts to understand the truth that is Jesus. Truth is not some intellectual concept or topic for debate. The truth has a name and its name is Jesus.

Until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the reality and truth of Jesus remained relatively unchallenged, even if there were disagreements about the correct interpretation of that truth. However, modernity brought with it an onslaught of thinkers who attempted to dismantle and deconstruct not only the idea that Jesus was the truth, but that an ultimate truth even existed.

People such as Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant, Schopenhauer, Marx, Darwin and Nietzsche all questioned the truth that had inspired humanity for thousands of years. “Before Darwin, the orderliness of nature and its wonders, from the eye of a bird to the brain of a human, called for a grand designer who created the world.”<sup>265</sup> With the arrival of Darwin’s book “On the Origin of the Species”, *natural selection* entered the public square and attempted to demote and dislodge God from His position of prominence. Friedrich Nietzsche even carried it a step further when he dared to proclaim that God was dead, no longer playing a “vital role in our culture.”<sup>266</sup> Their thinking was fueled by enlightenment revelations as they believed only verifiable and repeatable scientific results had the intellectual weight necessary to approach the realm of truth. Unfortunately, this scientific approach carries with it negative consequences. Scientific truth only retains authority until a new and better truth emerges. As a result, doubt and uncertainty hang like a dark clouds over all their transient truths. Moderns were left to look longingly toward the future when a new and better truth would be revealed.

Post-modernity continued to build upon the angst that entered the public square in modernity. As post-moderns, we find it hard to accept that there is only one truth. To even suggest this seems myopic and archaic. As a result, we find ourselves adrift on a stormy sea of self-doubt and false assurance in a climate that “emphasizes tolerance and cognitive and moral relativism.”<sup>267</sup> What is true for you may not be true for someone else. In post-modernity, truth is relative and we must discover and construct truth within our own context while allowing space for someone else’s truth to coexist.

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<sup>265</sup> Louis P. Pojman, *Who Are We?: Theories of Human Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2005), 205.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>267</sup> Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform*, 214.

However, truth is not some ephemeral theory or concept that rises to prominence one day and falls from favor the next. That is theory, not truth. “Truth is sure and strong, and when it seizes us, we inevitably become vulnerable. The truth ought to surprise us and make us weak at the knees.”<sup>268</sup> Truth has a name, its name is Jesus and His truth is not for the faint at heart.

As each of us struggles with our search for truth, know that God is not surprised or threatened by our questions, doubts, or attempts to create an alternative to truth. We can remain certain that in spite of our wonderings and our wanderings, truth is comfortable in its skin. Jesus is “*the way, and the truth, and the life*” and that realization should always make us weak at the knees in His presence.

And that’s the truth.

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<sup>268</sup> Allender, *Leading with a Limp: Take Full Advantage of Your Most Powerful Weakness*, 159.

## 20 - STRUGGLE

The Bible is filled with stories of those who struggle with adversity, denial and betrayal. But many of them also persevere with heroism, endurance and faith. One of the literal and metaphorical ways the Bible helps us to understand these struggles is by explaining the struggle in terms we associate with birth.

Anyone who has ever given birth, participated in a birth, or even heard stories of a birth knows that we do not come into this world easily. The Bible tells us that the pain and struggle of childbirth is a consequence of the mankind's fall in the Garden of Eden.

*To the woman he said, "I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children." Genesis 3:16*

This statement makes us wonder what childbirth would have been like for women without the fall. Unfortunately, we will never know. However, men do not fare much better in this fall from grace.

*And to the man he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Genesis 3:17-19*

And with this proclamation, both men and women are sentenced to a life of struggle that will result in their eventual return to the dust from which they came.

Even though pain and struggle are the unfortunate consequences of our early ancestors' poor decisions, it is interesting God chooses to bring our redeemer into the world out of the pain and struggle of this very human consequence. In other words, Genesis 3:16 announced the painful consequences of sin while John 3:16 proclaims that through the pain and struggle of childbirth, a young mother named Mary will deliver God's redemption into the world.

*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. John 3:16*

John 3:16 also provides a pathway out from underneath the curse of a dusty future (*you are dust, and to dust you shall return Gen. 3:19*) to that of an eternal life. Therefore, out of the pain and struggle of childbirth, that which was but dust, is on its way to eternity.

In the book of John we are also told of a conversation between Jesus and a Pharisee named Nicodemus. Apparently Nicodemus was curious about Jesus and had some questions.

*Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit." John 3:1-6*

We know that being born for the first time, of water, is a pain filled struggle. But, Jesus is also using birth terminology as he refers to the need to be *born* a second time of the Spirit. We

are likely naive if we assume that this second birth will be accompanied with any less pain or struggle than the first. The Bible is replete with stories of those who wrestle with their faith... those whose lives are filled with all the earthy drama they can endure as they run away from and run towards God. Our personal stories are typically no different. We have moments of great spiritual insight and confidence and yet at other times we feel all alone in valleys of doubt and despair. Reminders of this unwelcome reality always seem to arrive at our doorsteps unannounced.

Yes, in this world we will have struggles...struggles in childbirth, struggles in life and struggles as we bring our faith to life...as we work through this second birth. But, Jesus delivers some encouraging news.

*“I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!”* John 16:33

As the struggles of life confront and challenge us while we attempt to understand and live out our faith, we will always find the confidence to continue in the knowledge that Jesus has indeed conquered the world. It is in Him that our struggle finds our future and our peace.

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APPENDIX B - 100 Words Word Cloud



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