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Sol's Porch: Seeking a More Unified Church in a Divisive Culture

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

PROJECT PORTFOLIO:

SOL'S PORCH: SEEKING A MORE UNIFIED CHURCH IN A DIVISIVE CULTURE



IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

PORTLAND SEMINARY

BY:

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PROJECT FACULTY:

MINDY SMITH

PORTLAND, OREGON

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

This certifies that the doctoral Project Portfolio of

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has been approved by
the Evaluation Committee on March 15, 2023
for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Semiotics, Church, and Culture.

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Research Method

This Doctoral Project utilized a blended research and design methodology called ‘Collaborative Design for Ministry and Nonprofit Contexts.’ In Collaborative Design, practitioners work with stakeholder representatives to address a Need, Problem, or Opportunity (NPO) in their context. Using a combination of bibliographic resources, local knowledge derived from stakeholder Workshops, and an iterative process of continuous adjustment using ‘just enough’ feedback information at each juncture of development, practitioners produce an application-oriented Project that seeks to effect Christ-centered change.

Abstract

In this project portfolio, I will address the following NPO: The fragmented church has countless interpretations of truth caused by tribal fear, which has created ongoing divisions and a longing for control. If unified in Jesus, we could see radical inclusivity in future generations.

The key finding in my research revealed the unifying power of Jesus being the ultimate authority of our faith, Bible readings, and Christian practice. I have seen the prevalent church fragments in America and in my current context as a missionary in Toulouse, France. I believe the power of story and metaphor can play a part in a more unified church. My work, *Sol's Porch*, a dystopian novel, tells a story of a young man who stumbles into an adventure of losing the certainty of his group's beliefs to find a more beautiful faith through the spirit of Truth.

Introduction

The Semiotics, Church, and Culture program opened my eyes to a language I did not yet speak. Specifically, Dr. Leonard Sweet's guidance and influence of narrative and story have helped birth what I feel is a viable change agent for a more unified church. Each semiotic sign has pointed me to a creative expression within myself that, I believe, can make a difference. This doctoral journey has helped me form a strategic project to move forward. This project is a science fiction novel called *Sol's Porch*. *Sol's Porch* is a story I have had in my heart for years, but is now being fleshed out in a dystopian novel through a well-researched discovery process.

I started my doctoral program with the goal of writing a book in the end. I did not imagine the project being a fictional work. Through reading David Bentley Hart's *Roland in the Moonlight*, the idea began to combine semiotic theology and creative young adult fiction. I have witnessed the effects of an eschatological fictional series on the evangelical church's theology and know the power of a metaphor. I believe this project can move the church toward getting to know the "other" by focusing on Jesus.

Sol's Porch is a first-person narrative that follows the journey of the protagonist, Xi. Xi's context, based roughly one hundred years in the future, is a divided nation guided by its individualistic group algorithms. These algorithms are monotonously followed by utilizing interactive sight and sound technology, which guides them synchronously by their group. This represents the tightly held doctrines of the countless Christian denominations in the world today. After a traumatic experience, Xi's eyes are opened to the reality of his group's longing for control through their dogmatic beliefs. This leads him on a journey of questioning. He then gracefully finds himself in a place where he encounters Truth, a representation of Jesus, through the guidance of a sage named Sol. Sol walks Xi into a hopeful future for groups uniting in a living and experiential Truth instead of divisively held values of beliefs. However, the leaders of Xi's group will do everything they can to protect their algorithm and way of being, even if it means destroying the people their algorithm was created to support.

Sol's Porch utilizes several metaphors throughout the story, but two should be highlighted. Solomon's Porch, in Acts chapter three, is a place where Peter decided to share the good news after the healing of the beggar. He could have chosen either the secular or the sacred, but he decided to land on the overlap of each: the porch. Just as the porch shifts from the open front of house to the private back of house, Xi is challenged in his normal life of colonization with an invitation to incarnation. He finds the created systems that divide should be vilified, not outside groups or people in this newly found sacred overlap.

The second metaphor used is the table. It is a place for stories to be felt with compassion. A place where others must be heard with an open heart and active listening. Sol's table brings together leaders of other groups that Xi once saw as enemies. The short interactions at the table gave Xi a beautiful representation of Jesus in others.

Science fiction readings have had a great influence on the book. The series *Red Rising* by Pierce Brown¹ and *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins² have allowed me to see into divided worlds that came to realize their hope through an attempt at unity. Both books, along with many other sci-fi series, carry an inclination that violence can be a part of solving the problem. Sol's Porch shows a way of love and subversive disruption to systems creating division. This genre of books will have the ability to reach a broader audience fatigued with division. Since the 2000s, there has been a dramatic rise in the need for dystopian novels because of the many stresses and anxieties that youth and young adults are dealing with.³ People are searching for another world to belong to. Sol's Porch is my attempt to create a world that forms a desire to be a more loving, Jesus-centric human in our world.

In researching for this project, the most powerful finding was in the design workshop. The group was intentionally diverse. It consisted of pastors, church leaders, a non-profit president, a Native American tribal member, and involved community members of different denominations and ethnic backgrounds. Our group shaped the NPO by focusing on why we have far too many definitions of truth, with division as a result. Many of the reasons stemmed from denominational and group views of scripture. Our group agreed that the different theological views of the Bible are divisive when held with a singular worldview. We then began the discovery process of a root cause. We concluded the root cause of division in the church was fear. We participated in the "five whys" exercise and struggled to get past the fourth why, which was control. Digging further and talking more took us to the true problem, which is fear. The fears are of different varieties. Some groups fear a judgment of hell for eternity and others have a xenophobic reaction to any group portraying major differences. We quickly realized nothing can move forward and control becomes the fighting mechanism when fear is at the root. One-on-one interviews confirmed this with a group of pastors and leaders in the United States and internationally. The project evolved from something that I imagined impacting my circle, but I realized this is a global church need, problem, and opportunity. The change agent is the perfect love of Jesus. With a Jesus-centralized church, fear is cast out of a global church and world that desperately needs unity, not uniformity.

Being on the "porch" of another culture in France has helped me synchronize this into a work that is relevant to an international world. Before choosing this project, I went through the process of creating a children's podcast called Sol's Porch. It resonated with children, but I quickly realized it would not have the reach and flexibility of a novel. I leaned on the feedback of diverse groups and people to help me pick the writing of *Sol's Porch*, in novel form, as my MVP. It is a work I feel will

¹ Pierce Brown, *Red Rising* (New York: Del Rey, 2018).

² Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2008).

³ Yvonne Shiao, "The Rise of Dystopian Fiction: From Soviet Dissidents to 70s Paranoia to Murakami," *Electric Literature*, March 25, 2019, <https://electricliterature.com/the-rise-of-dystopian-fiction-from-soviet-dissidents-to-70s-paranoia-to-murakami/>

reach a broader scope of people within the body of Christ. I plan to continue to learn how the language of culture could connect to readers in the book toward the final edits and to read the signs properly. It has been a challenge to make sure I know the language of young adults through this process of writing. Throughout *Sol's Porch*, I utilize several terms in the French language. The Jeux (game), The Conseil (counsel), Nouvelles (news), and other terms appear throughout. I also utilize scriptures in Latin to code in the Christian factor for non-Christians who are reading. My goal in this work is to use language that would not trigger anyone to think any character is automatically against them or on their side.

The scope of the project was to finish with a rough draft by December 2022. I began in June 2022 by paying an editor to follow along with my weekly writing routine. The editor is not a professional but ferociously reads this genre and brings expertise in character and world-building. I am contractually paying her through the work of the project.

My benchmarks were the following: The first was for six readers who participated in the survey to give a score of at least 8 out of 10 in the overall book rating. I had five readers give feedback with an average of 8.25. This was gauged before it was professionally edited and changes were made to the story. The second was to begin the first rewrite by mid-November and finish at the December turn-in date. I have a first rewrite finished with a story I am proud of. I took many of the recommendations into consideration and made a major shift in the opener of the book, where many people got lost. I started with a different opener that would engage readers earlier and have already gotten positive feedback from that. The third was to have 80,000 words by the December turn-in date. I have over 61,000 words, but feel comfortable to have fallen short of this word count. I had to adjust my plan to produce a quality story over the number of words. I decided to get an editor who specializes in fiction books through George Fox to complement my other editor and to have a complete thought of what the finished product will begin to look like. My advisor and editor each encouraged me to put the story together to make sense before attempting to reach the desired word count. My story is now in a position where words will come much easier because the structure is now in place to handle them. Doing that has given me the confidence and the vision to have a clear plan for how to finish and publish *Sol's Porch*. The dots are connecting for the greater narrative to resonate and be powerful.

This journey has been a joy, and toward the end, I now see the obvious way I can best address the NPO is through *Sol's Porch*. There have been a few challenges along the way as well. One of them is being a first-time author. Another is finding that each group has an honest certainty about their beliefs. A story will not create an immediate change in their lives, but it is a yeast that could activate through a personal experience. I understand it is not yet a complete work. That is why I have a plan in place to complete it by graduation in May. After finishing and editing, I will pitch this project to publishers and find a way to get this story out to as many people as possible. I dream that it could be a three-book series that would complete Xi's adventure. I plan to continue after this work as well with creative storytelling in a Jesus-centric way in a Protestant world filled with Bible-centric stories.

The tribe of Issachar knew how to read the signs of their day. Leonard Sweet guided our class through the sixteen Issacharian commandments to help us better read the signs. This has been influential in how to specifically help this work be unified and relevant in a divisive culture. Commandment number seven is, "The Issacharians know nothing is quite as it seems." This story of Xi is told in a slanted way that reveals Jesus as truth in a way anyone should be able to read. Here are some examples of the meanings that readers may miss in the book:

- Verse (each group that represents Christian denominations)
- Three15 (Xi's Verse that comes from 1 Peter 3:15. This group prides themselves on winning arguments)
- Apolo (the onyx script that is the prize for winning the Jeux (game) in Three15. It comes from the word apologetics)
- Three (there are three days Xi is stuck, which represents a transformational three-day prayer retreat that I went on, where I encountered God from another part of the body of Christ. The number three is scattered throughout the book)

The heart of the book is to see a more unified church. This is realized when Jesus is at the center. Jesus showed us this by choosing a diverse group of people for the same mission while here on earth. In the book, Sol chooses a unique group of people from very different pasts. He never asked them to become something different, but to simply see differently. He challenges them to live out of the past by returning to their groups with an experiential Truth. The word Truth coincides with Jesus in *Sol's Porch*.

With technology rapidly advancing, I see a future of screens that we hold getting replaced by moldable AR technology that becomes a part of our bodies. In *Sol's Porch*, I portray this with theLens and theVibes. TheLenses are contact-type lenses that project augmented realities connected to people's everyday lives. TheVibes are a molded earbud that silences what the group wants silenced and casts what they would like casted. Another futuristic component is the power of their algorithm. Currently, algorithms keep people arguing from their fingertips, but imagine it being a part of erasing a neighbor. Xi is shocked in the story to see the damage of the algorithm because it had become so normalized to him that it was not expected.

Another Issacharian commandment that influenced my work says, "Issacharians know that Jesus is the ultimate sign." Xi thought the Script (the Bible) was the penultimate sign for truth to hold on to, but Sol took him on a journey of experiencing the risen Truth that was transformational. He felt nudges from the Truth all along, but the algorithm was too strong. When forced into not having it, he realized the rhythms of a Truth that was better than he ever imagined.

This story is told from my futuristic projection of where the church could be without unity. It reveals the intricacies and dangers of single-view narratives becoming dogma within groups. Xi hugs the harbor of his group, knowing people are drowning without hope. He leaves the safety and lets the fear ride as he ventures out to see those that have been erased.

Finding the truth for Xi involved change from a rote algorithm to an experience with the Truth. He realizes that he was relying on the creation of one person's view of the Script, and that one view shaped his entire life and the lives of those within his group. He sets a course to get to know what the Truth looks like from the others his group erased.

Church division is not a new problem. God's children have found ways to villainize each other since the conception of the church, but Jesus always calls us down from our clubhouses to have dinner together. *Sol's Porch* is a story that has been told many times, but this time, with different lenses and vibes.

Doctoral Project

Introduction

My project is a first-person narrative dystopian novel called *Sol's Porch*. The NPO that *Sol's Porch* addresses is the following: The fragmented church has countless interpretations of truth caused by tribal fear which has created ongoing divisions and a longing for control. If unified in Jesus, we could see radical inclusivity of future generations.

Currently, the book is over 60,000 pages, so I will showcase this project in a condensed form with the framework of a French meal. The service consists of a five-course meal that gives a comprehensive view of the book. The aperitif (starter) will give a bite-size glimpse of the book, highlighting the plot, themes, and metaphors used. The entrée and plat (main courses) will reveal savory scenes throughout the book that display a compilation of semiotic learnings. The dessert (epilogue) reveals the sweet ending and leaves enough room for the digestif (usually a strong drink), which finishes everything off with the assessment. To keep things clean, I will neatly fold in a napkin of brief descriptions after each scene to connect between disparate parts. Bon appetite!

Aperitif

Sol's Porch is a first-person narrative that follows the journey of the protagonist, Xi. Xi's context, based roughly one hundred years in the future, is a divided nation guided by their individualistic group algorithms. These algorithms are monotonously followed by utilizing interactive sight and sound technology which guides them synchronously by their group. This represents the tightly held doctrines of the countless Christian denominations in the world today. After a traumatic experience, Xi's eyes are opened to the reality of his group's longing for control through their dogmatic beliefs. This leads him on a journey of questioning. He then gracefully finds himself in a place where he encounters Truth, a representation of Jesus, through the guidance of a sage named Sol. Sol walks Xi into a hopeful future for groups uniting in a living and experiential Truth instead of divisively held values of beliefs. However, the leaders of Xi's group will do everything they can to protect their algorithm and way of being, even if it means destroying the people their algorithm was created to support.

Entrée (Chapter Three)

Eyes closed, conscious mind. Looking up, I tighten my grip above the square knot, hands clenched. Yesterday's events are behind me, and my fire is rekindled. I focus my body for a moment, breathe, and launch into a swing jump. I glide above the jagged platform five feet below as the fire waves get closer by the second. They surpass the platform and continue to rise. It is staggering to feel a genuine heat ascending. I feel like a composer in a ghastly symphony of calm and grit. Every muscle in my body plays its own tune in this victory. I am poised to trounce my last time by seven seconds. This is the final rope jump before the finish line. My breath speeds and my heart quickens. I hear no one behind me, only the faint tick of an antique autotimer above me. The blazing waves get closer as I force my body back for another swing, trying to build the momentum I need to finish this.

The pain in my body may say otherwise, but I know I can do better. I feel the stale, hot air now moving quickly, passing from front to back with every swing. I am sweating profusely. The splashes of lava-like waves get millimeters from my boots as I see the soles begin to melt like a cheap candle. The black boot drips become distracting as I feel my feet starting to melt along with them. *Pull it together, Xi. Finish this.* My mind harmonizes through The Principles as I prepare. After the third swing back, I kick forward with the force of an angry thoroughbred.

This is the fun part. This is what all Onyxwalkers call the rocket. I was taught by my Uncle Near as a little boy and have practiced thousands of hours since. I launch myself for a perfect take of the last rope. I let out a boisterous howl, landing on the platform as the rising waves snap at my landing hand. I triumphantly cross the platform line for my first ever eight-second lead.

"Xi, are you ready for breakfast?" I hear mom faintly say from the kitchen in a comforting tone. The fire waves and platform disappear, and I'm now in the clouds flying down to the stage to accept my victory.

"I'm about to accept the Apolo and give a speech. Give me a second please!" I yell back from my room closet. It was too late. Any pause longer than three seconds causes the simulation to end. I mutter under my breath at my mom's poor timing. Though she never hesitates to interrupt my practices, she is my world. I would give it all up for her, but deep down I know she believes I can do this. Rewrite our name in leadership of our Verse. My Uncle couldn't and he was the first to make it on the Conseil. Our dad left us when I was five. My little brother and sister were too young to remember, but I still think about it often. My mom works as a pod cleaner and writes datacode on the side so we can afford to go to the Pen Academy, the best school in Three15. She has continually given it all up for me so that I can compete. Serve. I got up earlier this morning than last year.

"Perfect practice paves the road to perfection," Mom says to me, taking off the simulation helmet. This is a phrase my little brother, Jag, had to learn to get through his stuttering problem when we were kids. It stuck with our whole family. "Don't let your breakfast get cold, lugnut," Mom says, walking back out of the room.

"Let me wash up, and I'm coming."

My foot still tingles from the lava-like waves touching me. I'm always impressed with how real the practice Jeux feels. The composition of the simulation creates an alternate reality in the mind. Simulated pain has been used for decades in Three15. To get life-like results requires feeling some pain. I'm still bitter about missing the most important part: my practice speech. Truth knows I need all the practice I can get to gain my people's trust. Some of the legends of the Conseil gave great speeches. I want to give my best.

Today is the day of the Jeux, and this is my year. The Jeux is a tournament that takes place every year on the Hill of our Verse. The Hill sits above Three15 like an immovable gentle mountain. It consists of building upon building of white layers that look like steps of white slate from a bird's view. Winding paths stir all along, leading to the summit. There are many Verses in our Nation and

many Nations on earth, but I belong to Verse Three15. We are the largest Verse in our Nation, and the greatest. The most faithful to the Script.

Last year was my best shot at winning the Jeux. With 30 seconds left and the sculptor getting his laser ready to put my name on the Apolo, the trophy, my balmy right index finger didn't catch the rope perfectly as I thought through the final principles of the Script. I had to open my eyes to catch the fall. Any time someone opens their eyes during the Jeux, it's game over. With our eyes closed during the competition, we use our raw minds and hearts and control our thoughts and emotions. The ones brave enough to compete and bold enough to serve on the Conseil are called Onyxwalkers.

My Uncle Near was one of the best. His escapades have taken him out of the history he could have had. If my wandering father hadn't ran our name in the ground already, my uncle accepted that full-time job. It is a high hill to climb, but I feel I can be a part of conserving what is inherently good in Three15, not destroying it.

In the Jeux, eight total sections must be passed. These sections represent our Eight Principles. These are our values as a Verse that come directly from the Script. The Script is our guide to life. It is our way. In the Jeux, we must visualize each principle word by word in our mind's eye, with our physical eyes closed. All that we imagine is on projection for everyone in the Verse to see. We mentally press play on an elaborate presentation of The Principles while going through a nearly impossible obstacle course. It sounds difficult. It plays out to be much more difficult. Only a few make it to the competition in the first place.

My heart feels a strange sort of way right now. I am confident, but the rhythm keeps getting faster. I leave the closet and check my soloPad by my bed and see the maroon color that I dread. Light green is normal. My heart sinks into my stomach.

"Not this morning," I say to myself. Everything is calm. Sudden spouts of anxiety have arrived without knocking here lately. Yesterday did not help. I handle storms well, but not when it comes without being forecasted. I walk slowly to the bathroom to sterilize and take three deep breaths. I close my eyes and count until my heart slows. Today is too important. I look down, and the red health soloPad fades to orange. I close my eyes and continue to breathe deeply until I hear the tranquility beep and look down to see green. Training for the Jeux takes a holistic strength.

"Xi Lark, breakfast is getting cold," yells my mother, clearly fed up with my stalling. I finally start making my way toward the kitchen. My heart is now calm.

"Coming," I say, moving quickly. I gently place theLens in my eyes and theVibes in my ears. I always start with my right eye and right ear. Most others do not think about where they start, but the right is my strength. When I was younger, I remember watching my father ritually start with the left every morning. So I start with my right.

Life without TheLenses and TheVibes is virtually impossible. On every child's first birthday, they receive a fitting in their eyes and ears. Most families hold a ceremony. Mom says Dad refused. It

marks the day they will see and hear exactly like their family. Like Three15. It is all I have known. TheLenses fashion to our eyes like a round magnetic blanket. They are effervescent like a bubble in the sun, but pack a punch. They are capable of operating at least 1,000 programs at once, displaying an augmented reality that interacts with everything in our Verse. They are connected to and work directly with TheVibes.

TheVibes are multi-conduction molds that are poured into our ears so we can hear the world around us and our connected programming. The only time both of these come out is at night to soak and charge. It is illegal to leave our pods without them, though I'm not sure who would want to. Our sights and sounds are programmed in by Three15. They provide beauty, entertainment, communication, commerce, well... everything needed all thanks to theSystem. TheSystem is our multiNation conglomerate that provides them for free. We simply allow them to provide all of our logistics to live a life to the full. It is a fair trade. We pay them to make life simple.

The stark white buildings of our Verse are anything but boring wearing our tech. It all comes to life. Of course, we have our algorithm that filters everything through our Principles. That keeps us safe. It keeps us blessed. Thank the Truth.

I step out of my room feeling good. My eyes are closed, reviewing The Principles and walking toward the kitchen. A simple thought of The Principles or Script with eyes opened unfolds an interactive augmented program. This is the case for all Three15ers. I keep my eyes closed anytime I am going through The Principles, not only for training but for wellness.

Many people can go through their entire life never learning to close their eyes to think and feel for themselves.

Xi has breakfast with his mom, sister, and brother before going to the Jeux. He is frustrated by his Uncle Near, who, in the first two chapters, is in trouble with the Governor of Three15 for continually questioning their algorithm. Xi makes it to the arena to be met by his Uncle Near, who, because of Three15 customs, he is forced to have as a mentor for the Jeux. The Jeux begins and Xi receives his first glimpse of the disorder in his group. He makes it through the first Six scripts. Then:

Script seven is a maze. I can Onyxwalk it as easily as my own house, but the trick is listening. As Onyxwalkers, our ears have to be attentive through theVibes. They completely shut down and naturally force us to hear our surroundings. I pull the poll and start the course. The maze is uphill. I turn the first corner to lean sideways. This angle is enough for anyone to lose balance with their eyes closed but I have learned to master it. Left, right, 45 right, right, 45 left, cross to the right, left, forward. I hear steps behind me. Six seconds have turned to four.

There is an excruciating detail about this particular maze script. If you touch the wall a shock comes through your body that feels like several bee stings in one area. Like lightning is striking you just

enough to keep you alive. I experienced many of them in training. If you do, it's game over. Seat taken.

I am speed walking and quietly, listening for upcoming turns. Right, 45 right, left, then I hear a wall in front of me with footsteps echoing. It is supposed to be left but I know it has become right. The trained tack of keeping my eyes closed begins to give way. My body is trying to force me to open them to avoid a shock that sends pain throughout an entire body in an instant. I have to keep time. I force them closed tighter. Darkness ensues. I quickly use my footsteps to hear that it is a 45 right instead of left and I quickly take it. My right arm is dangerously close to the wall as I take the turn.

The footsteps are getting closer behind me. Three seconds.

The change is over. I know the rest. My speed quickens. So do the footsteps behind me. Two seconds. Left, Right, 45 right, straight away. The ending is a straight hall that is around 30 meters. My projection is as not as pleasing as I had hoped. I count my steps with long strides pushing like a competitor of old in a full sprint. I listen to hear the footsteps behind fade but not by much.

The clearing room for Script eight has approximately 10 feet of landing space. If I dive on step thirty-three, I may gain .2 seconds. Twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine. My heart is pounding as the roar of breathing and steps pound away in the hall. Thirty-one, thirty-two, I dive head-first like I am trying to fly.

I have not tried this in practice, but this calls for the extreme. I stretch my hands, knowing the timer stops when any part of my body crosses the lasers. I turn slightly in the air to land on my back and slide. In turning, I couldn't get my left leg up in time. My calf catches the side of the checkpoint edge and I feel a shock run up my back. I quickly lift my leg and open my eyes with my back fully onto the checkpoint. All I can do in my first few milliseconds is use both arms to hold my right leg and watch my nearest competitor come. I do not think it is broken, but it is close if not.

I have approximately three seconds until joined by Bur. I focus on him furiously racing and notice something in a second that I can't unsee. He was running in a way that you do on a track, not blind. I look closer. His eyes are open!

The Onyxwalker's eyes are open!

It happened so quickly, but I have two full seconds to see him inside of the script with eyes open projecting his last word. My heart beats ferociously. I want to strangle him against the wall. I don't understand. I look at him with a scowl as he smiles again.

As the seconds pass, I remember the delay. Normally the alarm goes off when eyes are opened but not this time. I quickly jump up to my feet, feeling the dense pain in my right leg. My adrenaline from this injustice pushes past my pain. I ignore the worker away trying to give me water and check on my leg. The delay will catch the cheat if the system didn't.

Trow was not far behind—with his eyes closed, unlike his brother. My ten-second break is coming to a close, but I will have one second to see justice have its way with Bur in the live feed. Thank the Truth for the live feed; he will be caught and game over for his hopes for a seat.

“You’ll never be able to change your name, Lark. You’ll end up just like your uncle,” he says, breaking another rule: speech on a platform. My eyebrows raise to him as I give him a proverbial look of goodbye. Time connects from the livefeed and the scene hits. My heart stops. The live feed felt like the worst scene in a film in slow motion. His eyes are closed in the projection. Fully shut.

I only have a second to realize it, but it is clear as the Lens. My mind begins to panic. I know what I saw and I cannot unsee it. His eyes were clearly open, and the live feed is now showing them closed. I am witnessing a hack. A hack from within? My second seeing is now up and script eight begins. My mind has never raced so quickly. I have to get back on track.

I close my eyes and I am immediately regretting Latin as I stumble through the first phrase projection. Thinking clearly is not coming naturally. I take the first rope in the long last ropes course. My right index finger trembles and my heart rate spikes. My projection is sloppy. I can’t help it, but the script in my mind pauses.

I blank out and I realize that my thought is projecting Bur’s eyes being opened in his final two seconds of script seven for all of Three15 to see. It is an accident that I am beginning to recognize as brilliance. I am not upset about it. The Conseil will be confused, but it will be part of the evidence in the end. Everyone deserves to see what happened.

I can’t lose my track. I grab rope 7 with both hands, take a deep breath and catch up on the script as Bur and Trow get closer. 8-25th of the Principles begins in a play that was written for me long ago. I must not wonder, but to resume my thousands of hours of practice. Catching up and grabbing the next rope, I feel a foot collide with my Achilles above my right foot. I have heard of Achilles tendons rupturing and I knew it wasn’t that, but there was damage. The pain was immense. I was lucky enough to end with ropes and not have to use my feet, but Bur is directly behind me and doing everything he can to stop me. The temptation is to project my thoughts of him, but I continue.

The motion of the script speeds up. My right leg pulses with pain. Both of my legs seem unusable, but I have to continue. I have only practiced warpwalking a few times because it has only been needed when I am directly behind someone. Warpwalking sounds more complicated than it is. It is simply a speed that pushes your body, mind, and emotions to the limit in Onyxwalking. You give everything you have for the final script. Years of practice get you good enough to not need it. Until you need it. I lock in and continue. 8-55th.

I feel an elbow come crushing into my side as I take the next rope. If I knew the number of ribs I had, I could pinpoint which one just took the blow. It was poignant and direct. Pain shoots down my leg into my toes. I know that I am flashing images of Bur for everyone to see but they are only flashes. I am an Onyxwalker. My concentration and speed continue. 8-65th.

This is it. In the quickness of it all, I am brought back to the moment when it all came to an end for me in the last Jeux.

My right index finger freezes up.

It will not stop me. I have trained my other fingers. I take hold of the very rope that I missed last year and new confidence comes over me. 8-75th.

I hear the breathing of Bur in the last three ropes. My nerves prepare for another blow as I give all I have. I project the last lines "tuum est regnum et potestas et" but before I finish and go for the third-to-last rope, I feel a heel to my spine.

It is a move that I know can only be made with eyes open. Another direct and intentional blow. I am moving in a way that is confusing to other competitors. I watch the replays of their practice and I move differently on the ropes than Bur. He was watching me move and knew exactly where to kick. It feels like a hammer colliding with each vertebrae.

My right hand comes free from the rope. Projected for everyone to see is last year. My eyes begin to open but I can't. Not like this. In excruciating pain, I take my dangling right arm back up to the rope. It almost causes me to faint, but my heart is stronger. Another kick to the right hand. It is targeted but he is unable to pass me. He knows exactly where to kick. I lance back like a madman and catch his right shoulder putting a small pause to his cheap shots. I brace for another hit while projecting the script again and reaching for the last rope.

"—Gloria in saecula saeculorum," I project, grabbing the last rope.

I bring my legs back as far as I possibly can in pain and thrust forward. Bur catches my left foot with a white-knuckled grip. I frantically try and pull it free, but his grip is strong. I twist and pull. Nothing. Finally, I slip my foot out of my shoe completely to swing through the air. Bur catches my calf in my backswing with his heel. I feel as though I am in a freefall, but I hang on for the final swing. The only answer to a freefall is opening your eyes. I have come too far. I know this was the last rope and that I will be close to the checkpoint. In the short second I have falling, I stretch out as far as I can. The matter of milliseconds feels as if I am falling from the world's tallest building, but I give my body to this. If any part of my body touches the lasers at the checkpoint, I win.

The intensity of the freefall begins to peel my eyelids back from the gentle glue that's tearing them apart. Just as I feel my eyes beginning to open, I feel the pain of the steel checkpoint floor crashing into my ribs. I was there. Pain ensues and I feel my chest in my stomach. My fingers begin to slip as I gain an inch of grip from the knot in the floor. My breath is completely gone. All the strength I have left I use to begin pulling up to the platform. My head and hands have crossed the lasers. I needed to be completely in before opening my eyes. The lasers were touched, but the job is not finished. I have to be completely on the platform for a victory. I hear Bur shoot over my head into the doorway kicking my shoulder on the way in. His fall caused him to trip as he soared over me, and he quickly begins jumping up to come toward me. If the livestream showed his eyes open, surely they could

show me falling and not being able to get up. Another mistake that would take my seat from some hack. He is just meters away as he rolls and gets back to his feet.

With all the strength I have, I pull myself up, almost on, to be met with a foot to the head from Trow as he flies onto the platform. My nose crushes into the unforgiving metal below and everything begins to go dark. My shins are now against the edge and I feel the pain of the kick to my head. It wakes me up. A simple technicality of not standing could take everything I have worked for. Looking up from the kick I see Bur one meter away in a running motion beginning to lift his legs to kick me.

I take my right arm and swing it around behind me leaning forward and then back—something I have practiced getting through the webs. Bur was in too much motion and his right leg came over the edge followed by the rest of his body. He caught the edge and was hanging on as I grabbed Trow's sleeve to pull and lunge myself completely onto the platform. Trow stares at me for a second breathing deeply as he walks off the platform and leaves Bur dangling.

I stumble over to Bur. "Just finish the job, Lark," he says as he spits up toward me. My boot is two inches from his fingers that are slipping off the platform. Many haven't made it on the other side of a fall on the final platform. I take a deep breath and with all the strength I have left, I reach down and grab several orange tassels of his suit and begin pulling him up. His left hand slips off and he pulls me. I start slipping towards the edge and use my left arm to grab a pole that holds the platform to the ceiling of the arena. I pull with all my strength and feel my shoulder dislocate. I pull harder. Enough for Bur to get his foot on the platform. He shifts his entire body onto the platform and stands looking over me. He straightens his suit jacket, staring at me and says nothing. I turn over and stand up quickly. I hear him talking to himself as he walks away, kicking the last stanchion of the platform before the exit. As much as I wanted to step on his fingers, to write his story as he tried to write mine, I am rewriting our story. I did not even realize it, but I was standing. The laser was activated. I did it. I won.

Xi wins the Jeux and accepts the victory with his eyes closed (something a Conseil member would never do) as a sign of protest for Bur cheating. His uncle has a conversation with his sister giving a background on why he questions the algorithm. His uncle's wife was given a tool in which she could see without the Lens' projections, and she saw people who had been erased from their algorithm for various reasons. It broke her heart and she stopped trusting their Verse and the System (a multinational company that provides theLens and theVibes). She later died as a result of not getting medical attention because she refused to be connected to the System. Near gives Star the same tool in their conversation, and she is shocked and picks up his cause. The algorithm represents our group's protection mechanisms of their "correct" beliefs. It was created with good intentions, like most group's formations, but later becomes dangerous when trusted more than Jesus (the Truth). Xi walks home from the Jeux as he always wanted to after a win. Then:

I open my eyes, seeing the trail turn to forest. I can smell the moss from the trees and imagine oaks as tall as the clouds. I used to do this exact walk with my family up and down the hill as a kid. I imagined living in a treehouse with our family instead of our pod. I still wonder what it would be like. Life in the Real. Not being connected to the System. I sometimes like the world I create blind better than the world created for me through theLens and theVibes. That says a lot because I love my group and my family. Maybe that is why I am taking a seat on the Conseil. It can be better. Maybe I can be a part of that. I had a smokescreen view of perfection, but am now realizing the small tremors I have felt throughout my life begging me to ask questions. Faithfulness to the Principles would have me not ask. I now know I have to.

As much as I want my world to be perfect, reality touches down every time. I have much to figure out before imagining change if there is corruption within. If Uncle Near was not surprised by this, I can only imagine the injustice he has seen being on the Conseil. This specific feeling of walking down is not how I imagined it, but needed. It is bringing me back to my rock.

I open my eyes again to make sure I am on the path. Walking slowly and easily on my right leg, I hear a deep purr coming from above the arena. The frequency is slowly getting higher and it sounds like a giant whoosh of a fan colliding with the air. The sound gets louder and louder as the frequency gets higher. I try to look past all of the noise of theLens to find the origin of this. It is impossible. My face and story seem to be on every building, every tab, everything. I am everywhere. The deepness of the noise overtakes all of the Jeux statistics and I know something is off. The sharp noise is joined by a deep bass and I feel in my chest and in the ground beneath.

I turn over my shoulder and I see it. Looking directly over the stadium, I see what looks like a family drone, but with much sharper angles. It is bright yellow. It seems to be coming directly toward me. I see something purple take flight from underneath as the drone dives back toward the center to Three15. It is the purple object making the noise. Thinking it will turn toward the drone, I can't help but stare. The vibrations shake the air from this purple cube object. It continues toward my vicinity with a trail of purple smoke behind it.

In pain, I begin running as fast as I can. My podorium is to the left; I take a right into the forest thinking it is targeting my path. Everyone around me begins running in sheer panic as they see the same object. The sound is now unbearable and I feel it is shaking my core. I no longer turn back but put everything I have into making it deep into the forest. Now I feel it in the air. It quakes the ground around me.

My right leg is the first to give out. I take a 45 turn left to tumble down a hill. I slide down rocky soil and come to a stop at a small brook. I take shelter behind the biggest tree I can find and lean against it. It is not sheltered enough. As the purple box finally came to a stop, I felt the air move. Like thunder after lightning, the deep bass kicks in and throws me back into the brook. My face, my arms, and my side exposed to the box are met with sharp objects that felt like thin cuts in every part of my skin. Screaming in pain, I look down to see fragments of glass everywhere on me. I am still conscious but in shock. The ice-cold water of the brook keeps me awake. In my left ear I can still hear Three15 announcements of the Jeux and I notice theVibe in my right ear is gone. I feel in the mud beneath

me in the brook for theVibe but feel nothing but smooth stones and river grass. TheLens in my eyes begins to flicker on and off as I try and sit up. They were damaged. Stepping out of the brook and looking beyond my only cover, I don't see anything but a purple mist in the air. I hear people screaming out of my right ear. I slowly creep back towards the shaken site of the crash and I see the thick silky purple smoke fill the air from the container that crashed 30 feet away. It slowly spreads out in every direction. It is coming toward me. I hear cries for help out of my right ear and I look out through the forest towards the path. Everything is a blur, but I see a handful of people injured. These are my people.

I start toward them to do what I can to help, but a burn stops me with just a few steps. I taste an acidic and metallic taste in the air. It smells like sulfur and strange chemicals. My throat is pricked with the smell but I keep walking toward the people. It feels as if I am walking directly into death itself. Pain sheaths my throat as if I just inhaled a torcher pepper. My right leg gives out and I go down to my knees. I am still in pain from the Jeux. My hands are covered in blood from the glass shards. I can do nothing to help except work with all of my strength to simply get a breath in. As the oxygen dissipates, the poisonous purple gas snakes all around like a vast fog over the land. The trees begin to disappear and my feeling in my extremities is leaving as numbness sets in. I can only feel my face and look where I was to try to find my sailsuit. It is nowhere in sight. I had it over my shoulder. I do everything I can to muster enough energy to get to my feet, but I move my neck to see my hand twitching. My body is reacting in a way that I can't control. A numbness takes over my burning mouth and throat and all I see is a purple cloud now. I imagine many things, but I have never imagined the fight fading from my very being. Life fading. This is it.

Xi is dramatically rescued and brought to a mysterious house that his Lenses could not pick up. Somewhere out of Three15. This is where he meets Sol.

Plat (Main Course)

"Welcome to the porch," Sol says, extending his hand. Taking his hand, he gently helps me off the old oriental rug sprinkled with reds and different shades of blues that I was sitting on. "Here's a comfortable chair for you. Let me go get some supplies to get you fixed up. You can put your leg on this pillow."

He slides an octagonal, purple pillow close enough for me to arrange it. Firm, yet soft. I slowly take my right leg with both hands and place it on the velvet pillow. It melts into the middle of it like butter on a pan. The pain remains, but it feels much better elevated. After all of this, I'm waiting for something else robust to happen, but somehow I feel a strange peace on this porch. The same peace I felt on stage closing my eyes. The same I felt on the rock. As if I were in a wrong situation that felt right. The pain is present, but it doesn't negate the peace.

Where am I? Who is Sol? How did they find me? Questions start to swarm and loom like a nightmare that is just starting. I am wondering if I was some sort of target. Of whom? I look down at my hands and begin picking out small, sharp particles. Sol came over and set a small plate beside me to put the shards on. The music changes to a different song, but still jazz. A complicated piece that was off rhythm just enough to be on. The pieces in my skin look like blades of broken purple grass. They are all only dug into the surface, thank the Truth. After getting some out, I look outside. I expect hyperGlass for the protection of his porch, but it is surrounded by a material that looks familiar. It is transparent from the inside, but the mesh makes it feel that it was open. I slowly face my pain to get up to go touch it and feel what material it is, and I realize that the shock is wearing off. My body and my soul feel overwhelmed and all I can think to do is sit back down. I gaze out of the window, feeling trapped. Tall cedar trees sway in the wind like the sails of our cruiser boats going from side to side. The sun is setting behind his place and the reflection from the tall emerald choreography in the breeze is mesmerizing. I usually need to close my eyes to imagine such beauty. I watch as a white bird flies from one end to the other. It looks like a canvas painting I have seen before. I sit back and again, attempt to pull out more shards. The views are different here. A bizarre sort of reality.

Star finds out about the bombing and her missing brother. Their family begins a search for Xi.

I look out again. A cloud floats through the sky in the background and reveals the arena in the distance. The white walls glimmer in the sunlight. We are not that far away. My chest feels like it is being squeezed, and I look down to see my fists in tight orbs. What am I doing? I have to get back. I am Conseil-elect, and people are still in danger.

I put theLens back in, but it is not coming on. They must have gotten damaged. It's impossible for my battery to be dead. They last seven full days without a charge. I quickly take theVibes that I had left.

"Unfortunately, they don't work inside here," Sol says, stepping back onto the porch.

I look up at Sol as fear grips me. "Sir, do you have a charger, I think they just need a reset," I say, not in the mood for joking. I feel a sickness coming over me.

"Xi, they do not work in here. We are surrounded by a barrier that blocks any of the System's devices. It is for all of our protection. I am sure that theVibes and theLens of yours are fine, but they will not operate here."

I try not to panic and take a deep breath adjusting my leg on the purple pillow. I calmly look back up. "I need to contact my family," I say, desperately pressing theLens back in my eyes to see if it works again. Why would he not want me to use them? They still do not work. I keep trying. I imagine him speaking up again, but he does not.

He walks over and sits down on a swing beside me and put his hands on the top of his head, still breathing heavily from the running. I can hear him whispering but can't catch what he is saying.

I look back outside. Seeing the glimpse of the arena again, I feel a depth of horror. I am in trouble. I can imagine this is in every Nouvelle possible. *An explosion and the newest Conseil-elect missing.* I imagine they already have a crew out looking for me. I have the ceremony tomorrow to be sworn in. I have to be there for this to be official. I need to be at dinner tonight, but I see the smoke filling the air around us.

"How long does the smoke last?" I say looking over at Sol.

"Three days," Sol says with his hands still over his head. "I have seen the same mixture several times. This type of cube bomb. The same purple killer."

"Do you happen to know who I am?" I say to Sol with humility, deeply hoping he can help me.

He doesn't answer but keeps his hands on his head, but his eyes closed now.

"Sol," I say with a pause and ask him again as if he knows me.

"Do you know who you are?" he answers, looking up at me.

I am in pain and looking for answers and I don't have time for games. "All of Three15 knows who I am, sir, especially now. I just won the Jeux, and I must be on the platform tomorrow for the ceremonies," I say with a confident tone.

"As much as I know you want that, the smoke will take three days, Xi. You will have to be here. I will not let you kill yourself trying to get out," he says, turning to look at me.

"There is no reason for me not to believe you, but there are people that need me out there, and I refuse to miss this."

Sol continues to swing. "Our longings to be needed sometimes have to bow to our own needs. Sheesh, that's a big one," Sol says, looking at my side. I am not sure how this seems nonchalant to him. He quickly gets up and takes the tweezers from the table and walks toward my side. "Either I can do this, or you need to," he says, still looking at the sharp purple glass that pierced my shirt like a nail pinning cloth onto a wooden board. "Each of these glass pieces will begin to infect if not pulled now." He stands from the swing and slowly walks inside. I look up for what seems like a second, and he picks up a tube of something and some bandages that he laid beside me earlier.

"What is in this for you, if you do not mind me asking?" I say looking at Sol confused, grateful, and frustrated.

He looks at me and says, "Are you doing this or me? If I pull it, you need to have the cloth ready to stop the blood. Or vice versa." I've never met someone who gives such indirect answers. Or none at all.

In Three15, we give direct answers because we work hard to have the answers. I look down and take the tweezers with my left hand and grip the end with both hands. Feeling and my senses must be coming back, because this old man is beginning to frustrate me. I put my right index in the air as I clamp down on the glass and utilize my other fingers. My skin in and around the glass begins to burn. It is coated. I quickly pull it as hard as I can, and it comes loose. It went deeper than I thought. The blood proved the depth after it came out. Sol quickly takes a cloth and wipes down my wound as I cringe.

"Put this on it," he says, grabbing a tape. I put a cloth pad down on my wound. It has a soothing aspect and medication already on it. He tapes it from end to end, making the blood stop flowing. I look down and notice some got on his rug.

"I am so sorry," I say, looking down to watch as a section of the light blues of the rug fade to burgundy. I try to wipe it with the extra cloth in my hand.

"Oh, this old thing?" he says with a laugh. "Just another addition to its story, Xi. It's seen a lot. I will clean it later." He hands me the tweezers and an old mirror, calm like a surgeon in operation. "The other pieces look small enough to pull. Get them out before an infection could set in. I have some medicines here that you can have in case," he says, continuing the surgery.

"I don't know what to say, Sol," I say looking up at him. "Usually strangers don't do things like this without an ulterior motive. I don't have the slightest clue what I could possibly do for you at this point. So, thank you. Thank you for helping me to safety. If I can do anything for you on the Conseil, I certainly will. I do need to tell you that it is absolutely necessary for me to be back for tomorrow morning's ceremonies, though." I continue to repeat that tomorrow is the swearing-in ceremony, hoping he will take that seriously.

"Most people nowadays consider 72 hours as a long time," he says, taking a bottle of water over to his plants. "But sometimes three days is barely enough time to take a deep breath."

He is beginning to frustrate me not getting to the point. I speak up again. "In my circumstances, a lot can happen in three days. A lot has happened to me in the past three hours. There may be funerals that I have to be at as well as officially taking my seat. I cannot imagine what people are thinking right now. Now more than ever, I am needed," I say, stopping my job of pulling glass.

"Sometimes it takes us three days to realize how much we are not needed. That we are not the answer to every problem," Sol says, looking into the distance. I am trying not to take offense at this point. I have a comeback, but I hold my tongue. I simply nod my head at him knowing that I will need to come up with a plan on my own.

The pain of not being able to help the people near me during the explosion creeps up, but I cannot let it. I have a mission: getting back. If I had any calm in me before these thoughts, they left. "Sol, to make this as simple as possible, I have to get back. I could use one of the masks that you gave me earlier and run the entire way. I am used to long runs."

Sol continues watering his plants. "Xi, now is not the time to get back out there. The smoke has only just begun. It is thick now and surrounds us. I have seen the purple cubes before. The smoke lasted three very full days. Your skin couldn't survive getting back into the woods," he says, putting the watering bottle on a green table.

He turns toward me and puts his hand in his pocket, pulling out what seems to be a locket, and looks at it. He seems to care less about my situation but strangely wants to care for me. I need to get back. "Please let me try, sir. I am an Onyxwalker; I can do this." I slowly stand up and look around the room to make a plan.

Xi attempts to escape Sol's house to get back but the smoke almost kills him. Sol risks his own life to rescue him again and bring him back inside to care for him. Sol medicates Xi before resting and having dinner. Then:

I finish up dinner and see Sol taking his time eating across from me at the small table he placed between us. He is quiet and intentional with his bites, not mixing any foods. It was an old table, I could tell. My mom has some old wooden artifacts that favor this. Maybe from the nineteenth century. The middle had an almond-shaped carving with acorns on each corner. It was old but kept pristine. Something you would be nervous to eat on, but he used it like we were eating on a folding table. We sat in silence as I was finished with my seconds. He is slow and meticulous in his eating. As Sol savors each bite, he seems to be in deep thought. It is as if he thinks that I need silence right now. The problem is, I don't like too much silence. I like my eyes closed, but silence is another thing completely. Frankly, it scares me a bit.

An idea comes into my mind like fly buzzing around and landing on my head. The more I try to shoo the idea away, it keeps coming back. Tonight, I will pretend I quickly fall asleep and wait until there is no noise around. I will then slowly look around the entire house to find a sailsuit. I have to get out of this place. I'm not sure how, but I need a new plan to make it back by tomorrow morning to receive the Apolo with my name on it and officially take my seat. There is a new sign of hope that I feel. This is very kind of this old man, but if he does have a sailsuit, I can be out before the sun comes up. I am on mission now. I can't relax.

Beginning to feel the anxiety come over, I speak up with small talk. "Sol, where did you get the table?"

"Ah. This old thing? It is one of my favorite possessions, Xi," he says, cupping his hand on the side as if to embrace it. I look around, knowing he is the type who has a story for everything he owns. I feel bad knowing that I will steal from him if I have to, but I will do anything to get back. I can always send it back to him once I have made it.

"It is a mandorla table made from an oak tree. I had the acorns added on from a local carpenter. I like acorns." Again silence. "Ancient mandorla art is as close to a descriptor of a good-lived life as we can get. The Truth is in the middle, you know."

I look at the almond shape that he points to in the middle of two circles. "It is the sacred overlap that seems to have the most tension. It may hold all that tension, but it is also where we find peace. The in-between. Between the heavens and the depths. Between pain and healing. This is where we find Truth." He slides his hand across it and looks up to me. "That's what this porch really is, Xi. Porches were the mandorla of podoriums of old. They called them neighborhoods and homes. People spent time on the porch, the in-between. They would risk hearing stories different than their own. It is a brave place. An open space. They slowly began building living spaces behind their homes and the porches disappeared. The bravery of listening to the other seemingly disappeared with it. It was never perfect, but people chose sides instead of having mandorla hearts. We then created algorithms that kept us on our sides. Then porches disappeared altogether. This place brings peace because it is a way of being that should return to bring unity to our Nation. Our world."

I feel drawn to everything he is saying, but I am still suspicious of his foreign words. I am suspicious knowing that I could not see him with the Lens in. There must be a reason for him being erased from Three15. Who knows, maybe from the System itself. We sit in silence for a moment, and I do not respond.

"So, where were we, Xi? Did you say that you were in the Jeux? The explosion happened so quickly but I knew it was in Three15 territory," he says with his attention finally on the situation.

"I was in the Jeux," I say, looking up at him.

"How did you place?" he says.

"I won," I say, looking out toward home.

"Whoa. That's a big deal. How long have you been training for this day?" he asks. It is like he wants to sympathize with my pain right now, but I am not letting it sink in.

"Since I was twelve." I leave the story alone. I don't trust him yet. The kindness could be a mask. There could still be other plans he has with me.

"Three15 will be on a major search for you," he says, smiling and looking at the ceiling now. He looks down at me into my eyes and says, "Take a deep breath. You are journeying home."

I pause for a moment. He just quoted part of 7-95th of our 8 principles. "How do you know that?" I say looking at him.

"The real question is, why are you not following that principle right now, Xi?" Sol looks up and takes a deep inhale, looking at the ceiling with his eyes closed. He exhales, opening his eyes and looking back at me. My training takes over.

"Home is a journey you fight for. The fight is still in me," I say, quoting 3-43rd and looking into his eyes.

"You know your principles kid." It is serious, yet playful. Not many people can quote the Principles like that with their eyes closed. He doesn't even have the Lens here. At least I don't think he does. Our immediate response in Three15 is to have a correct answer. If someone misuses the Script, correct them so they come to know the principles within the Script and the correct interpretation of it.

I look at Sol and his eyes are closed with his face to the ceiling. I can't stand the tension of wanting to know more of his background after hearing him quote the Script. "Do you follow a set of beliefs?" I say, breaking the silence.

"Oh, very much, kid. The Truth has set me free."

"I as well," I say, which is a typical Three15 response to any correct truthful language used. So many other Verses and groups are sadly confused with the Script. They put their spins on it instead of taking it for the perfection that it is. You can usually spot this in the beginning, but Sol has curious answers. I appreciate most of them.

"I imagine if you competed today, you know the 8 in your heart very well. Especially winning the thing." If he only knew how well I knew it. This could be an opportunity to see how disparaged his thoughts of the Script are and why he is off the grid, but I take myself back to mission. Tonight, I plan my escape. Although I am exhausted, my adrenaline is flowing again thinking about finding a sailsuit and getting out. I play it up even more and begin to let my eyes slowly close in the silence in between our talking. He takes notice and my plan works.

"I can see that you are getting tired," he says, looking at me. "Let me show you to your room and show you where everything is. I will clean everything up. You get some sleep." He comes over and extends his hand to help me up. I am not looking forward to this part. I take his hand and slowly rise. My right leg is bad off, but my back is feeling a bit better. I am at least able to limp back autonomously, although Sol offers his shoulder.

Xi begins searching the house for a sailsuit to continue to plan a hopeful escape but has no luck. In looking for the sailsuit, he stumbles upon a hidden room under a set of stairs that appear in one of the rooms at Sol's house. He attempts to avoid it, but he encounters a group in the basement of Sol's house.

"My name is Xi, and I am from Three15. Today I competed in the Jeux and I won. On my way home, I was unable to put on my sailsuit because of the pain in my leg. I took another way home and unfortunately a bomb went off while I was in the forest. Sol found me and saved me by bringing me here. I am now here and hopefully on my way out to accept the Apolo and my seat on the Conseil

tomorrow at the ceremonies. I am not sure who to believe, but I will ask once more, where can I find a sailsuit?"

It's very quiet after that. The playful faces before become much more serious. "We haven't had a Three15er for a while, and never someone who has won the Jeux," says the brute in a more compassionate manner than before.

The beautiful girl in front of me takes a step closer to me. "I cannot imagine what you are going through, Xi," she says, looking into my eyes. "I hate to say this, but there are truly no sailsuits here. I am sure it is difficult knowing you can't leave here for the next few days. I am glad you stepped through. Looking at your skin, it looks like you have already made an attempt to get out." My heart sinks, thinking about all that this could mean not having a way out. "I am sure that Sol can help you while you are here. He has helped us in ways that we cannot describe. If you are a Three15er, you believe mistakes don't happen, right? Truth is in control?" she says, looking at me with everyone listening.

"That's correct," I say, not making eye contact.

"Well then, take a deep breath. There's a reason you are here." I wish her words were more comforting, but the puzzle I feel I am in just became 10,000 pieces instead of the 100 I thought I was dealing with on the porch.

"Welcome to the underground, Xi. My name is Zara," she says, looking at me sincerely with her hand out. I shake her hand, ready to get back upstairs and keep searching. It is soft but confidently shaking mine with a smile. I am not used to people introducing themselves with their names. In Three15, you simply see a name projected conveniently above their head so that you never forget. I don't even know if you ever remember many names because of this.

I can tell others are getting ready to introduce themselves, but I speak first. "Zara, nice to meet you. I am sure you are all great people, but I am in and out. It may make more sense for me to just stay upstairs until I can leave."

"I know we are a bunch of misfits, but I truly believe this time for you here can be valuable if you let it be," she says, switching from my right to my left eye as she looks at me.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I say, still confused as to what this is.

"I had the exact confusion in my eyes when I began to break down the awful systems in Eight28 that I never saw before," Zara says. "It took my breath away to know wonderful people in my group were being led by systems and algorithms instead of by love. By the Truth. Systems they created, but ones that they held tightly to when they saw that it gave them safety. Security. A club to belong to. We are here to teach and be taught how to take down every system and algorithm that oppresses and excludes. The humans are not the enemies. It is our creations that we lean. Our boxes we need for security that we lean on more than Truth. We are here to learn a better way. Give a way of Truth

that can give people the life they need. We are here to learn how to turn things upside down without harming a soul, but with healing. Crushing the systems that keep souls harmed."

I am taken back. I have never heard anyone talk this way before. Gentle, yet fierce. Admirable, maybe needed for her group, but not mine.

"Xi, I am asking Truth that you begin to see what you have not seen yet until the smoke clears."

I speak up and snap out of her special moment. "I am touched, really, but I have nothing against System for any algorithm that is actually working well. In Three15, it works. Not sure about Eight28 or the other groups."

I look around the room, and people seem unphased by the conversation, as if this has happened to each of them. I don't have time for games or some underground group. I nod a "nice to meet you" to the group and begin walking back from where I came, but I can't find the black space I walked through. "You walk through the green door," Zara says. I reach for the handle and feel nothing. "Without opening it," she adds as the brute in the corner gained his laugh back. "Not now, Troc," Zara says, looking at him. I close my eyes and walk through.

Xi, confused with the underground group, gets needed sleep and wakes up for another conversation with Sol.

"How do you take your coffee, Xi?" Sol asks with his comforting deep voice.

"Black, please," I reply quietly.

"The best way," he says with a thunderous laugh.

"I'm sorry, did I wake you up, Sol?"

He walks toward the kitchen and says, "Not at all. It's the siren that gets me up every morning. By the way, I was able to encrypt a code to Three15 and let them know you are alive. It is a dated way to get a message across, but they will receive it. I also sent over the read of your pulse monitor to show that your heart is beating clearly. They will know you are alive but they will have no way to know where you are. I can imagine your family will be relieved at that news."

My hands automatically cover my face hearing those comforting words. Will they pause the ceremonies now? The realization of being trapped in this old pod for two more days sinks in. I am ready to leave, but there is a deep down bizarreness of knowing there is some sort of importance to this place.

"You know, kid, that swing you're on is a good teacher," Sol says, handing me a hot coffee. The steam is soothing as I lift the cup to take a sip. The mug he hands me is white with a picture of a

hand-drawn acorn on it. "You have to lean back to go forward. When you lean forward, you go backward. You are starting to lean backward, and I know it is scary." Sol spoke slowly and took long intentional pauses with each sentence. "It seems like you are falling, but you have to realize that your faithful fall is, in fact, upwards. It is necessary for every seeker of the Truth. You need it for your faith to grow. The invitation is to lean back and let Truth do what Truth does best. We try to climb our way there to find Truth, but we are always called down from the tree for an encounter if we are truly listening. Lean back and let Truth take you forward."

With every word, I feel a paradox of peace and uncertainty, but I'm not interested in entertaining his philosophy. He seems like a sage, but it is difficult to be a good listener right now. There is much to know about this old man that I don't. I don't trust him yet. I do know that I have a lot to process. Zara comes to mind. Her short conversation with me is still sinking in. The certainty I had yesterday before seeing my uncle has left me empty for years, but my questions create a holy longing that I cannot figure out.

The deeper I sink into knowing that leaving is not an option, the more I try to give myself to the strange situation at hand. There is a pulling within.

Star ventures to the old Verse's library to try and find out more information about the algorithm and she quickly leaves when the government library officer becomes suspicious. Xi and Sol continue their conversation on the porch.

Sol takes a pair of binocs and begins looking toward the Hill. "Wow," he says, shaking his head. "Take a look Xi."

I stop swinging and take the binocs to look. Without theLens, I see the white buildings strangely through the purple smoke. I see people walking like normal throughout without publicit  everywhere.

"Xi, do you see the family against the theater building over there?" I look three meters north and see them after a cloud of purple smoke clears. I am surprised to see a family of four covered in a mint-green tattered blanket leaning up against the building. They are huddled together closely. "Every day for the past two months they have been in the same place. Others like them, too. Have you ever seen them before, Xi?" he says, looking toward them.

Dumbfounded, I say, "No." This is the same way I take to school every day and the white wall that this suffering family is leaning against is an advertisement through theLens. "Xi, have you ever thought about what Three15's algorithm is doing?"

Putting his coffee down, he looked up at the ceiling fan on the porch. The fan blades slowly spin above as he looks at me waiting for a response. He seems to know the training I have been through and that I will answer him with another question.

I could come up with something better, but I am wincing at the awful thought that I hope is not true. "Are you telling me that they have been erased from theLens?" I say, still looking in amazement at the family.

"The algorithms control the information we are given. Our groups give us exactly what they want us to hear and see. It is a tactic for control that began at a pure place. It comes back to faithfulness. A faithfulness in what you have always known. A faithfulness to keep the systems that keep us safe in place. Following the wind is not safe, nor can you design an exact map. There is an inquisitive notion of fear that people like this family you see are a threat. Fear that other groups and their understandings are a threat. So theLens erases them, just as they have erased me and the others here. You see what you want to see in life, Xi. When you see the algorithm your group has created as the only good nouvelles out there, you begin to villainize others who do not see and hear as you do. It is the systems and algorithms themselves that create division and class. How were the eggs?"

I don't respond. I feel deceived. I don't want to believe it. I take the binocs one more time to make sure this isn't some program Sol created. I see the exact places I walked with the same family. I was living in a bubble.

"You briefly mentioned a crew of people in your metadark doored basement. I found them last night. Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Around here, you find things out when you are ready."

"This has to be an illegal operation and certainly wouldn't be stood for by any group." My mind is racing, and my distrust for Sol increases. There are too many new things that are being revealed for this to seem right. Why me? He says it wasn't planned, but it seems he has lots of plans. Have I been a part of his plan? I better play along a little longer in case he is dangerous. It could have been him that sent the bomb in the first place to recruit me into his own group. I don't think so, but I can't count anything out at this point.

"That's the beauty of being invisible."

Silence. I try to slow my racing mind, but things are crumbling. Sol doesn't seem to be afraid of silence. I am not afraid of the dark, but silence. I can't take it. It is excruciating.

But it's a necessary thing around here, apparently. I take a deep breath and put down the binocs. I cannot deny what I am seeing. I cannot deny already seeing the corruptness of the leaders within my group. Most of all, I cannot deny the peace that I am feeling during the most stressful time of my life. Sitting here. Seeing nature with unobscured views. It is all sinking in, but I am fighting it.

I will not let all that I have learned and fought for be thrown out in a couple of conversations. I am obviously confused and not thinking straight. This is how people like this get here in the first place. They throw away the right ideals for those of a feeling. I am not a man of feeling but of Truth. I am blessed enough to have been taught it and live in it. I will not have some strange man break me

with a feeling. My group might make mistakes, but they are good people, and we follow the right way.

"Xi, I know how you are feeling right now," Sol says, looking over at me. I do not make eye contact. I let out a bit of a cantankerous laugh, shaking my head and pulling my hands from my face down to my knees. I continue to look outside at hazy greenery and birds chirping above the smoke. This is a disaster. I will not let him do this to me.

I turn to see him. "I don't know if you do understand what I am feeling. To be honest with you, I am torn. I struggle with finding an underground group away from their safety. Their families. As they may find that they are healing their thinking, it could potentially be that good structures have been put in place by people of truth. Good people that you probably think are evil. Thank you for your kindness, but I feel strings attached. I have a place to take in a group that is still making a difference. I have no clue who that family is out there, but maybe there is a reason they have been erased. Like you. I still trust Three15. Every group has its flaws, but I am loyal."

"Is it your group's ideals you trust, or the Truth, Xi?" Sol asks. "If I could, I would help you get home. I know you are ready to get back."

"Badly," I say. I miss my parents. I miss Jag, as annoying as he is. Star, the Onyxwalker herself. I feel imprisoned.

"Xi, I know this entire situation is not ideal. We are getting to know you well. You will need to be here longer, so you might as well ask a few questions and get to know some of us. One of the most beautiful things you can do is get to know the stories of those different from you. They may not be all that different," Sol says, getting up to leave. He stops at the door. He turns with his eyes closed and opens them holding on to the door. "You're going to be here, so at least get to know who you think are your enemies." He walks inside. He is using the Script against me. He pulls things out of the Script in his speech in the most annoying ways. He has no clue about my training. It burns me, almost as if he knows what buttons to push to test me. He does not feel like an enemy, but he sure toes the line.

Xi has another conversation with Zara about everything he is going through and Star continues to try to find more clues about the origin of the algorithm with Uncle Near. Sol has his first session with the underground group and has a hologram guest speaker who is an enemy of Three15. It offends Xi that Sol would have someone who is an enemy, and his distrust grows. After walking out, Xi discovers a piece of the bomb under Sol's bed. He suspects that Sol is a leader of the TerrorVerse and confronts Sol at the dinner table.

A woman steps out into the dining room. I do not look up. "I am really glad you could join us, Xi," she says, making her way to the table where I have chosen a seat in the middle. Her voice sounds

familiar and I know I have heard it. I look up and see Sharr Magnus. My heart sinks. Why am I not surprised? She is the leader of Five43, a group that stemmed from Three15 around ten years ago. Governor Lor despises no one more. Five43 took full rebellion into their hands and decided to start their own group simply because a woman could not be on the Conseil. They changed some of the Principles as well. She knows who I am and my allegiances. They are a neighboring group that has minded their own business until they began taking some of ours through their own propaganda.

This is why our algorithm protects us from people like this. We lost too many to other groups. There are always ones who try to take those out at the top. Even when things at the top are as they should be. I have never thought of her as a threat, being at the same table is not ideal. She sits and says nothing. In comes Sol with an enormous piece of smoked meat. Sharr gets up to help Sol bring in more food. I don't move. I am nervous about carrying the piece of information that could get me killed. I feel alone at this table, and I realize how big of a target I must be. I will be the youngest member of the Conseil with a desire to keep things the same and move forward, while people like this only want more for their own group. The governor's statement about Sharr was clear: she is a danger to our values. I now know their collaboration with the TerrorVerse. I sit and I wait for my move. It doesn't include hospitality, but I feel vengeance inside. One that wants to let justice roll from the Hill directly into each of these people now sitting across and beside me.

I hear footsteps coming back in from the kitchen to the dining room. Sol first. He has lots of sides. I have no appetite. Then comes Sharr. She carries a carafe of water and a bottle of red wine. After her comes Zara. I see her similarities in Sharr and it makes me glad I have kept a distance. She may be her daughter. She has four glasses in her hands and sets them at each place at the table. They arrange the table from where I sit. No one is talking. There is an awkwardness. If they know what is about to happen, they could easily have a plan together that could take me out. Maybe they don't. I usually have a better conscience in these moments, but I don't feel a thing. I simply know they will realize their wrongs.

They spread everything out and Sol speaks up, closing his eyes. "Let us see Truth more clearly, follow Truth more nearly, and love you, Truth, much more dearly." He then looks up and smiles, let's eat.

"Xi—" before Sol can say anything else, I interrupt.

"I cannot sit here and make small talk. I am sure you already know, but I found this." I stand up and move my seat to the side as I have everyone's attention and the room is silent. I drop the bright yellow piece of the bomb on the table, making the glasses around rattle. "Is this how you pull in all of your followers?" Sharr tries to speak up, but I speak over her. "I need the truth! I need honesty," I say, face wrinkled, making sure to catch every eye at the table. "Your confusing conversations and hospitality may work with the others, but not me. It all makes sense to me now. I don't want trouble," I say, knowing the risk of this, "but I can't continue until someone tells me what is actually happening here."

I place my napkin and finally break eye contact with Sol. Zara's eyelashes are low, staring at me in confusion. Sharr is quiet, looking at me with wide eyes. Sol stands up. "Xi, if you had been willing to listen, we have been trying to tell you. I only asked one thing of you here, to get to know us. I have lost my appetite as well."

Not this. He gets up and leaves the table going through the kitchen. I hear the porch door creak open and slam shut. Zara gets up and goes after Sol after giving me a look of disgust. Sharr doesn't move. I turn my attention toward her and wait for a response. I thought there would be a defensive attack against me, but now my mind is racing.

"Do you feel better? Do you feel... right?" Sharr says, looking at me. "I try not to put all you Three15ers in a box, but my Truth you make it hard."

I don't know where this is going but I continue to give her my attention.

She takes the metal piece from in front of me. She throws it against the wall behind me, crashing it into the slatted wood on the wall and just missing a dish display. "Are you ready to listen?" she says loudly enough to silence a crowd.

"I am really not in the mood for more lies," I say, meeting her frequency and looking directly at her, full force.

She takes a deep breath, shakes her head and takes a seat again. She pulls out her file bag. She turns her hologram and opens her display recordings. She looks at me as she searches for a recording. "Look," she says, showing me the slip seal of what she just discovered. A slip seal is an unbreakable code revealing that a day's recording has not been tampered with. My recordings were off because I lost my sailsuit, but hers were in her glasses.

"I didn't think I would need to show you this, but you have forced my hand. I would think this could come from a conversation at the table, but your accusations will enlighten you," she says, touching the recording and breaking the seal with a password. She presses play. It is her having a conversation with Sol. She swipes her hands to fast-forward to the explosion. She rewinds to the part and then looks at me and presses play and focuses on Sol. Each day recording is a 360-degree camera and you can target people you want to watch. We watch Sol.

Hearing the deep bass of the explosion makes me shake again. Yesterday seems too far away but it feels close again. She is on the porch with Sol.

"Noooo," Sol yells. He turns and grabs his mask and presses the hatch to open the door.

"No, no, no, no" is all I can hear Sharr saying. I look over as this plays and see Sharr's eyes begin to tear. They run. The sound is only footsteps as they dart through the trees toward the explosion. Sol is carrying a medimat. He is counting and running faster than I have seen someone of his size run. "We have twenty seconds," he shouts as I hear the heavy panting of Sharr running behind him. I see the smoke beginning to rise and the bright yellow bomb in the shot now. Sol is running toward it.

"Fifteen," he shouts frantically. He dives to the ground low beside the bomb and takes out a blade. It looks like some old welding device. He begins to cut away a part of the yellow.

"Five," Sharr shouts at him.

He says, "Got it," and rolls on his back. A piece falls from the bomb. The same piece that Sharr just threw. The same piece I brought in here. Sol jumps up and looks around.

"We have to go or you won't make it," Sharr shouts at him, beginning to run back. The view of Sol behind gets smaller and smaller. I know the feeling of the smoke hitting. It is not easy. I see Sol spot something near the river. He takes a little girl and puts her on his shoulder and begins to run toward Sharr. Sharr pauses the hologram. She then presses her view. It's me.

"Come with me quick," she says to me, grabbing my hand. I looked like I was blinded from the bomb but took her hand and ran. It was her. She saved me. I thought I recognized her voice. She presses pause. Turns the hologram off.

"That man that you just accused of being a terrorist has saved more lives than you will ever know. Just so you know, I would save yours again if I had the chance." Her words pierce deep. She took looks at me for a moment and then walks out. "My appetite is gone as well," she says, fading away, walking toward the porch.

Xi embarrassingly takes time alone in a room in the house where he finds an Apolo (award for winning the Jeux, with the deeper meaning of apologetics from 1 Peter 3:15) with Sol's name on it. He was in Three15. Xi thinks more about it and comes back out to apologize.

"I was hoping you would come out," Sol says with a face of invitation. Silence. Sharr doesn't look at me. Zara gets up to leave just as I come out and does not look at me as she passes by. It is now just us three. Sol is on the swing and Sharr sitting beside him.

"I am really sorry," I say, looking at them both. The silence rests again. It makes me uncomfortable thinking that I have ruined my chances of listening.

"Xi, if I were in your shoes and your age again, I probably would have reacted much worse. Come and have a seat. You certainly had some puzzle pieces that you put together, but you can never solve any puzzle without them all."

I don't move but nod my head. I look over at Sharr. "I also want to say thank you, Sharr. Thank you, Sol. You both saved my life. While I assumed other intentions, I hope you will give me an opportunity to listen. I have obviously forgotten some things while being here. I hope you accept my apology."

Sol begins his thunderous laugh. He continues to laugh and settles into his rhythm of swinging. "You sure caught me off guard with the bomb piece. I thought you might be a terrorist yourself," he says, continuing to laugh. "Xi, a posture of transformation always wins over an expectation of transaction. The only thing I ask you to give is listening ears to those you may see as enemies. Give the decency to find a table together. Not because we somehow saved you, but because it is good and right and true and kind. That's who you are, Xi. You realize that, right? Do you know the meaning of your name?" he says to me intently.

I had never given it a thought. "I don't," I say, looking down.

"Your name even means hope. A twice perfection. Fourteen." It was the first time someone has told me what my name meant. "This has been something spoken over you. Probably every day of your life. Anytime someone says your name, they are speaking hope over you, a hope that does not come from simply following an algorithm but a hope that comes from what the Truth is saying to you deep within. You simply have to listen to it. The three-legged stand is experiencing the Truth, reading and internalizing the Script through the lens of Truth, and being in community with followers of the Truth. This is what shows us the way. One of today's rarest commodities is to listen, you know. Kindness often gets lost, too."

He leans forward and pauses the swing for a second and looks up at me. "You might just see that we are not that different. We can talk more after we meet with everyone this evening." I am dying to ask him about the Apolo, but I know I need to let it rest and give some time to reflect.

Xi arrives at the evening meeting with the underground group.

"Tonight is an invitation to experience the Spirit of Truth. Truth can be found in the stillness. In the quiet. In the places we fear. The places we love. Many groups see Truth as their understandings or as the Script itself. Truth is much deeper and wider than words on a page. Truth ventures into our imaginations and captivates our hearts. Truth is Spirit. A being. Someone we can experience and call good. Someone who breaks barriers of algorithms and systems, Verses and nations."

It feels a bit strange, but I am glad the attention is off me right now. This feels like a practice I have done on a school trip one time, except much more inclusive. We were in the transitory years from college to lycée and it was a part of training for people who had a desire to give their lives to something more. To give their lives to the Truth. That's always been my desire. I remember being uncomfortable then too. But here I am. In a room with a bunch of outcasts and rebels. And somehow, I feel that I fit a bit more than I am comfortable with. I want to skip this and have time with Sol, but I feel a beckoning. I let my pride go and give an openness to this moment.

"Everyone close your eyes so that we can see. If you see better with eyes open, that works too. Let's take a second and invite Truth." I close my eyes and participate, knowing that everyone else is too. He talks like he is in Three15, but he speaks of the Truth in a way I have never heard.

"Truth, we invite you ahead of us in our futures, behind us in our pasts," Sol says as he pauses to take a deep breath. "Above us in the heavens and below us in the depths. At our right in our strength and left in our weakness. Except for Thomas, who you know is left-handed."

People laugh a little to cut the seriousness of the moment.

"Open the eyes of our heart and let us behold you who are everything good. In you, Truth, we have all that we need. Come and meet us." I close my eyes again and take a deep breath. My anxiety calms, and I begin to relax. The tightness of my chest fades into a slow rhythm of a heartbeat that feels natural.

"Now," Sol says, looking up at us all. "Keep your eyes closed and I want you to use your imagination," he explains. "The eyes to our souls. Our resting place with Truth."

I take a long pause, and I stop thinking about what those around me are thinking. I don't think anyone around even knows about the drama earlier except for Sol, Sharr, and Zara. None of them seem to be focused on me right now. I give myself to the moment. It feels foreign but right. A moment that only peace could describe.

"Imagine yourself in your favorite place that you have ever been. A place that gives you comfort. Find yourself there." He takes a long pause. I let my wandering mind come to a rest. It is difficult at first with everything my mind has going on. The pain I still feel in my body and in my heart is real, but calm comes. I go back to the place by the sea my mother adores. The place my family finds rest. We go every so often as a family. I imagine this place to be a glimpse of the heavens. My favorite rock is there. Eyes closed, I take myself there again. This time recognizing Truth.

"What is the weather like? What do you feel, see, hear?" Sol says gently. I Onyxwalk through a memory. Something I have done many times before, but this is different. I am sitting right by the sea, younger. The age when worry had no place but wonder made its home in me. I hear the pebbles rushing forward with every small wave's crash. I dig my fingers and toes deep into the smooth stones and feel the sand beneath as the cool water gently touches my feet. I hear the laughs of my family behind me as they play a game. It is just me and the sea ahead. The sun is setting to my right, and the clouds roll revealing the sun like a painting above me. I walk toward the rock that I love so much. Through the gentle waves. Deeper and deeper. As the waters rise, I lose a bit of control but let the water take me. I feel my feet touch the giant of a stone. I climb up and sit at the top with the endless waters ahead and everything I care for behind me.

"Now, invite the Truth into that moment. That place. It is because of Truth that we see the beautiful memory. The giver of good things in life. Giving the invitation to rest. Imagine Truth coming and sitting beside you. Being beside you," Sol says as I escape further into this moment in my soul. I feel my heart beat slower. The doubt of the moment subsides and a strange peace comes over me.

"Truth is good and nothing else. Allow your imagination to get you close enough to lean on Truth's heart. Feel the perfect rhythm of grace. What do you feel in this moment in your body? In your soul? Your spirit? To know the peace of leaning on Truth. If you could look into Truth's face, what expression would you see? What are Truth's eyes saying to you this evening? What is Truth thinking while looking at you? Truth looked at you with love first, adored you first, gave to you first," Sol says as a quiet fills the air.

He continues, "Truth has been up all night waiting to tell us something right now in this moment. It may not be audible, but you will know when you hear." My hand begins to shake a little out of my frailty in this moment. "Let the first thing that is said come to you. When you lay down your agenda and you open your heart to listen, you will hear Truth speak in love with words that build. Words that create. Words that change."

Silence.

I work to keep myself together, but I feel undone. I gain control of my hand at my side and let my eyelids gently rest like a blanket just tucked over a child. I feel warmth. I have never felt the Truth in this way. I guess I haven't given it the chance.

I listen. A movement inside that fights normalcy and brings me peace. Just as I would memorize the script and put it on projection, I am seeing a projection that I know is Truth speaking. A beautiful script appears in my mind's eyes, one I have never seen before. The Writing starts.

"You are mine. I am yours."

I look at the script appearing in an ocean ink in the sky above as the sun is setting and I lean against Truth. It is as if Truth made a projection for me. A projection I can feel.

"You are searching for meaning, Xi. You found me. You look for answers. I am the answer. I wait for you every day. You make me proud to call you mine. Your faithfulness makes me smile. You make me proud. I am not going anywhere. Here I am."

I am taken back. My emotions swell but remain in the moment. I look up and know there is a smile looking back down at me. I have been brought into a projection especially made and thought about for me. I feel at home, if there ever was such a feeling. Right here on the rock. Not alone. Words I don't hear that I have been longing to hear have come in a crash of a wave that is as gentle as a feather. I feel the tightness of a hug like a blanket collapsing over me in the cool of the sunset. Peace ensues. I sit and breathe in a moment more beautiful than I have ever experienced. Reality blurs from beauty. My pain is still there, but Truth being with me gives me all the strength I need. I could be in this moment forever. I hear the laughter of my family behind me, and I turn around. I see a man walking toward the water. Toward me. I recognize him but cannot make out who it is from this distance. His hand is stretched out. My family follows behind him. The sun comes from behind his face and I see him. My father. I quickly turn back, not wanting to see him. I have hated him since he left. Only my earliest memories of him give me a picture in my mind, but this one is vivid. I turn back around.

"I miss you." I hear him say and I quickly open my eyes. This is too much.

"Ok, I see some reactions," Sol says. "I would love to hear what Truth spoke to some of you." I quickly begin thinking through the embarrassment again and get up. I walk toward the door and through the space into the in-between room. I walk up the stairs quickly, letting my emotions take over.

I am not ready to share this with anyone. The porch seems the only place I can be, and still feel that I am not in another world. I see the Hill. I see the lies. I see the trauma. I feel the Truth. I think about my father for the first time in years. An indescribable peace has filled every part of me. I sit on the oversized, comfy chair thinking through everything.

Sol shares his story with Xi.

"I remember my first time doing that exercise," Sol said, stepping onto the porch. "We know the Truth is real and guides us, but we don't use our imagination enough to meet. What did you think?" He takes a seat on the rug in front of the chair.

"I think it is something I never knew I needed so much," I say, looking up at him, still shaken from earlier. My intensity is gone and I feel lost, but found. "I feel like I have the answer, but know nothing," I say to him smiling. It was an old proverb from Marlin Tok, one of the Three15 greats.

Sol looks up at me and smiles. "Marlin definitely got that right."

"Sol, I wish I would have known you were in the Conseil," I say looking at him.

He pauses. "Would you have been willing to listen to an enemy of our old group?" He says with a serious face. He has a point.

"I saw the Apolo in the closet. How long did you serve on the Conseil?"

"Ahh. You found out I am a brother... That was going to be our dinner conversation, but this works too. You're safe here, Xi. I know it may feel like things are coming apart, but fear is the last thing the Truth would have you feel." He slowly gets up.

"What happened in Three15 that brought you here?"

He smiles and looks up at me. He gets up and makes his way to the swing. He walks with a slight limp that I didn't notice before. "Well, how much do you want to know?" he says, getting ready to sit.

"As much as you have time, I know it is getting late."

"I served nine years before they couldn't hold me anymore," he answers. "I was driven to uphold the script in a way that was unique as a child. I saw my life being different and I did everything I could to serve. I was taught to love the script and that it was what we looked to. I still love the script to this day. I am grateful for being raised in Three15," he says fondly. "When I knew I wanted a seat on the Conseil, I began practicing as an Onyxwalker. This was at twelve years of age. I became one of the best. When I won, I did not just want a seat on the Conseil, but a way to make a lasting difference. I spoke with Lor, who was a good friend there and took me in on the Conseil, about how to conserve our beliefs. As you know, Lor was close with Terra Storm, founder of System. I came up with the idea for an algorithm just as System was giving us direct access to be able to customize our group's experience through theLens and theVibes. They were very much in question when they first came but became adopted into people's daily lives. I knew we had to get our principles and the script into our hearing and sight, or we would lose it. In creating the algorithm, I made a fully functioning way of life that was tailored to our experience as Three15ers."

"Wait, you created the actual algorithm?" I say looking at him with attention captured.

He smiles and continues. "It was for Three15, by Three15 and perfectly molded our life to our way. It was crucial that it was for us and that it was the best. As other groups began to follow their algorithms, I wanted to know what they were doing. I went to other groups to see how they were adapting. That changed it all for me," he says as his rocking slowed down. "I thought I was going into enemy territory, but I met some dear friends. I met people that saw the script in a way I never had before. They knew the Truth in a way that I didn't know was possible." He pauses for a moment and seems to get choked up.

"What if you found out what you have been told growing up is not all true? Not all correct. It's devout. It's honorable. But it's like a puzzle that's not all put together. Not all there. I was foolish enough to think that I could have all the knowledge of Truth I needed from my Verse. If people simply accept thoughts from one group of people who think alike, they miss out on a whole world of beauty. We know where Truth is, Xi, but we should never claim to know where it is not," he says and continues to swing away. "There is an opportunity to know that Truth is so much bigger and better than ever imagined if you just listen to the voices you haven't before. Dance to the music that is foreign. Bleed for one who is not family. Suffer with those who have been erased."

I could see the faithfulness and love he had for Three15, but also the love he had for humankind. For other groups. For the image of Truth they held.

"I knew that I needed to adjust our algorithm and add some of the beauty of Truth I was finding in other groups. As you can imagine, that did not go well. I brought my findings back to the governor at the time, Dar Timm, and told him we would be much better off by not placing certainty on items that didn't require it. I must have hit a nerve with him. That was all it took," Sol says, his attention toward the Hill. "I began to find out meetings with the Conseil were happening without me and soon, I was voted out. The algorithm was kept. It is the same one that remains today. Only technical tweaks. Lor laid claim to it when I left, and he became governor. I was erased from the System and told not to return to Three15. My family was heartbroken. The love of my life never spoke to me

again. I had a ring for her and was ready to propose the very next week. Friends that I had for life never to be seen again. So... after many years in the wilderness, I ended up here. I found people like me. Ones who needed guidance and another chance. Even though some don't see the script the same way I do, and they see Truth in a different way. It has taught me how much more beautiful life is with diversity around your table. I would diminish Truth if I worked to make them all like me."

"If you are Three15, you believe Truth brought me here," I say looking over to him.

He looks at me and smiles. "Truth is not a controlling cosmic puppet master that caused a bomb and brought you here. Truth found you right where you were when you needed it most."

I sit and can do nothing but let it all sink in. I feel betrayed by Three15. I feel that there are so many things that I do not know but need to. Sol continues to rock, knowing that I have a lot on my mind.

"We have a full day tomorrow," Sol says. "You better get some rest."

Sol finds out through a frequency that the Governor announced that Xi was dead to move forward with his son being the new Conseil member. Sol begins designing a hack that will allow Xi to appear in people's projections to show that he is alive. Star and Near continue to get clues that point to Sol being the creator of the algorithm. Sol invites Xi to another session with the underground.

Walking through the pitch-black door into the underground still causes hesitation. It is as if it is another dimension. When I come through, I see a classroom-type setup with Sol, again, at the front. I look to my right and see Zara. She doesn't look at me. I do not blame her. I haven't given anyone here any ability to be heard. I haven't listened to one story. I came thinking I knew what was happening. I look around the room. The people are so different. The funny part is that I thought that I was remaining in my training by being on guard, but I lost it because of fear. My mom used to tell me that letting fear in opens the door to letting impossibilities out. She would tell a story of an old wise bird, one who was brave enough to land directly on a scarecrow. This wise bird knew to face fear so it would not miss out on the gift in the ground below. I have to be a part of the impossible happening and fear has no place.

"Good morning," Sol says, getting everyone's attention. He comes by me first and comes close. "Your hack is in the loading dock. This session will not take long, but it is necessary for you. We have to wait on the hack anyway, so we might as well learn while we wait."

I nod to him, and he walks to the front of the room. "Look around the room. Each person in this world has the ability for open eyes and ears just as yours have been opened. There are people waiting on you to tell a story bigger than yourself." I look into each person's face. Each one is a stranger who feels different than the day before. I do not have full trust or confidence, but I have a new longing to listen. "There are people waiting on an experience with the Truth that could give

them hope in the darkest times. Remember, it is in the darkness that a seed grows. Roots do not get deeper in the light. They are already a part of the light in their darkness.” The way Sol speaks gives way to a needed think time afterward and his pauses are usually too short. I am not sure I will be able to keep my emotion under control during the next twenty-four hours, but I have no other choice. I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and open them back up, ready to listen. Ready to learn. Ready to get home.

“Some of you have been here for a few months. Some for a few weeks. Some, we only have a few hours with. Some of you are here by accident, some on purpose. Some of you have strong beliefs in the Truth. Some of you do not believe in the Truth at all. However you have found yourself here, you are not alone. You belong. What I am about to show you should not be something that brings offense but reveals a reality that we all face.”

Sol reaches behind him and uncovers a hologram projector. He then steps back. “I want to show you a projection of myself thirty years ago. This is when I was in leadership of a Verse. TheLens and theVibes were in full effect and the algorithm I just created was a part of every decision that I made. I am using technology that the Verses created for war years ago to try and get information out of the enemy without torturing them, but simply having a conversation with their projected conscience. By using the algorithms they follow and their projection, you are able to actually have faux conversations that are scary accurate. Each person is learned by the algorithm. It tracks our every move and takes note. It soon begins to predict decisions to the point of helping one make decisions that feel like themselves. It makes sense, to a point, with things like easily purchasing the mouthcleaner you enjoy the most because your algorithm knows you. But it becomes dangerous when we put life on autopilot and let it take control. People get so used to following the promptings of the algorithm that they remain in the rhythm of artificial intelligence. A false self. It is a way to get people to stay the same. To blindly follow. To not have the ability to grow and learn and change, which is in all human nature. People essentially lose themselves to the algorithm. Now let’s have a conversation with the old me.”

I have never seen anything like this. How does someone have a conversation with themselves from the past? Sol moved back and the lights for the hologram came on. There stood a thirty-year-old edition of Sol. There were some giggles from the long sideburns he used to sport. His hologram looks around the room and moves as if he is a living being, but without speaking. Looking around the room tells me I am not the only one who is seeing this for the first time.

“Welcome, Sol,” says Sol. “You are in a classroom full of students ready to learn from you.”

The hologram speaks up. “Well, in that case, it is an honor to be here.”

The real Sol looks at us and smiles. “This is even weird for me,” he says. Looking at the projection, then looking at us, he begins. “Ok, ask away. Ask my old projection questions. One at a time, raise your hand. I will point to you, and then ask away.”

“What is the most important thing to you?”

"Well, that's easy, the Script and our Principles," the projection quickly answers.

"What group is the greatest?" asks Zara.

"Three15, of course." Sol smiles at his old antics. His hologram continues, "We may not be the greatest in power, but our knowledge of the Truth through the Script is second to none."

"Have you ever been in love?" someone cheekily asks as Sol smirks from the back corner.

"Yes, but it was before the Truth. My love was conditional because my heart always fails me without Truth."

"How do we change the world?" someone else asks.

"Principle 7 explains it well. Tell people the truth, and they will accept a better life."

I raise my hand. The real Sol points to me. My heart is beating fast because I am unsure if I am too new to be speaking up in class like this, but I think I am tracking with the direction that Sol wants to take us. "Would you rather have the Script memorized or know the Truth?" I ask, and all the air sucks out of the room.

The real Sol reveals a small grin, knowing that I was tracking. "The Script is the Truth, so to memorize it is to know the Truth."

I speak up again without raising my hand. "When you say Truth, you mean your understanding of Truth?"

"No, I mean the Truth. My understanding takes the Truth for what it is, nothing else."

Each of his answers points back to specific phrases of the Script.

"Ok, that's enough. Who is next?" Sol says, looking up at each of us.

His answers give me ease because I know it is the correct answer. But is it the right answer? The Truth I have been feeling goes beyond words on a page or the correct answers. It is a mystery that cannot be fully explained. A movement in my heart that has me think about the Script differently.

Three more students allowed their projections to answer questions. Some embarrassingly, but this is working. We begin to piece together where Sol is trying to take us. Each student is to tell a three-minute version of their story of their background and where they are now with their life and thoughts before their projection is shared. Carmen, a young girl in the back corner, stands up. "I'd like to go," she says with her face looking toward the projector and no one else. I noticed her the first time I walked through the vale. She did not speak much.

"I was hoping you would, Carmen" Sol says with a grin. "You have a lot to teach us."

I look around and see some of the other people in the room talking among themselves. "Come on up." Sol scans her patch on her right shoulder, something everyone has, and then sits back to watch the projection come up. "Before we get started, Carmen, why don't you tell us a bit of your background and how your story brought you here."

Carmen looks at all of us for what seems to be a minute of silence. Then she began. "I was born into a Verse that took the Script very seriously. Serious enough to follow it without reservation. Without care for people. They took their understandings and just went with it, without thinking about who it was harming. They always had the benefited in mind and never the quiet ones. Never the ones who needed substance and something real. That was me. I went along with things but finally realized that I didn't fit in. I also realized that I didn't believe in this fairy tale of the Script and Truth anymore. It is just a false hope that keeps people feeling like they can wake up to purpose, but here we are. Still stuck. Still lonely. Well. Here I am."

A hush saturates the room and she has everyone's attention. "I have not been willing to try any of these exercises until now. I finally feel like this could be a time that you could see the ridiculous larks that I used to follow and give me a chance to show you all that it is just words on a page that actually guide you in life. Words that divide and exclude and create superiority in you. I used to think I was better than some people simply because of how I believed words on a page. Well, I don't anymore. If it divides like this, I would rather choose unity."

She reaches down, turns off the projector and goes to her seat in the back corner without saying a word.

Sol steps out from his place and walks back to her seat. He crouches down to be at eye level with her and pauses. I can see kindness in his eyes. "Thank you," he whispered to her. "That was beyond brave."

Sol stands up, looks at all of us, and takes a deep breath. "I hope to Truth that some of you will be as honest with yourself and as brave as Carmen." I have never met anyone who do not even believe in the Truth. I am offended by some of her words. I know Sol does not agree with her, but I feel the power of having her around the table. Valuing her voice. Her journey. Her story. "Break time," Sol says to everyone.

They begin to eat and start conversations.

As we get started, Sol looks up at everyone. "Let's eat together in Truth." He takes a sip of a coffee and continues to look at everyone with his left index finger up. People begin to eat but pay attention to Sol. "Projections are powerful, but they are only projections. That is not who you are. They are only an imitation of who you are. A prediction of your consumer tendency, not the generous humans you are at your core. It projects the part that doesn't use your heart. You know your heart

is deep in all of its ways? When operating fully, your heart is guided by the Truth. When operating on autopilot, it is operated by the algorithm.

"It is in dying to the materialism of these projections that you can descend into the depths of your soul and resurrect as your true self. Only your true self will be able to reveal the Truth in your life. To your family, your Verse. When it is you speaking from your heart, not coming from the algorithm's automated answers," Sol says as he begins to eat his food. He sits quietly as people talk. I can't eat a thing. It is the exact words I needed to hear. I have an anger toward Three15 that I can't begin to describe, but Sol humanizes them as well. The bitterness is still there, but my eyes are now turned toward my faults. Not simply theirs. I have coopted and operated in the same algorithm that has damaged the lives of many. The same one that kicked out Sol and others who didn't deserve it. I also have worked with my eyes and ears closed without recognizing that autopilot has been on. The tremors I have experienced have been the Truth knocking, and I am beginning to realize it. I have been too busy to answer. I feel all of this deep in my soul as everyone sits and eats around me. I look around. They are laughing, living, and enjoying food and time together. I look across the table at Zara to catch her glance. She looks down and then looks back up at me and gives a small smile. Then she begins eating and talking with her friends.

The TerrorVerse finds Sol's home and sends in dozers to attack. Everyone escapes to the underground after Xi got needed items from Sol's closet. He took his Apolo as well, and they all went to the underground for safety. People from the TerrorVerse found the underground part of the house, and Sol saves the group by locking them in a bunker from the outside and sacrifices his life. The group spends time grieving in the underground after the house was destroyed. After the TerrorVerse cleared, they dug their way to the surface. Before leaving, Zara told Xi that she will be at the clock tower of the EndVerse every day hoping that they would see each other again. Xi safely escapes and makes his way toward the ceremony where the Governor's son is being sworn into the Conseil.

The closer I get to the Arena, the closer the music gets. The vibrations of the ceremony. My pace speeds up and I no longer worry about who sees me. Anyone in Three15 would recognize me from the Nouvelle alone the past four days. I have no time though. My quick jog turns to a run. My right arm is throbbing, but I will get through it. The pressure on my right knee is picking up, but I press through. I pass someone on the left, but they don't notice. I pass another family walking by, but they don't even look at me. More people are gathered around the Arena staring at a grand white wall that I am sure is broadcasting this egregious moment.

I run toward the gate and no one pays attention. I reach the east gate of the Arena to find Ced. He is a security guard at the arena who I have known for a few years. He stops. "Xi? Is that you? Oh my goodness, it's you," he says, coming to embrace me, but I reveal my injuries to slow him down. "We just saw your message. Everyone did. They said it was a TerrorVerse ploy, but you are here! You must have delayed the ceremony by 30 minutes with the confusion," he says, giving me a hug.

"It's been a rough day, as you can see, I need to get in as soon as possible, Ced," I say, saving the small talk.

"Yes, you do. We got to get you up there, the governor will be so glad to see you. This is a miracle. Thank the Truth." If he only knew. Ced leads me down the hallway. People seem to be ignoring me coming down the hallways that are Arena staff. We come backstage and another security guard sees me. "What do we have here? Is this a joke? Is that really you, Xi?"

"It's me. I have to speak with the governor."

"I have never seen anything like this, but I imagine he would like to know you're alive. The ceremonies are getting nearly over. I don't know what to say," he says, looking around clueless.

"I do." I walk past him. He doesn't stop me. The music gets louder, and the lights hit my eyes as I walk onto the stage from the right side.

I am frozen. Bur is getting ready to take the Apollo. There are mellow cheers from the audience as ritual would have. Like a machine that I can't control, my mission takes my feet toward the center of the stage in front of everyone. The governor immediately notices me with shrugging security guards close behind me. Governor Lor stands and walks over to the security guards, completely ignoring me.

"You knew I was alive" I say to him.

"Please stay right here with him so people remain calm," he says to the security guards. "Come with me, Xi," the Governor says, taking my arm to go off stage.

I stand firm. "We can talk here," I say, looking him directly in the eyes. I take his arm off mine and turn to face the thousands of people present. "I, Xi Lark, am alive. I was attacked by the TerrorVerse, but never died. I was attacked again this morning but never died," I say, looking at the lack of reaction of the crowd. Their attention is not on me.

"Unfortunately, you have been erased," the governor says quietly from behind so no one hears him. "We will get this resolved as soon as possible, but we need to have a moment to talk in private."

I look back at him and say nothing. I walk toward the center of the stage and Bur now moves from the mic and steps backward in shock. All of the security and top officials have me in sight from their programmed settings for making noNames and the erased visible. No one else. I remember the hackvalve Zara gave me. Shockpen in my left hand in case I faint and a hackvalve that could change everything in my right, I step up to the mic and look over at governor, who now has security coming to get me and is shaking his head as if I am crazy. I reach into my pocket and press the most important button of my life. "Please work," I say. I hear a hush go over the crowd and gasps from all around. Zara did it.

"Hello Three15. I am Xi Lark, and I am alive and well, as you can see. I was, in fact, victim to a bombing, but was soon rescued by someone I thought was an enemy of ours. You were told I was

dead, but a message was sent to the governor saying that I was alive. I am not sure why this information was hidden from you. I was treated and cared for by people from different verses. People who we, as Three15, have fought and argued with for decades. Others that have been erased from our sight. I learned more about the Truth in those three days than I have in a lifetime. My table got bigger. My heart got bigger. I am a changed person. This ceremony is rightfully mine." I pause and try and catch my breath, looking over to see the governor speaking with the security guards. I must. I am on stand in front of my entire verse. "This was an unjust action to know I was alive and proceed with a ceremony without me."

As soon as I say this, the governor makes his way up beside me.

"I rightfully won, and I am here today..."

The security guard grabs my right arm and begins taking me backward.

I raise my voice, continuing, "I'm here safe because of people who became themselves through the Truth instead of living everything through an algorithm like we have been living in Three15 for decades," I say with all my might as the crowd's silence turns to unruly conversations.

They carry me off the back stairs roughly. I am now behind the stage and am thrown down by the governor's security to be met by Governor Lor seconds later. He takes a long pause and pulls a white cloth from his suit to wipe his forehead.

"This could have gone very differently, Xi. You didn't have to end it this way. We could have protected you, but you just turned your back on us," the governor says, walking toward the stage.

"I love Three15, Governor, but what was done was wrong," I say as his security guard places a cloth over my mouth.

The governor stops and walks back toward me. "Xi, if you love Three15, you would not have said what you just said out there to our people," he says, bending down and looking at me sweat. "Our Principles are at stake!" he yells, pushing me backwards. "The Script is at stake! Do you understand that? Take it out of his mouth," he says, grabbing my arm and pulling me close.

I hear the crowd continuing to talk loudly and unorderly.

"You have ruined any chance you had of serving," he says, pushing me backward again as I trip and land on my side.

I stand back up and walk as close to him as security will allow. "Sir, whether on the Conseil or not, I will continue to serve. I love the Script. I love it because it points to the Truth, but is not the Truth itself. I experienced the Truth powerfully while I was away through people we have erased. Our algorithm has caused us to elevate ourselves and erase the ones who know the Truth in a different way, a beautiful way. I beg you, stop protecting what keeps you safe. Also," I say, looking at him. "I forgive you for the lies the deceit."

The governor manipulates the crowd by saying Xi is hallucinating from the smoke, but he is grateful he is back. Xi escapes from security and runs out of the stadium to his home pod before security arrives.

Star gives me a big hug from the side.

"Easy with the arm," I say, overcome with joy to be with my people. Uncle Near sits at the table, looking at me with a big smile on his face.

"I thought we lost you," Mom says.

"I don't have long. I love you all more than the world itself. You have to listen close. I know it sounds crazy, but the governor will be coming for me soon. There are drones in the sky now searching for me. He is too embarrassed and arrogant to come here now, but I would not count on much time for his security. I am erased from the system now. I have to go. I don't know how long.

"I am going to give you this hackvalve. Just press it to see and hear without the algorithm. Uncle Near, do what you can to have people reproduce it. Let everyone see the noNames that Three15 has made disappear. Step to the barriers of our Verse and look at the differences. We could be not only helping others, but also listening and learning from those we think are enemies. Unfortunately, we have lost our sight and hearing as a society. The only way to gain it back is to take a moment each day to be blind and deaf so we can truly see and hear. We have gone decades listening to an algorithm we say is the Truth and we have protected it at all costs. I met its creator, a guy named Sol. Someone who is great. He gave his life to this fight. He said he regretted even creating the algorithm because of the damage it has caused from our reliance to it. Something that started as good has become a replacement for Truth. A safety and control mechanism. It was never the intention.

"I encountered the Truth these last few days in a way that has changed me."

My mom puts her hand on my face as she continues to listen.

"I found a gift more precious than the Apollo, but it may take some time for people to believe me. Because I want to see you again, I have to leave now."

They have no words, just the deep trust that can only be built in a tight-knit family. They give me more hugs.

Star comes and squeezes me tight. "I am fighting for you."

I get as close as I can and whisper to her, "Go to the red oak."

She stares at me in confusion, squeezing my hand.

I take the hackvalve out of my pocket and set it on the counter as I step back toward the door, looking at all of them. "My mission is very different than I imagined. But I wouldn't trade what's to come for any world in the past. I love each of you with my whole heart. I am a part of building a path to freedom. A path for the noNames. More unity between verses. I love each of you dearly and promise to see you soon."

I open the door and look up. A drone passes by. I squeeze into my brother's sailsuit and dart through the boarding room and out the door again. I begin walking back down to the tree line hidden from the system.

"I need to take a walk. I am a bit overwhelmed," Star says to her mom.

"Get back soon little Onyxwalker" she says looking at Star.

"I will, Mom," Star says, walking out on mission toward the arena for the tree line. She sees it. The tree of her childhood memories. The red oak tree where they would carve and make up pretend stories of attacking the TerrorVerse together. She touches it with her right hand as she circles and gets back to figuring out why she is there. She looks around, making sure it is just her. Blue drones and officers are walking by, and she quickly goes behind the red oak. She sees her sign: a new carving of a giant star. In the middle is a hole carve with a papernote that reads, *Hackvalve's reorder chip in bottom. Dig, make sure the prize is displayed for all to see. One day. You are an Onyxwalker.* She looks with confusion and down at the freshly dug soil below. She takes her hand to the soil and touches something. She pulls a black object out of the ground. An Apolo. Something a girl has never touched. Expecting to see Bur's name, she dusts it off. It reads, Solomon Keel.

Dessert (Epilogue)

The sun is brighter than normal. I am still adjusting to being out of the System, but continuing to practice my life without theLens and theVibes. It is getting better and better. More freeing than I imagined, although I miss my family dearly. It is day thirty-three at the same place. The same part of this new place. All foreign, but I am beginning to learn it. Learning the new people and the same foods each day. I am still struggling to memorize everything here, but trying. I made a way of making credits to survive, cleaning drones until the dust settles in Three15 for a return. I look up at the tower and I have three more minutes.

"Three minutes," Star says, turning to me. She could not help but come along. She is an Onyxwalker. She is a bright light that helps guide me, on mission just as I am. Although mom didn't like it, she handed her a black onyx before leaving our pod and said something to her that I still do not know. They are Onyxwalkers as I am. I believe it runs deeper in our blood than I will ever imagine. My right arm and leg are healing nicely and my body is whole, for the most part. I look back up to hear the bells ring for the thirty-third day in a row. I stand and I slowly turn. I look down each incoming street. Each corner of a store. I gaze through each window. The EndVerse is foreign, but I am Xi. Carrier of hope. I am forced to be a noName now, but not for long. We make the circle again and start back

to my small pod. To start tomorrow and do this all over again. I feel Star grab my arm. My heart quickens. "Xi, it's 3 o'clock."

I turn to see her. Zara. Walking toward me with wide eyes and smiling like the sun.

Digestif (Assessment)

When I first cemented my plan to write this book, I knew it would be the best fit to address my NPO. The process of writing a book for the first time has been both daunting and fulfilling. I am pleased to present this as a unique project. Most Christian content, specifically for future generations, places the Bible as the foundation of the Christian faith. *Sol's Porch*, however, places Jesus in His rightful place as the foundation. With that in mind, I also make sure to portray the necessity of scriptures and the important place that it plays in our lives. Many theological nonfiction books point to this, but a fraction of fiction books do the same.

Like doing anything for the first time, writing a fiction book has given me the ability to express myself in theology and creativity. It has also taught me that the best way forward in writing is through trial and error. Throughout this process, I have made many mistakes, but utilizing different voices for feedback has guided me closer to a complete book. My benchmarks were the following:

1. For six readers who participate in the survey to give a score of at least 8 out of 10 in the overall book rating. I had five readers give feedback with an average of 8.25. This was gauged before it was professionally edited and changes made to the story.
2. To begin the first re-write by mid-November and finish at the December turn-in date. I have a first rewrite finished with a story I am proud of. I took many of the recommendations into consideration and made a major shift in the opener of the book where many people got lost. I started with a different opener that would engage readers earlier and have already gotten positive feedback from that.
3. To have 80,000 words by the December turn-in date. I have over 61,000 words but feel comfortable to have fallen short of this word count. I had to adjust my plan to prioritize producing a quality story over the number of words. I decided to get an editor who specializes in fiction books to have a complete thought of what the finished product will begin to look like. My advisor and editor each encouraged me to put the story together to make sense before attempting to reach the desired word count. My story is now in a position where words will come much easier because the structure is now in place to handle them. Doing that has given me the confidence and the vision to have a clear plan for how to finish and publish *Sol's Porch*.

The feedback of stakeholders was critical in how the story was shaped. I felt that I addressed key insights within the story, but needed a wide variety of eyes reading the story to help it make sense. The difficulty came in having a gripping story that people will want to read. As a first-time novelist, I am seeing that this is a craft that takes decades to develop fully. It is a weakness being a first-time author, but it is bringing the joy of knowing I can only get better from here. I feel a passion for this

work, and I now have a product that shows the bones of a great story to be finished before graduation and presented to publishers.

This has been a journey that I could not have done without this program in place. Utilizing the key aspects of my learning in semiotics has given me the confidence to produce something I truly believe can be a part of unifying the church toward Jesus. I have enjoyed the process and valued the feedback from my peers, advisors, friends, and mentors along the way. I did not realize that this would help me find an artistic expression of writing that I wish I discovered a long time ago.

Sol's Porch will be the ignition to future books that I will write. Hearing the feedback from readers suggesting the need for a book like this gives me the confidence to finish it and get it into the hands of a fragmented church. To complete the book, I will finish with the word count and go through the thorough process of rewriting to connect all the dots for a complete story. I will then finish by utilizing an editor to help produce a book that is presentable to publishers. I have developed thoughts for the second and third books as well. If *Sol's Porch* proves successful through sales and feedback, I will begin writing the second and third books.

Project Launch Plan

Doctoral Project Description

The fragmented church has countless interpretations of truth caused by tribal fear which has created ongoing divisions and a longing for control. If unified in Jesus, we could see radical inclusivity in future generations. In addressing these problems, I believe my written work, *Sol's Porch*, a dystopian novel, will be a unique and needed resource designed to inspire people toward church unity.

Doctoral Project

Sol's Porch is a first-person narrative that follows the journey of the protagonist, Xi. Xi's context, based roughly one hundred years in the future, is a divided nation guided by their individualistic group algorithms. These algorithms are monotonously followed by utilizing interactive sight and sound technology which guides them synchronously by their group. This represents the tightly held doctrines of the countless Christian denominations in the world today. After a traumatic experience, Xi's eyes are opened to the reality of his group's longing for control through their dogmatic beliefs. This leads him on a journey of questioning. He then gracefully finds himself in a place where he encounters Truth, a representation of Jesus, through the guidance of a sage named Sol. Sol walks Xi into a hopeful future for groups uniting in a living and experiential Truth instead of divisively held values of beliefs. However, the leaders of Xi's group will do everything they can to protect their algorithm and way of being, even if it means destroying the people their algorithm was created to support.

Sol's Porch utilizes several metaphors throughout the story, but two should be highlighted. Solomon's Porch, in Acts chapter three, is a place where Peter decided to share the good news after the healing of the beggar. He could have chosen either the secular or the sacred, but he decided to land on the overlap of each: the porch. Just as the porch shifts from the open front of house to the private back of house, Xi is challenged in his normal life of colonization with an invitation to incarnation. He finds the created systems that divide should be vilified, not outside groups or people in this newly found sacred overlap.

The second metaphor used is the table. It is a place for stories to be felt with compassion. A place where others must be heard with an open heart and active listening. Sol's table brings together leaders of other groups that Xi once saw as enemies. The short interactions at the table gave Xi a beautiful representation of Jesus in others.

The opportunity this work beholds is for the church to see radical inclusivity of groups and a love for others that unifies without being uniform. I desire this work to inspire a nudge for Christians to grasp the beauty of other parts of the body of Christ. I also want it to bring hope to a non-Christian expressing a new message explaining how the way of Jesus is inclusive rather than exclusive.

Audience

The target audience will be young adult readers. The plan is for the audience of this work to broaden from the given target once the book gains traction. The project is being written in a way that would not only appeal to Christians, but also non-Christians, with the continual decrease in Christianity among this audience. The language is intentionally vague to draw from both audiences, yet recognizable to someone who would identify as Christian.

Only 9% of the young adult audience (Gen Z) are actively engaged in a church and they are the most diverse generation in American history.⁴ Capturing the minds of young adult readers requires a unifying work instead of a work that pushes a specific denomination or movement. I believe the power of telling a relatable story will bring much-needed unity in the church to the next generations. I also believe this book will be attractive to Millennials and beyond who have been disenfranchised by the division of the church and affected by deconstruction.

To engage this generation in Sol's Porch, I will not be able to simply rest on the hope that they read the work, but go to them. I plan to actively engage in word of mouth, social media campaigns, and strategic marketing to intentionally engage young people who need to hear this unifying message for the future church.

⁴ Barna Group, "Gen Z: Your Questions Answered," February 6, 2018, <https://www.barna.com/research/gen-z-questions-answered/>.

Development Plan

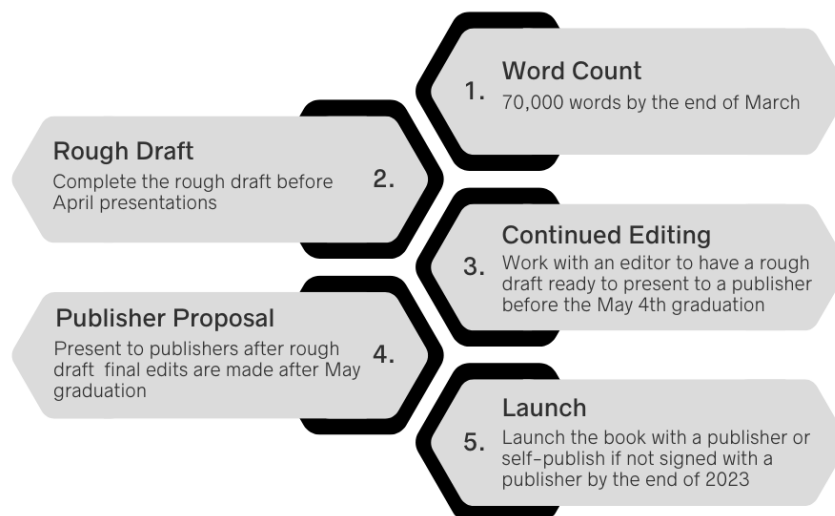


FIGURE 1: DEVELOPMENT PLAN

Development Process

In continuing to develop *Sol's Porch*, I will begin by distributing the present rough draft to each person involved in the original process of workshops and interviews to gain further feedback. This will take place as I continue to write throughout the month of March. The intention is to finish the incomplete subplots while I gain the information to re-story where needed. I will then present the rough draft to a group of young adults and utilize an online survey form to gain further knowledge of relevant topics and get more feedback. The goal is for this to be completed before the April presentations. Next, I will package *Sol's Porch* into a professional digital format that will be presentable to an editor before graduation in May. Lastly, I will present *Sol's Porch* to publishers. This will first take place through a few personal connections. If that is not fruitful, I will go through a traditional presentation process to publishers. The final option is self-publication which I will proceed with through Amazon if I do not have a publisher by the end of 2023.

Appendix A— Milestone 1 The NPO Charter

Personal Research Manifesto

I commit my best in this NPO journey in following my heart, passion, and creativity with excellence along with a community of others and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

NPO Statement

The fragmented evangelical church has countless interpretations of truth caused by tribal fear. If unified in Jesus, we could see radical inclusivity of the next-generation.

NPO Scope and Constraints

While discovering the NPO, we came to the conclusion that the next generation encompasses the sole audience that change should be addressed to. As we could have specified for the church or non-church audience, we came to the conclusion that the beneficiaries encompassed everyone in the coming generations. If this problem of “what we see as truth” is not solved and not discovered as Jesus being that truth, we will continue to see different interpretations and a fragmentation of the Church body. This will continue to cause a loss of future generations in our churches. For this reason, my focus will be on this topic.

NPO Context

In addressing the lack of church unity, my setting forms from a self-critique of the white supremacy empowered evangelical church. My denominational background that I will address in research is formed from the American Pentecostal movement that started in an inclusive environment with those on the fringes, but ended up forming systems that excluded those that were part of birthing what it is today. I will seek to research and write in a way that will allow someone on the far left edge and far right edge to take a step towards the fringes in the middle. I, as a missionary, also hope to address the missional models that we have formally adopted that play into a colonizing practice instead of one of incarnation. My formational context will not produce an all-is-lost mentality, but a much-to-be-gained opportunistic strategy.

Root Causes

In utilizing the Problem Tree and 5 Whys methods, the findings of the root cause for continued fragmentation of the Church in our discovery workshop was fear. The first root that we named was tradition. This would encompass race, nationality and everything that would make up the cultural world view we find ourselves in. Below that surface is comfort. To stay in our box that we find ourselves in is the easiest way of being. This keeps us in a place of “being right.” When we, again, peel back the surface, we see a longing for control. Below control we find fear. Fear is the deepest root that can be found in the journey of the fragmented church. From my findings in the one-on-

one interviews, fear found itself in the forefront as well. Many branches of this tree are found broken and lying on the ground instead of connected and bearing fruit because of fear.

Discovery Workshop Stakeholders

The stakeholders present at the discovery workshop consisted of two pastors, a Native American tribal leader, a non-profit worker, a real estate agent and a missionary.

One-On-One Interviews

The one-on-one interviews took place with a social activist, a music artist, and a missionary.

3-5 Key Biblical Texts

I will utilize Jesus' disagreement with the text in Matthew 5:21-37, the Akedah story of Genesis 22, the reorientation of the Word being Jesus in John 1, the revelation of who we say Jesus is in Luke 9:18-20, and a consistent walk through the life of Jesus found in the Gospels.

Academic Resources

In my research approach, I aim to find Jesus-centric voices that will bring people together in what we can all agree upon as the Church. I will be utilizing scholars of Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox faith backgrounds in order to get a full grasp of this beautiful body that our God calls His bride. I continue to find a rich diversity of Jesus followers from all over the world that will help give a voice to this work.

Appendix B– Milestone 2 NPO Topic Expertise Essay

Introduction

Our world is increasingly global, yet tribes, nations, neighborhoods, and denominations are building higher walls.⁵ The church has historically desired unification, but as the story continues to play out, that is not the case. The church stands fragmented, with some seeing truth as the Bible, others as hierarchy, and still others in their personal experiences. Factionalism and partisanship continually lure into a further division and mask themselves as the only resort.⁶ This is not the only resort. Walls can come down, tribes can work together, nations and denominations can keep their identity while unifying, and neighbors who are different can be recognized as a gift. There is an answer to unity that is simple, yet the church has made it complex.

Section 1: Biblical and Theological Foundations

Unity is defined as the quality or state of not being multiple or having a condition of harmony.⁷ Unity is never immediate but comes through process. A condition takes time to form unless it finds itself birthed as an original. The church was born in a state of harmony. Although it had a multitude of different people involved, it was not in a state of being multiple foundations. Throughout the story of humanity, unity is formed through methods of understanding a centrality to look towards.

Centrality, unless whole, must be formed by many opposing parts. In the case of the church, it must be formed by the different groups and denominations that make up the bride of Christ. All people are biased from their social constructs. The Church is no exception. Examples that heavily shape social constructs are nationality, the color of someone's skin, churches they grew up in, the absence of a church, upbringing, and their environments. All of this must be considered as factors in how to see things moving forward in unity. Several passages in scripture take a journey that bends toward unity. Just as a 2,000-year-old fragmented vase would take time to be put back together, unity in the 2,000-year-old church is a journey which requires patience in discovering what God is saying through scriptures and how the church unites on the other side. Scripture reveals truth in a way that brings the church closer to an answer to this age-old dilemma.

⁵ Briggs, J. R., and Skye Jethani. *The Sacred Overlap: Learning to Live Faithfully in the Space Between*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2020: p. 24

⁶ Jersak, Bradley. *A More Christlike Way: a More Beautiful Faith*. Pasadena, CA: Plain Truth Ministries, 2019: p. 135

⁷ Unity. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/unity>.

Textual Discussions

A unified state of being requires something to take the place of centrality. One option is to continue through the madness of factionalism and attempt to unify over the Bible. This way of biblical understanding presents itself in the form of denominations “being right” while everyone else has it wrong. The following text give a different glimpse into a better way:

THE AKEDAH STORY (GENESIS 22:1-19)

Early in the morning, Abraham began a trip with Isaac (Genesis 22:3). God gave him the direction to take his only son, who he loved, and to sacrifice him on a mountain in the region of Moriah (Genesis 22:2). Why would God ask him to kill his promised son (Genesis 14:10) that He blessed him with? To understand the context, Abraham was from Ur of Chaldees in Mesopotamia (Genesis 11:28). Sacrificing children was a cultural norm in this time and place.⁸ Abraham hearing from God aligned with the way of his culture and the lens through which he saw life. Even so, God met him there.

Much like Abraham being a product of Ur, as seen by his actions, theological frameworks are formed out of the culture, language, denomination, and family beliefs of a formational context. Every human has their unique “Ur” that produces their mindsets. These formational constructs and understandings cause God to be seen through these lenses. Before this moment, God told Abram, who would become Abraham, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you” (Genesis 12:1). God’s directions required Abram to step out of his house. He was guided by God to step out of his “Ur.” If a step can be taken out of theological and contextual frameworks, individuals and churches begin to see outside of their bias lenses to a more loving and inclusive image and reality of God. Change takes place in Abraham as he travels, listens, and learns God outside of his context. As followers of Christ, this can be a powerful practice in taking a step towards unity. The further Abraham got on the journey and higher up the mountain (out of Ur), the more the story changed (Genesis 22:6-8). He told Isaac God would provide a lamb when his confused son asked where to find the sacrifice (Genesis 22:8). Either he was lying to his son, or he was questioning and thinking about whether God would have him do this or not. Abraham, one of the heroes of faith (Hebrews 11:8), did not kill his son. This reveals the alteration of his mind. Even heroes sometimes question, because they are human.

Could it be that God was changing God’s mind, or could it be that Abraham was beginning to listen more deeply the further along the journey? God did not change God’s mind. Abraham first listened through his lens but kept taking steps out of his context for clarity. How often does it feel as if God spoke and listening occurs, but it happens to line up with the cultural nuances that are normative?

⁸ Recht, L. (n.d.). Human sacrifice in the ancient Near East. Retrieved February 22, 2021, from https://www.academia.edu/1561457/Human_sacrifice_in_the_ancient_Near_East.

Often bound by fear, the church and its individuals lock the doors of their theological constructs to keep “wrong” beliefs on the outside. This happens to people in the church by voicing opinions instead of listening, remaining in a context instead of traveling, and only learning from the voices within the circle in which they were formed.

The word *Akedah* is a term used by Jewish Rabbis for this story, and it refers to “binding.”⁹ Being bound in a certain church tribe comes naturally just as child sacrifice would have seemed culturally natural for Abraham. This is far from natural just as the church being divided is unnatural. The danger in remaining bound is that individuals and groups are only experiencing one part of the body of Christ. Experiences and belonging lead to a trust within a certain church culture or denomination and create normalcy. Too often, churches and denominations are quick to suppress voices from the outside to remain safe and bound. This takes place because of fear of the unknown. Abraham travelled into the unknown to know God in a way that he did not before. God continues to lead His people in the liberation of their bound-up hearts and minds by inviting them to travel, listen, and learn from His other children. This allows everyone to see Him as the Jesus of this entire universe, who is intrinsically revealed inside and outside of individual social constructs.

JESUS’ DISAGREEMENTS WITH SCRIPTURE (MATTHEW 5: 21-45)

In Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), He not only gives clear instructions for a new way to live, but does something that would have shocked many. Directly after talking about how unrighteous the Pharisees were, he told everyone, “You have heard it was said...” (Matthew 5:21), followed by familiar passages they would have known. This would have been a scandalous thought in this time and place. He began describing a scripture and then turned it around with a completely new way of seeing it.

He mentions murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, violence, and hate (Matthew 5:21-43). He then reoriented the laws to be seen as issues of the heart instead of the head. He shifted thinking in some parts and then directly disagreed in others. As an example, He said, “You have heard it said, ‘Eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth. But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.’” (Matthew 5:38-39) This is a direct disagreement with Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, and Deuteronomy 19:21. Did He disagree with the law that He said he would fulfill (Matthew 5:17) in the scriptures? The word *fulfill* in Greek has two meanings. The first definition is meeting requirements. This would be how many have viewed this passage, but there is a different understanding. The other meaning is perfecting and completing

⁹ Peterson, Eugene H. *The Jesus Way*. London, UK: Hodder & Stoughton, 2009.

something.¹⁰ It is made clear in scripture that the latter is the best fit per his responses. He is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith and who we look to (Hebrews 12:2).

Just like the crowd Jesus was speaking to, Christians are faced with a decision. It is either sticking to a social construct bias and framework that has shaped them individually in the way they think about God and the world, or they could consider that Jesus meets each human in any framework that they chose to build Him in. This means each Christian on this earth has something to learn from other Christians outside their circle. Jesus' nature is to sprout beautiful differences that can be unequivocally embraced, but only if an understanding exists that makes room for Jesus expressed in "the other". The church will find more of Jesus in learning from, doing life with, and serving the people they are usually the most afraid of.

Christians often say, "I trust the word." When that is stated, it tends to mean the Bible. The Bible often references the word, but when it does it reveals that Jesus is the word (John 1:1) and always has been. As the pastor and theologian Brian Zahnd says, "the Bible is the penultimate word of God that points to the Word of God who is Jesus."¹¹ Jesus was, is, and always will be a decisive view of God here on earth without question in the Christian faith. The understandings of the Bible on their own were, are, and continues to be divisive. It only takes a three-minute drive in the "Bible belt" to see the contradicting church signs and numerous denominations to reveal this reality. Satan himself attempted to divide the mission of Jesus by using scriptures (Matthew 4:1-11). This is not making a case to lower the view of the Bible, it's quite the opposite. The word becomes alive more than ever when read through the lens of Jesus, the ultimate word. The Bible is a story of God's people journeying in an evolving understanding of who He is. It has not always been the case but it is now known that God has always been like Jesus (John 14:8-10).

WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM (MARK 8:29)

Jesus asked the question that will ring through the ages, "Who do you say that I am". The beauty of Jesus, is that throughout history, he usually answers to whatever he is called. Jesus meets everyone and every group in their limited understanding of Him. The virgin Mary had a little boy that was called Emmanuel (Matthew 1:23). He is God with us. If He is God with us, could He potentially be the God of "them" in the other denomination, tribe, or church as well? Could His bride possibly be more beautifully diverse than ever imagined?

¹⁰ Flood, Derek. *Disarming Scripture: Cherry-Picking Liberals, Violence-Loving Conservatives, and Why We All Need to Learn to Read the Bible like Jesus Did*. San Francisco, CA: Metanoia Books, 2014: 25.

¹¹ Zahnd, Brian. *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God: the Scandalous Truth of the Very Good News*. CO Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2017: 50.

God loves the “other” just as He loves the world. The word for “other” in Greek is *allos* which is where the word allergen comes from.¹² When allergies occur, a natural human reaction is to medicate and build a defense against them. Avoiding contact is the ultimate goal. Human nature is to remain in the places and with those in which they are used to. Continued research on interpersonal attraction suggests the most powerful predictor of friendship is familiarity.¹³ There are ways that natural human reactions can be pushed against and corrected. A natural reaction is not always a good reaction. An organic remedy for allergies is to consume honey that derives directly at the source of those allergies. Another treatment for allergies is immunotherapy. This process introduces a small amount of the allergen over a long period of time.¹⁴ This takes a continual introduction which begins to build up immunity towards the allergen. Often, the more introduction to the allergy, the less of a reaction is had. It is fitting that a taste of something sweet from an area other than our own, creates an adaptation in a way that does not react. There is an opportunity to “taste and see that He is good (Psalms 34:8) “there” too! God is good enough to reveal how an introduction over time can begin to heal what was formerly a feared negative reaction. This commences a process of seeing Jesus in the “other.” Emmanuel is God with all of us. This is good news! He chooses to meet people right where they are in their understandings of Him and graciously in their misunderstandings of Him. He continually challenges pre-built frameworks to help love better. He then comes in and sits down with each human made in His likeness and asks them to be at His feet to know Him more (Luke 10:38-41). He is also doing the same with our neighbor on the other side of town and the other side of the world. The question, “Who do you say that I am” will continue to ring through eternity until we see Him as the Messiah (Matthew 16:16). He is the savior of each human’s thoughts of Him, of others, and themselves.

Synthesis of Themes, Values, and Commitments

The church began with one foundation and centrality which was and is found in Jesus. Jesus is the great unifier and these scriptures are only the tip of the iceberg in this revelation. Key characters and stories throughout the story of the Bible reveal an evolutionary shift in understanding who God is. Deep within the story of Emmanuel’s arrival, the way forward is illuminated. When perfect love, found solely in Jesus, arrives on the scene, fear has no ground to stand on (2 Timothy 1:7). Tribes

¹² Downing, Crystal. *Changing Signs of Truth: A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication*. IVP Academic, 2012: 174.

¹³ Cleveland, C. (2013). *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the hidden forces that keep us apart*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. 28.

¹⁴ Serrano, K., MD. (2008, June 30). Immunotherapy. Retrieved April 01, 2021, from <https://health.howstuffworks.com/diseases-conditions/allergies/allergy-treatments/immunotherapy.htm#:~:text=How%20Immunotherapy%20Works%20to%20Treat%20Allergies201%20Immunotherapy,way%20your%20body%27s%20immune%20system%20responds%20to%20allergens.>

form, and tribes divide over words on pages, but Jesus stands patiently with an open invitation to walk hand in hand back into a condition of harmony.

The great hope of unity is added when fear is subtracted. When following the way of love, who is God, we step out to see neighbors. Churches begin to come together in their communities, and systemic change begins to form. It lifts the most marginalized and walks together in moral dignity. Unity is never about uniformity, but those brave enough to unite in love. Jesus says a prayer that synthesizes this thought in John 17:20-23:

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one - I in them and you in me - so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."

His prayer is not for the church alone. It is not only for a certain tribe or individual. It is an all-inclusive prayer for this entire world in which he dearly loves. Most Christians are quick to state where their salvation is, but if they are all honest, they do not know where it isn't.¹⁵ Jesus consistently gives an invitation to step out of a particular context and framework to see brothers and sisters in the "other" neighborhoods, denominations, tribes, or nations as a part of the family. Jesus is not asking every individual in the church to become a part of one denomination or all become the same, but to learn and celebrate the beautiful differences of His children as one body. As it stands, the church in many parts of the world is known for its hate. The church is known for its division and for its self-righteousness. When unified in differences just as the Trinity is unified in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the world will know His love. A hope can be held for a more unified church in Jesus. He unites His bride in His mystery, while continually moving her towards the way of love. Thousands of different ways forward can be found by building walls around frameworks and understandings of God in the Bible and only sending invitations to those that are similar. This has been the issue since the beginning of time. Cain built an empire of systemic separation (Genesis 4:17) while God was longing for the garden again. The garden is found by the way, the truth, and the life who is Jesus (John 14:6). He is the great unifier, but only if He becomes Lord of the Bible, history, and self.

¹⁵ Jersak, Brad. *In: Incarnation & Inclusion, Abba & Lamb*. Abbotsford, BC: St. Macrina Press, 2019: 94.

Section 2: Topic History and Key Voices

Topic History

ORIGINS OF THE CHURCH

To begin a discussion of church origin, it would only be right to start with Jesus. Jesus began with 12 diverse men. One was a fisherman, another a zealot, and yet another a tax collector. Jesus would have had His hands full with a far-left tax collector (Matthew 9:9) and a far-right zealot (Luke 5:1-11) on the same team. From the beginning of the church, there were people from very different backgrounds and contexts being asked to be together as one. This would have been revolutionary at the birth of the church, just as it would be in operation today. From the gospel being good enough for the Gentiles, to breaking the Sabbath and dining with sinners, Jesus began to show a way that was different. There was an endless chasm of people holding an invitation to follow this new way that Jesus was presenting. That thought within itself was revolutionary.

The life of Jesus brought about a new way. After his death, resurrection, and ascension, the church was formed. Jesus gave a command of patience to wait for the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4). After the day of Pentecost moment, the first community, found throughout the book of Acts, formed. They began by calling their new movement “the way.” It was only shortly after that the word *ekklesia* (church in Greek) was used.¹⁶ They unified together through baptism and the Eucharist. There was an unparalleled unity that brought people groups together under a God that was all-accepting. The realization of perfect unity only exists in the Trinity, so a forecast of differing thought was only a matter of time. The first groupings to face difficulties were the Hebraic Jews and the Hellenistic Jews. The Hellenists were more adapted to Greek culture and got along much better with Gentiles. Their Hebrew brothers and sisters had a more challenging time adjusting. Right away, they were faced with a left and right divide. From the start, it has been messy. This does not mean that it was wrong. It was simply human. The Hellenists thought their widows were being overlooked in church welfare. Thus, they created a council that would allow each group to be served by Hellenist disciples.¹⁷ They did not separate but made way for it to work in their differences. This is a key in finding a way to keep unity but allow for unique expression through differences in humanity.

The unity of the church continued and spread throughout the Roman empire and far beyond. In a Roman society filled with aristocratic elites, plebeians, and slaves, an embrace of level ground at the foot of the cross of Jesus would have been scandalous and revolutionary.¹⁸ The introduction of Christ for all people created a radical social ethic of love that was all-embracing. They named the

¹⁶ Shelley, B. (2021). *Church History in Plain Language*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁷ IBID

¹⁸ Valley, P. (2020). *Philanthropy: From Aristotle to Zuckerberg*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Continuum. 55.

oneness of the Church Catholic. In the early second century, Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, said, "wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church."¹⁹ The church continued as a unified front through the Spirit of Jesus, loving God and each other, and the leadership of early church fathers and mothers.

When Constantine came on the scene, a change occurred. Constantine, the Roman emperor, legalized what became known as Christianity. The state and the church became one. This was the origin of the fear of being a part of church work. The Constantine rule created an opposing way that Jesus often spoke against. It created control, force, and fear instead of faith, hope, and love (1 Corinthians 13:13). It systemized the organic growth of the Catholic church and turned the garden into a greenhouse. There was an established orthodoxy at the time, but many different parts of the family. The church family came together in Nicaea. With several disagreements, the verdicts were disputed by the church but also widely accepted and written out in the Nicene Creed. This is still, to this day, widely accepted orthodoxy in the entire church. Maxim said, "there can be no heresy if there is no orthodoxy."²⁰ The Nicene Creed (Apostle's Creed) was produced and something that the church can continue to agree upon as a great source of unity.

There was a significant shift in the Constantine era of the church which was a seed of divisiveness planted. In 306, the control-magnified leader, Constantine, ascended into the role of Caesar in the West. He had not yet converted to Christianity at that point. This reveals that his embrace of Christianity could have easily been an expedient political play.²¹ Imagine the implementation of systemic hierarchy, fear-based coercion, and placing domination and power at the helm. This placed a leading cause for division in the church as they vilified others around them. Some church leaders began to embrace the Constantine rule because it meant their persecution of the Roman Empire would end. Others were concerned that the expansive way of following Jesus could be politically coerced. Constantine was certainly not the birth of church division, but he was a part of the birth of a temptation of power that divided.

Jesus came into power by riding the fowl of a donkey as Zechariah prophesied, while Constantine brought a great reversal that enticed and intoxicated many in the church. Many people still misunderstand the Jewish scriptures and ancient stories. Human tendency is to see and make decisions based on self-interest. The vibrant and loving move of the early church was now generations removed, and the allure of power was at hand. Many early Christians had the

¹⁹ IBID

²⁰ IBID

²¹ Wickman, Eric. (2017). Shaping Church-State Relations After Constantine: The Political Theology of Hilary of Poitiers. *Church History*, 86(2), 287-310. doi:10.1017/S0009640717000543.

temptation to fall back into the practices of violent rule by a dominant king instead of remembering that Jesus was the humble Prince of Peace. This subtle division of the mission of Jesus that benefited a select few became another seed in the division of the church. The Gentiles quickly forgot and created another form of Gentiles in the "other."

SPLITS, REFORMATIONS, AND THE BIBLE

The church moved forward, unified in one name but drifted into sects while differences continued to grow. Another major shift in history is the first official split of the church. Different sects had previously been excommunicated for their beliefs and differences, but this was the first time they officially recognized churches split into Western Catholic and Eastern Orthodox. This was called the Great Schism of 1054. From the third century, Eastern Christianity and Western Christianity had many differences. The unraveling of the unified church had to do with theological, political, cultural, and social aspects.²² Though this was the official first church split, the disunity of the church was apparent in the 5th century when the Assyrian, Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopian, and Syrian Orthodox churches were sent on their way for their different beliefs.²³ An East and West divide continued, especially when the Latin Knights of western Catholicism plundered Constantinople (Eastern Orthodox Church home base) in an attempt to gain land from the Muslims.²⁴ This furthered the mindset of coercive power that continued to develop on both sides.

Though other splits took place since then, there was a monumental split in the Protestant reformation. In Wittenberg, Germany, Martin Luther was at a cell in an Augustinian monastery when he had his "tower" experience in 1511 or 1512. He did not feel accepted by God even after the numerous penitential observances. When God revealed the scripture, "the just shall live by faith" (Romans 1:17) to him, he began to feel an overwhelming sense of God's love.²⁵ The deconstruction of the Catholic church needed to take place, but unity requires a reconstruction. After nailing the 95 theses to the door, he knew that it was a new beginning apart from the Catholic church.²⁶ The

²² Flinn, Frank K. "Great Schism, 1054." In *Encyclopedia of World Religions: Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, by Frank K. Flinn. 2nd ed. Facts On File, 2016.
https://georgefox.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/fofc/great_schism_1054/0?institutionId=4720.

²³ IBID

²⁴ IBID

²⁵ Cantalamessa, Raniero. (2018). "The righteousness of god has been manifested": The fifth centenary of the protestant reformation, an occasion of grace and reconciliation for the whole Church. *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 53(3), 423-435. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ecu.2018.0028>.

²⁶ IBID

95 theses were a biblical challenge to the Catholic church's teachings and practices of this time.²⁷ This great divorce that took place gave tradition to the Catholics and scripture to the Protestants when they needed unification with both. While the Catholic church has many different orders as a part of their church, they have continued to stay together because they have tradition to keep. The Protestant church splits apart every day because people have different understandings of scripture. The Protestant understanding of the Bible became *sola scriptura* (only scripture) instead of continuing to take the beautiful framework the Catholic church had of the tradition of the story. The scriptures became a set of principles to live by instead of the story that transforms. This was a great reversal. The interpretation of the Bible was a matter of fitting the story of the Bible in another world with another story instead of incorporating that world into the biblical narrative.²⁸

The Reformation needed to happen, but could the church have reunified? Being in the Protestant tradition is knowing that scripture divides. Different understandings of scripture continue to divide today. In the Protestant church, there are over 47,000 different denominations.²⁹ There are 19,502 total cities and municipalities in the United States alone.³⁰ With these numbers, two unique denominations could be placed in every small town and big city in the United States. The church splits every day without the intention of rebuilding and it is detrimental to the church's potential. At what point does it end? Denominationalism must stop being an obstacle to unity. The seemingly impenetrable barriers that keep Jesus from being the focus need to come down.³¹ Having Jesus as the great valley between man-made mountains, the unifier, and the savior from our divisiveness could change everything.

Key Voices

A catalyst for unity is listening. In listening, the importance of different voices and different views becomes crucial. In concentrating on scripture being a divider, Jesus being the answer, and a new way to move forward, there are three voices that are exceptionally influential. For the body of Christ to be fully represented, the voices of the Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Church should be

²⁷ Luther, Martin. (1997). Martin Luther's 95 Theses. Retrieved May 04, 2021, from <https://www.luther.de/en/95thesen.html>

²⁸ Frei, H. W. (1980). *The eclipse of Biblical narrative*. London, UK: Yale University Press. 130.

²⁹ Beale, S. (n.d.). Just how many protestant denominations are there? Retrieved February 23, 2021, from <https://www.ncregister.com/blog/just-how-many-protestant-denominations-are-there>.

³⁰ Department, P., & 20, J. (2021, January 20). Number of U.S. cities, towns, villages by population SIZE 2019. Retrieved February 23, 2021, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/241695/number-of-us-cities-towns-villages-by-population-size/>.

³¹ Leithart, P. J. (2016). *The end of Protestantism: Pursuing unity in a fragmented Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group. 98.

valued and represented. The following voices each represent a tribe of the big three. Their voices are similar but different. The similarities are in Jesus, while the differences are in practice.

KEY VOICE 1 - N.T. WRIGHT

N.T. Wright is a British Anglican bishop. He currently resides at the University of Oxford as a research fellow at Wycliffe Hall. He represents the voice of the Protestant tradition. N.T. Wright displays an array of knowledge and grace within the topic of church unity. He continually reveals a grace for other traditions and a unifying hope in Jesus. There is a way to finding unity through Jesus, and the place we meet is at the Apostle's Creed. At the creed, the church finds a common orthodoxy that can unite with humility. Silos form very easily in Christianity, but everything in the New Testament points towards Christianity being a team sport.³² The body of Christ has many limbs and organs in operation. When they are healthy, they work together.³³ Working together can bring about tension and difficulty, even in our bodies, but being uncomfortable is not always a bad thing.

Wright views the Bible as a narrative in 5 acts, of which much of the 5th is missing. There is creation, the fall, Israel, then Jesus. The beginning of a fifth act is the resurrection, ascension, and Holy Spirit. The end of the fifth act is sketched in loosely with the new heaven and new earth, and we are like actors being told to know the play and improvise through so you get to that goal.³⁴ Wright explains that many understandings of the Bible consists of, "here are the principles, now let's apply them."³⁵ This is part of why there are thousands of churches in silos instead of united. We should be more interested and live by, "here is the story and how do we fit in it?"³⁶ If the church could live this out, individuals would not only find their own stories throughout scripture, but they would have more grace in listening to more stories of others outside of their context. The common mistake of the church that creates further division is searching to find truth that comes from Western rationalism. It treats the Bible as a pseudo-text book and escapes from a right-brain view of the Bible to a left-brain.³⁷

From the birth of Protestantism, *sola scriptura* is at the center and it begs much to be talked about. While thinking the Bible is all that is needed, an understanding of the Bible is crucial within itself.

³² Wright, N. (Producer). (2019, May 21) *Ask N.T. Wright Anything #14* (audio podcast) <https://www.premierchristianradio.com/Shows/Weekday/Ask-NT-Wright-Anything/Podcast/Ask-NT-Wright-Anything-14-The-Church-worship-and-unity>.

³³ IBID

³⁴ Wright, N. (2018, June 28). N.T. Wright - philosophy of the Bible. Retrieved April 16, 2021, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZQU83Lfdi8w>.

³⁵ IBID

³⁶ IBID

³⁷ IBID

For example, a word that is commonly used with scripture is inerrancy. Inerrancy is used when describing the Bible, but should we look towards these specific catch-phrases that are sending following generations to the way-side when they do not believe them anymore? Inerrancy is usually looking to get into a defense mode that continues to divide. It does not seem like an accident that the use of inerrancy and infallibility came into being while Rome insisted on papal infallibility.³⁸ The rationalism of the Enlightenment partly made the Protestants want to feel included and intellectual. This created a longing for precise facts that left the truthful mystery behind in a ditch. This view holds tightly to, "if there is a good God, He must have given us a perfect scripture."³⁹ There is a good God and He gave us a perfect son.

Fundamentalism shuts down questions, but if this is the book that God wants us to have, all questions should be welcomed. People with such thoughts are quick to call the Bible truth, but the notion of truth itself is more complex.⁴⁰ Many Western Christians search for truth scientifically instead of truth in story or metaphor. When the Psalmist says, God has "smoke coming out of His nostrils" (Psalm 18:8), we should know it is poetry. In the same way, is Genesis 1-2 a poetic telling of creation? If so, is that a deal-breaker? The Bible should not be something we are looking at to prove in a scientific way. The Bible is infallible in that you can totally rely on it.⁴¹ The Eastern thinking of Jesus and the people of the Bible allows a holding of paradox. They would not have struggled with holding two separate truths in one. Western thinking looks for a black and white right and wrong. All authority in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18) is not given to even a sacred book that was written, but in Jesus.⁴² The scriptures that we read are a witness to Jesus, the word of God.

KEY VOICE 2 - BRAD JERSAK

Brad Jersak is a Canadian author and itinerant teacher. He currently teaches theology at St. Stephen's University. Brad has a unique perspective being that he was raised Baptist, became Mennonite, and is now in the Eastern Orthodox church.

Brad Jersak's view of church unity is paramount for the church today. In Jesus' prayer in John 17 for all of those who love Him to be one, we must see unity and oneness in love, not uniformity. We share a common humanity with every single person on the planet. This reveals the importance of

³⁸ Wright, N. T. (2011). *Simply Christian: Why Christianity makes sense*. Ney York, NY: Harper Collins. 183.

³⁹ Wright, N. (Producer). (2019, May 21) *Ask N.T. Wright Anything #14* (audio podcast) <https://www.premierchristianradio.com/Shows/Weekday/Ask-NT-Wright-Anything/Podcast/Ask-NT-Wright-Anything-14-The-Church-worship-and-unity>.

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⁴¹ IBID

⁴² IBID

loving all humanity as our neighbors. The church is included in this. An acceptance is possible even if the other group following Jesus has a much different understanding of what that looks like.⁴³ Brad shares a revelatory viewpoint of the story of Mark 5:

"I saw our Lord Jesus Christ get in a fishing boat and cross Galilee. He sailed to our shores to visit us. He didn't land in Gadara or Decapolis—our region is called Denomination. But for a few rags, we're naked. We're mobile, but we're scarred by scores of abrasions—self-inflicted. We're obviously insane, but we come running because it's Jesus. Jesus then asks our name and we intend to say, 'I'm Baptist' or 'I'm Mennonite' or 'I'm dispensational' or 'I'm Charismatic' or 'I'm Orthodox' (all labels I've personally worn—assume your own). But that's not what comes out of our mouths. With a hoarse croak, we blurt, 'We are Legion.' Isn't it true? Is there an entity so possessed and fragmented by schismatic and sectarian spirits as the church for whom Christ implored when we traded love for one another with lashing one another?"⁴⁴

With a fragmented church at hand, moving forward can sometimes seem impossible. What seems almost impossible is getting the church to agree on the same things to move forward. The church is too quick to push a group out of the circle to strengthen their own "right" beliefs. In the early church, the Gnostics felt they had special knowledge, and they were even seen as heretical but were not kicked out of the church. Why are groups individuals kicked out so quickly?⁴⁵

Moving forward must look like moving towards Jesus, not simply having a correct view of scriptures and kicking out those that do not think alike. Jesus is the word of God, and scriptures must bow to the living Word.⁴⁶ In the scriptures, it seems to primarily point towards Jesus as the word. The Bible as the "word" would be like saying, "you have my word on this." It is crucially important and a home base for Christians, but it is what points to the living word who is Jesus. The Bible is the product of the church in which we consider for our faith and practice. Realizing that the church predates the Bible may help. The church is the tradition and the Bible is the apostolic witness to Christ where the Gospels are central and should be held higher.⁴⁷ The beauty of scripture is that, in the words of the

⁴³ Jersak, Bradley. *A More Christlike Way: a More Beautiful Faith*. Pasadena, CA: Plain Truth Ministries, 2019. P. 136-137

⁴⁴ IBID

⁴⁵ Jersak, Brad. (Guest). (2018, December 9) *Episode 71: The Bible for Normal People* (audio podcast)

⁴⁶ IBID

⁴⁷ IBID

author Pete Enns, "God let His children tell the story." Does this entail that there are mistakes? It could be looked at that way, or it could show how it flows through humanity and progresses towards the complete fulfillment of Jesus entering the story. An awful assumption that is often made is that without a Bible, it would be impossible to be a Christian. How would the early church feel about that? It would be foolish to think that the only way we know him is from the scriptures. That should be a moment to ask the question, "do we not know him?"⁴⁸

John 16 does not say, "when the Bible comes, it will guide you in all truth," but when the guide or Holy Spirit comes, "He will guide you in all truth." Paul doesn't say, "the Bible is the pillar and foundation of the truth," but the church is (1 Timothy 3:15). Most people first encounter Christ, not by way of scriptures, but by the church, an AA meeting, or by a dream.⁴⁹ When the damaging view of scriptures can begin to shift to a Jesus-centric way of being, like a magnetic force, the church will begin to draw closer together in mission and work.

KEY VOICE 3 - RICHARD ROHR

Richard Rohr is an American author and Franciscan Friar. He now serves as the founder and director at the Living School for Action and Contemplation in New Mexico. Being Catholic, Richard has a unique view about unity in the church and the Bible.

Rohr does not often directly teach about church unity, but his teachings all point to it. Jesus has a beautiful prayer for unity in John 17 that encompasses this. It has often been taken by literal minds and assumed divine unity is organizational or institutional. The unity found in the Trinity is infinite love between the three.⁵⁰ If looking at the Trinity, we easily see divine distinctions, but a divine connection and oneness through love. Love is the only thing that will bring it all back. Richard says, "We Catholics thought for hundreds of years that you Protestants would come back and we would all be unified in you coming back to the mother church."⁵¹ There have been too many disagreements that could be healthy if adopted. The Catholics are leery of trusting something directly derived from the Holy Spirit, and Protestants are often told that having an inner experience that changes their thinking and hearts can be unnecessary and sometimes even dangerous.⁵²

⁴⁸ IBID

⁴⁹ IBID

⁵⁰ Rohr, R. (2017, November 16). On Christian unity. Retrieved April 17, 2021, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pee4Be70e7c>

⁵¹ IBID

⁵² Sweeney, J. M. (2015). Eager to love: The alternative way of francis of assisi. *Spiritus*, 15(1), 132-133,154. Retrieved from <https://georgefox.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/scholarly-journals/eager-love-alternative-way-francis-assisi/docview/1681930875/se-2?accountid=11085>

Imagine if the church body could see the things that look like Jesus and begin to adopt those things from other parts of the body of Christ. The key to unity is not found organizationally. God is a God of the impossible. The Trinity reveals the seemingly impossible possibility to retain diversity and unity at the same time. If all things are possible through Jesus (Philippians 4:13), it is possible for the church to operate in the same way. Honoring and protecting diversity is crucial. When out in public, looking at the faces of any crowd show how much God loves diversity. It is in our humanity that we feel threatened by otherness.⁵³

Unity and inclusivity of the other can be found in scripture as well, if it is looked at how it is meant to be looked at. Understanding scripture is understanding different levels of consciousness of God and the evolutionary trajectory. When looking at books of the Bible like Joshua or Judges, they are not uninspired, but cannot be compared to the book of John.⁵⁴ When the scriptures were written, it was not God's controlling invasion into human consciousness, but it was filtered through their capacity to hear it and receive it.⁵⁵ Richard says about scripture that, "It is inspired, but you can't say that every line in the Bible is equally inspired because God becomes less punitive, less violent, more inclusive, less tribal, and it is obvious to see. That's why it is important to read the scriptures in the light of Jesus and see how He interpreted the Bible."⁵⁶

After the Enlightenment in Western Europe, Catholics and Protestants began feeling less intelligent in the conversations and writings. This caused the Catholics to create an absolute authority in a supreme court and Protestants to create an absolute authority in the Bible. There are problems to be seen from both ends, but from the Protestant perspective, the Bible is left up for interpretation, and no matter how the Bible is interpreted, it is still an individual's interpretation.⁵⁷ It has been left to influence by many but found in a space that relates to individualistic world views and influences.

Inner experiences are very needed, which may sound dangerous and scary because different parts of the body of Christ could potentially get different thoughts. The fear is not of God. It stems from a desire for control, and if groups or denominations are not controlling in their views of God, then that puts them in a place that they are not in control, and they do not like this as humans. A true

⁵³ Rohr, R. (2017, November 16). On Christian unity. Retrieved April 17, 2021, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pee4Be70e7c>

⁵⁴ Rohr, Richard. (Guest). (2017, March 26) *Episode 2: The Bible for Normal People* (audio podcast)

⁵⁵ IBID

⁵⁶ IBID

⁵⁷ IBID

experiential union between God and others will lead to a Jesus-centric path to unity.⁵⁸ Rohr explains a wholeness of a follower of Jesus with their experience like that of a tricycle. A tricycle has three wheels. The first wheel at the front is experience. Then the back two are tradition and scriptures. The Protestant movement has continually put scripture as a unicycle, and Catholics have done the same with tradition. Protestants trust their own experience to find correct meanings in scripture, and Catholics do the same thing by finding bishops or saints that agree with their thoughts.⁵⁹

In placing the Bible in the place of primary authority, Protestants continually desire to prove historical and scientific accuracy. This narrows our lens and limits our capacity in the beauty of scripture. When trying to prove that Jesus was really born in Bethlehem in year zero, it does not help expand the heart, mind, and soul of others, and it will not bring people to experience the risen Christ. The Bible itself deconstructs that type of thinking because of the beautiful contradictions.⁶⁰ It reveals a correct way to read through Jesus, the way. Faith is found in who Christians are for, not what they are against.

Section 3: Synthesis and Conclusion

In summary of the voices heard, there is an answer to the future of the church being unified. Following a Jesus-centric way of reading the Bible, viewing tribalism, and thinking of self and others provides a path to unity.

A Jesus-centric view of scripture provides a way forward that unifies the church. This does not implore the entire church to get on the same page with scriptural understanding. This understanding simply provides space to learn from the other. Scholars have and will continue to divide over scriptural understandings but that does not give a right to divide within itself. The church must realize there has been a trajectory hermeneutic, or an evolving interpretation, throughout history and in scripture which continues to bring everyone closer to seeing Jesus in God.⁶¹ This revelation brings about a new way to read the Bible through the lens of Jesus. Even in stating this, different interpretations will always exist. A unity in placing Jesus at the center can hold holy tensions in understandings which have existed since the beginning of the church. If properly

⁵⁸ Sweeney, J. M. (2015). Eager to love: The alternative way of francis of assisi. *Spiritus*, 15(1), 132-133,154. Retrieved from <https://georgefox.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/scholarly-journals/eager-love-alternative-way-francis-assisi/docview/1681930875/se-2?accountid=11085>

⁵⁹ Rohr, Richard. (Guest). (2017, March 26) *Episode 2:The Bible for Normal People* (audio podcast)

⁶⁰ IBID

⁶¹ Rohr, Richard. (Guest). (2017, March 26) *Episode 2:The Bible for Normal People* (audio podcast)

handled, this will only build the church stronger. The door will close to fear and open a new door of unified trust in Jesus.

A Jesus-centric view of tribalism reveals that tribes are not wrong within themselves. Denominations and different parts of the body are a part of the whole of the bride that Jesus described (1 Corinthians 12:12-14). Division begins when different people striving to follow Jesus are looked at as if they do not belong. When a denomination or tribe of Christianity sees themselves as the entire body, they ignorantly unhealthily function as such. This denies that others could play a part in showing the world a God who loves them. The easy way out is getting caught up in blaming and scapegoating. This only reinforces group identity and separates further.⁶² When realizing that the "other" is not as dangerous as the fear that is placed in them, space is created at the table for more voices. Fear takes people away from a beautiful safety of God and community and places them in their own self-created safety that divides.⁶³ Jesus offers communities of faith a way in Him that reveals a table big enough for all. At this table, each place has a personalized name-plate for the ones that were never thought to belong. Love brings tribes, denominations, understandings, to the table without walls. Finding out what this love looks like is in finding Jesus.

A Jesus-centric view of self and others allows an open door to unity. Unity begins when the first thought, deep knowing, and feeling is love. Love must be the interpretive lens that makes radical demands for self and the other.⁶⁴ It cannot be forgotten that God is love. There is an ongoing definition of what love is outside of the life of Jesus and as defined in scripture that seeks to further fitting into one side. Love must be found in knowing the Jesus of the gospels and knowing Jesus experientially. In leaning into love and letting walls around our constructs begin to come down, one of the most powerful things that can be done is allow space to listen. Listening is part of what plugs humans into life and allows them to understand themselves as much as those speaking to them.⁶⁵ There is an allure of certainty in our worldviews and constructs that always seeks to divide and walk alone. Placing certainty, outside of Jesus, on the altar gives space to be more like Him and the realization of never walking alone.⁶⁶

⁶² Ó Touma, P. & Jordan, G. (2021). *Borders & Belonging: The book of Ruth: A Story for our Times*. Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press. p. 32

⁶³ Martin, J. (2016). *How to survive a shipwreck: Help is on the way and love is already here*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁶⁴ Brown, D. (2008). *Tradition and imagination: Revelation and change*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. p. 305

⁶⁵ Murphy, K. (2019). *You're not listening: What you're missing and why it matters*. New York, NY: Macmillan Publishers. p. 29

⁶⁶ Schulz, K. (2011). *Being wrong: Adventures in the margin of error*. New York, NY: HarperCollins. p. 159

A few proven practical steps in this Jesus-centric path forward include listening, learning and collaborating in serving. Listening begins with venturing out from the voices who constructed familiar frameworks. For example, a white male Christian surrounded by other white Christians should spend time reading, listening, and being in community with people of minority backgrounds in their society. This commences a journey for someone to love better and find more of who God is in those that are different. Learning in a Jesus-centric way is committing to diversifying the pallet of the church's reading list, podcasts, and influences. Over time, Jesus is revealed through people that were formerly vilified and marginalized. Lastly, one of the most practical and Jesus-centric ways to bring the church together is through collaborating in serving others. Throughout the church's history and still today, churches that collaborate in bringing dignity to the poor find common ground. This topic has not been researched enough. Mother Theresa (Catholic) is not looked at as less than by a Protestant just as the Salvation Army willingly works with the Orthodox church in reaching the poor.⁶⁷ When you do unto the least together, something special happens (Matthew 25:40). Jesus served the unique group that He named disciples by washing their feet (John 13:1-13). He then described to them the pattern that He set in place for them in serving. Unity in heart with Jesus at the center begins to form by serving people. There is a power in doing the work together for Jesus. Each of these created spaces and practices must take place slowly and intentionally to avoid an allergic reaction.

In discovering this topic throughout history, relevant voices, and current studies, there are many pieces of the puzzle yet to be put together. Unifying and coming together are not the way of the world, but the way of Jesus. By stating that the way of Jesus should be followed, interpretation is left. Experience is left. Different children will hear and do different things from the same father because that is what children do. Within the being and doing, we find a loving God who is inclusive of all. Unity is far from being had and there will always be those that keep their constructs as holy convictions. This does not mean that hope is lost. There are people out there that are moving toward a more unified, decentralized environment of church that has their eyes and faces towards Jesus. When the church all faces the son, it becomes difficult to place our brother or sister in a spot over, below, in, or out. It sets a precedent for moving forward in a more beautifully diverse way. This is the Jesus way.

Appendix C—Milestone 3 Design Workshop Report

⁶⁷ The general meets greek orthodox archbishop at exhibition launch. (2018, October 31). Retrieved May 01, 2021, from <https://www.salvationarmy.org/ihq/news/inr311018>

Introduction

In the continual exploration and research of church unity, findings are followed by inspiration from different perspectives. This is a journey filled with voices that are far from uniform, but have communicated and embodied unity through Jesus. Because of this, encouragement understates the need and longing to see a project birthed that will have impact in and beyond my tribe.

NPO Statement

The fragmented church has countless interpretations of truth caused by tribal fear that has created more division and a longing for control. If unified in Jesus, we could see radical inclusivity of the following generations.

NPO Scope and Constraints

Exploring the fragmented church is a topic that has been dealt with since the church began. The unifying effort seen throughout history is found in Jesus. It is in His way and in Him being the Way that truth is found. Jesus is the non-negotiable resistance to the fragmented church. The scope is wide, but centers focus when concentrating on the following generations. Working towards a children's-based project invites a much wider audience with parental and care-taker involvement but remains keyed in. The seeds that fall into good soil in this project will be for those who are willing to listen. The bad soil of offense and deeply embedded dogma will not come from the children, but the parents and caretakers themselves.

NPO Context

The ministry setting for this topic is widely based on the whole Church but starts with a self-critique of Protestantism. This project and research is grounded in the idea that hope is alive for unity in the church, even my tribe. The research and focus comes from an American evangelical background and point of view. Because of this, it will also entail further criticism for evangelicalism.

In my current role, I am a part of planting a church and working with other churches in compassion ministry in France. As I move towards a project, my focus will target my background but I see a growth track of targeting the resonate audience I am working with here in France. The most effective will be impacting the culture where I am from and know best but I see this bringing wide impact to my current context as well.

Root Causes

Beginning with concrete history, a specific one-on-one interview with a theologian brought about a unique perspective in root cause. They spoke about the fragmentation that took place right away because of the persecution of the church. The distinguishing factor is that early church people were not kicked out and excluded because of differing beliefs. Some chose to leave but the pre-

Constantinian church was one. In a theoretical view, our Discovery Workshop utilized the Toyota "Five Whys". In our findings, the modernity of today's church division points to the last two "whys" that were asked. These are control and finally a root of fear. Many find their "rightness" with a fear-driven faith that focuses on an eternal conscience torment to pay as consequence.

Lastly, a unique current perspective from a one-on-one interview placed the enemy of algorithm at the center of today's division. Our biases are continually confirmed by the algorithms technologically set in place which increase church fragmentation.

Three Big Ideas

The first idea identified is education curriculum among children and youth. Secondly is an interactive children's book with a focus on imagination and story from a Jesus-centric perspective. Lastly, is a children's podcast that would aim to utilize humor, Jesus-centric stories, and history told by unifying voices.

Definition of 'Done'

The goal in addressing this NPO is to begin a movement of children with a desire of unifying in Jesus and a hopeful inclusion of participating adults.

3 Concept Pitches

The first concept pitch was an education curriculum. The idea of this would be to tell history from the perspective of the marginalized in a Jesus-centric way. The Bible has a way of doing this and captures imagination and truth. When history has been told by the powerful, we have a lot of excavating to do. The audience of this is children aged 4-12. This addresses the NPO in a sense of teaching a non-fear-based curriculum that encourages students to see the "other" as a brother or sister instead of an enemy. It gives a glimpse of the church as wholly valuable instead of one denomination being valuable.

This could be implemented in a variety of settings. The approach that we found to be most valuable is in a pairing of a church setting and home setting. This would allow for a connection with church leadership and parents also connecting with the curriculum. The risks involved are the potential small rate of adoption of the material in churches. Many churches move towards their own thinkers and this could be seen as a threat to that. The assumption that could be taken is that leading with a utilized voice in their tribe could be an open door to potential use. Testing this curriculum would take time being that measurement of unity and scope take time. Benchmarks of success could be seen in children enjoying the class and the stakeholders working with other churches in community.

The second pitch is for an interactive children's book. The main idea of this would be a book for parents and their kids to interactively participate with. The audience are the children but a hopeful effect would take place in the parents as well. This addresses the NPO by breaking down

assumptions of the “other” not being right in the body of Christ and benefits the parent and the children. The approach is using interaction with parents and children in activities and challenges throughout that encourages to love the “other”. The risks that could be present are offense due to the use of voices from different parts of the body of Christ that do not align with their tribe. This would be something that could be testing in a format where the stakeholders and beneficiaries could provide feedback from a questionnaire.

This would prove to be successful if children are having their questions answered of why their groups and tribes are not friends with the “others”. Movies are doing a great job showing them this but not the Church for the most part.

The final pitch was a children’s podcast. This is a podcast that inspires imagination, utilizes humor, and tells the story of Jesus from many different perspectives in the body of Christ. This addresses the NPO by simply letting metaphor guide children to long to know the “other” and follow Jesus. The benefit of this podcast would be an option for car rides or before bed that give children and parents a moment to escape screens, and be taken to a Jesus-centric world of imagination. The approach would potentially be interactive with a book but certainly have weekly episodes that would engage children to look forward to the next one.

The risk involved would be offense from the utilization of story in the bible and also of different voices throughout the entire body of Christ. To test this out, I would send it to a group of people in different parts of the body of Christ and see their thoughts to see if it engages all and causes a longing to know and connect with the “other”. Benchmarks of success would be other materials to come out of this from a following of the podcast that could further the unification of the church.

Design Workshop Stakeholders

Participants in this workshop included a native American tribal member, a non-profit founder and president, a local church pastor, and two missionaries.

One-on-One Interviews

The one-on-one interviews included a theologian author, a pastor, and a columnist author.

Annotated Bibliography

The first book is the *Danish way of Parenting*.⁶⁸ Iben Dissing Sandhal is a certified coach, author, and licensed narrative psychotherapist, and MPF. Jessica Joelle Alexander is a bestselling American author, researcher, columnist, and Danish parenting expert. The intended audience in this book are parents looking to raise happy and capable children. The premise of this book

⁶⁸ Alexander, J. J. & Sandal, I. D. (2016). *Danish way of parenting*. Piatkus Books.

involves the acronym for PARENT. It includes play, authenticity, reframing, empathy, no ultimatums, and togetherness and hygge. This book brings together the fun whimsical practices in a child-focused and Jesus-centric topic. This will be a resource that helps frame in engagement with the project and intentionality.

The second book is the *Sin of Certainty*.⁶⁹ Dr. Pete Enns is the Abram S. Clemens Professor of Biblical Studies at Eastern University. He is also an author of several books and hosts the podcast *The Bible for Normal People*. The intended audience of this book are groups that are certain about their tribal beliefs being correct without a desire to know the beliefs of the "other." The book invites readers to understand how God desires us to have trust for Him instead of being solely set on our "right" beliefs. This work will help portray a healthy way to express a trust in Jesus instead of a trust in our tribal beliefs.

The third book is *A More Christlike Word*.⁷⁰ Dr. Bradley Jersak is the Dean of Theology and Culture at St. Stephen's University. He is also the editor-in-chief of Clarion Journal for Religion, Peace, and Justice as well as an author of several books. The intended audience for this book are people seeking to find the true Word, who is Jesus. The premise of the books takes a journey into the Emmaus Way and elimination of scripture through Jesus. Jesus is the Word and all scripture must be seen through Him and His way. This will be helpful in the project because the largest reason for the fragmentation of the Protestant church is because of the "rightness" in each groups understanding of scriptures.

The last book is *The End of Protestantism*.⁷¹ Dr. Peter Leithhart is President of Theopolis Institute and is a former pastor. He is also an adjunct senior fellow of theology and literature at New Saint Andrews College as well as an author of numerous books. The intended audience of this book are people seeking healing in a fragmented church. He does a great job of critiquing and encouraging the Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches. His intention is that the church would be one. This is a helpful resource in the project because it focuses on the intended outcome of allowing us to see the "other" parts of the body of Christ as a part of us.

⁶⁹ Enns, P. (2017). *Sin of certainty*. Harpercollins Publishers Inc.

⁷⁰ Jersak, Bradley. (2021). *A More Christlike Word: Reading scripture the Emmaus way*. New Kinsington, PA: Whitaker House.

⁷¹Leithart, P. J. (2016). *The end of Protestantism: Pursuing unity in a fragmented Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group.

Appendix D—Milestone 4 Design Research Report

Introduction

Hope is a strong four-letter word. The strength of hope resonating deeply within the heart of its holder can shift a single perspective or change a nation's direction. A perfectly unified church will never be grasped, but a more unified church can be. Exploring and researching how this can be done has been pivotal in these prototypic findings. Hope without strategy falls flat, but with a clear and precise plan in place, hope can allow people to have an experience that brings them together. The following findings of the future are exquisitely hopeful for the unity of the church one human at a time.

Prototype Summary and Findings

Prototype Descriptions

For the prototype stage, two different prototypes were chosen. One is a children's podcast, and the other is a theological dystopia book for young adults, which both correlate together by design. They are both called Sol's Porch. This derives from the sacred overlap moment of Peter choosing to preach from Solomon's Porch in Acts 3 after the beggar's healing took place. Solomon's porch was a place that was frequented by all walks of life in the community. Whether commerce, philosophical discourse, or the people of God gathering, it can be found at Sol's Porch. It was a place sacred and secular, a holy in-between that brought people together.

The first prototype is the children's podcast, Sol's Porch. The goal of this podcast is to unify in Jesus by introducing characters and practices from different parts of the body of Christ, utilizing voices from the Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Church. Each episode is designed to point children to Jesus. From personal or corporate experiences to theological understandings of God, Jesus is centralized. Each episode will have a subject that allows the children to see from someone's perspective outside of their worldview. The main characters of the podcast are Pete and Marbles. Pete is the host with an evangelical background that has a love for Jesus and the church. He is on a continuous journey of learning more from each part of the body of Christ in order to love Jesus more and others more. Marbles is a comedic child sidekick that regularly interrupts and utilizes humor to engage listeners. They work together to symbiotically tell the story throughout the episode.

The second Prototype is a young adult dystopian called Sol's Porch. In this book, Xi, the main character, is forced into a 3-day life-changing experience where he finds his sight in the most unlikely place; Sol's porch. The choice is his in the end. Will he follow the algorithms of Three15 or choose to follow the Way? The goal of this book is for people to see themselves on the journey of Xi. The book follows Xi's story of growing up in a Christian group and knowing there must be more. Sol's porch is his introduction to the Jesus he thought he knew. Utilizing the metaphors of the porch and the table, Xi begins to see his enemies as allies who also follow Jesus. The goal of this book is not for people to leave their groups.

The character Sol is the sage in each conversation. Sol has a background in the Three15 but has embraced each part of the body of Christ. He utilizes the Jesus-centric thoughts of the Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Church. He is a guide for Xi in seeing the other people in other groups as brother and sister instead of the enemy. The goal is for readers to be inspired to be a part of changing them from the inside out by embracing difference in the body of Christ with Jesus in the center. A full description can be found in the appendices.

NPO Statement

The fragmented church has countless interpretations of truth caused by tribal fear that has created more division and a longing for control. If unified in Jesus, we could see radical inclusivity of the following generations.

Participant Descriptions, Research Questions, and Benchmarks

The targeted participant audience for the podcast were families with younger children. Please find the attached link to the podcast prototype in the appendices. The following gives a description of each listener and answers provided questions:

Listener One: The first family of listeners is a family of 7. They have 4 boys and 1 girl. They listened on their way to church on a Sunday morning while riding in the car. Their children's ages range from 7-18. They are ex-evangelicals.

Questions for the parents:

Did the children disengage? If so, when?

No the children did not disengage at all.

Were you engaged as a parent as well?

Yes, we stayed engaged.

Did you learn anything new from this?

No, but I was really pleased that my children were able to learn about breath prayers.

Does this make you curious to learn more outside your church denomination? Yes.

What would you change to make the podcast better?

The mix of the music and voices needs to be better. Some of the music is significantly louder in certain sections.

Questions for the children:

What was the big idea of the podcast for you?

"Learning about the voice of God" and "punching the alarm clock right in the face."

What do you want to personally change after listening to this?

To pray more.

Does this make you curious about how other parts of the body of Christ pray?

Yes.

What would you change to make the podcast better?

More "punching the alarm clock in the face."

Listener Two: This family of listeners has a family of four with two girls that are 4 and 6 years old. They made the comment that they have been searching for a children's podcast like this and they are looking forward to more. They have a Protestant church background.

Questions for the parents:

Did the children disengage? If so, when?

The 4 year old and 6 year old began to disengage after the 10-11 minute mark. They were re-engaged after asking them to continue listening and asked questions showing their engagement. They immediately started saying a breathe prayer afterwards.

Were you engaged as a parent as well?

"Yes, the voices were great." They laughed several times and enjoyed how the stories shifted from one to another to keep it engaging. For it to be 17 minutes, it worked to keep it changing.

Did you learn anything new from this?

This opened up a new way to engage the kids in prayer life. They have never considered teaching them about breath prayers, but it clearly connected.

Does this make you curious to learn more outside your church denomination?

"Not really, but this is not a hurdle for me."

What would you change to make the podcast better?

They would give more opportunity to girl characters having two daughters. They were not sure if the character Marbles was a male or female.

Questions for the children:

What was the big idea of the podcast for you?

The 6 year old said, "I want to use prayer to help me listen. And I want to use a breathe prayer to help me with my worries."

What do you want to personally change after listening to this?

The 4 year old did not engage in this question but the 6 year old said "to pray more."

Does this make you curious about how other parts of the body of Christ pray?

They answered yes and immediately began to pray to Jesus. What would you change to make the podcast better?

None

Listener Three: This family has a 5 year old boy and an 8 year old girl. They work for an evangelical church.

Questions for the parents:

Did the children disengage? If so, when?

"Yes, at about 5 minutes in."

Were you engaged as a parent as well?

Yes.

Did you learn anything new from this?

Yes.

Does this make you curious to learn more outside your church denomination?

Yes.

What would you change to make the podcast better?

"I would shorten it if you have a younger target audience of children."

Questions for the children:

What was the big idea of the podcast for you?

"You can pray to God whenever you want to."

What do you want to personally change after listening to this?

"Read the bible and pray more."

Does this make you curious about how other parts of the body of Christ pray?

Yes.

What would you change to make the podcast better?

"Include the story of Daniel in the lion's den praying."

Listener Four: This family has three children ranging from 5 years old to 10 years old. They have two boys and one girl. They currently work for a Pentecostal Church.

Questions for the parents:

Did the children disengage? If so, when?

No. They did interrupt and ask questions during the podcast. The 5 year old paused it to go to the bathroom.

Were you engaged as a parent as well?

Yes.

Did you learn anything new from this?

"Yes, this is the first time we have heard about a breathe prayer. We are from a church that talks a lot about prayer but I have never hear of this."

Does this make you curious to learn more outside your church denomination?

Yes.

What would you change to make the podcast better?

A description of the characters would help. "My kids think that Marbles is a puppy and Sol is King Saul from the bible."

Questions for the children:

What was the big idea of the podcast for you?

The kids new the big idea was about prayer and even shared more about it afterwards. The youngest was shy, but the older two had a breathe prayer ready when asked about it.

What do you want to personally change after listening to this?

They will pray more.

Does this make you curious about how other parts of the body of Christ pray?

Yes.

What would you change to make the podcast better?

Nothing. They keep saying "cherry red Ferrari" throughout the house.

Listener Five: This family has two boys ages 7 years old and 10 years old. They are currently missionaries in Europe with a Protestant movement.

Questions for the parents:

Did the children disengage? If so, when?

No. They were engaged the entire time.

Were you engaged as a parent as well?

Yes.

Did you learn anything new from this?

No.

Does this make you curious to learn more outside your church denomination?

Yes.

What would you change to make the podcast better?

To have better audio quality.

Questions for the children:

What was the big idea of the podcast for you?

That listening to Jesus is really important.

What do you want to personally change after listening to this?

To be quiet more with Jesus.

Does this make you curious about how other parts of the body of Christ pray?

Yes.

What would you change to make the podcast better?

Make Marbles' rap better.

The targeted participant audience for the book were adults (most in 20's and 30's). Please find the sample pages from chapter 5 and a detailed description of the book in the appendices. The following gives a description of each reader and answers the provided questions:

Reader One: This reader is a leader of a non-profit and an ex-evangelical.

Questions:

Was this engaging? Why or why not?

Yes. It's well written with great descriptive words and imagery.

Did the sample of chapter 5 make you want to continue reading? Why or why not?

Yes, you gave some foundational information so I had an idea of the story I was reading and drew me in with the imagery then left me questioning about the glass and purple smoke and how Xi's parents will respond to his equipment being broken. It left me wanting to learn more about the characters.

Did any part of this resonate with you? Why or why not?

This line and message! "But...a faithfulness to a group's understanding of the Book without embracing the beauty of other groups and without the light of Jesus can be divisive and dangerous."

What would you change about the book idea?

Nothing. I like it a lot. Honestly if it wasn't created and written by someone I knew and wanted to support in reading it, I likely would not because I'd be expecting a book like this to be another Frank Peretti - however what I am reading is well written and has heart and makes me want to read more.

Reader two: This reader is a missionary for a Protestant movement with a Catholic background.

Was this engaging? Why or why not?

YES! Being brought into Xi's experience and thoughts was super engaging. His inner-head narration is raw and honest, but you actively feel like you are on the journey with him, in real time, as he discovers the reality around him.

Did the sample of chapter 5 make you want to continue reading? Why or why not?

Yes! There's just enough nostalgia from other apocalyptic genre books/movies to fill in blanks about what this experience would be like, but unique enough to want to know more about what happens in this specific scenario, and how it will be different with a Christian lens. I'm super intrigued with the family under the sheet, and what their life experience/viewpoint is.

Did any part of this resonate with you? Why or why not?

Definitely. My experience coming out of the secular world and being thrown in head-first to the AG/evangelical environment was really disorienting, and it took a while to recalibrate what reality was. There were even moments in there for me of wondering what parts of my "old life" I wanted to hang on to, and what parts needed to go.

What would you change about the book idea?

Creamy salve substance. Kidding. It's hard to answer this without reading more and seeing how it all wraps up in Xi's internal thoughts/the cliff-hanger of his decision, but as of right now, I think it's incredibly well thought out and framed for a really interesting dive into church unity. Loved this so much: "When you see the algorithm your group has created as gospel, you begin to villainize others who do not see and hear as you do."

Reader Three: This reader is a conservative Evangelical in the medical industry.

Was this engaging? Why or why not?

Yes, it kept me in suspense.

Did the sample of chapter 5 make you want to continue reading? Why or why not?

Yes, to find out what happens next. Also, it's helping me to understand even more what you've been trying to tell me.

Did any part of this resonate with you? Why or why not?

Yes, bc of discussions we've had. I know that my relationship with Jesus has been a lifelong journey and will be until He takes me home. I know that too many times I haven't shown the love of Jesus as I should. You have given me lots of things to think about, and I pray that the Holy Spirit, through prayer and continued study of Scripture, will continue leading and guiding me into His perfect will and way. Thank you for the many things that you are teaching me! I do want to go on a silent prayer retreat and just looked up info on it.

What would you change about the book idea?

I wouldn't advise changing anything about the prototype, bc what you're writing is coming from your heart in a very creative way. I look forward to reading it all!

Reader four: This reader is a conservative Protestant in the automotive industry.

Was this engaging? Why or why not?

Yes, because I see how it implies that denominations can and are sometimes against one another and shouldn't be.

Did the sample of chapter 5 make you want to continue reading? Why or why not?

Yes, because it's interesting.

Did any part of this resonate with you? Why or why not?

Yes. I'm open to learn about other people and their beliefs.

What would you change about the book idea?

It sounds like a SciFi and I'm not crazy about them, but you're doing a great job writing and I want to read it!

Reader five: This reader has a Catholic background and formally worked in an international community development non-profit and works for a Protestant organization.

Was this engaging? Why or why not?

Yes, it was engaging. I felt that the dynamic between Xi and Sol was really intriguing and the contrast between the felt anxiety/panic of Xi and the family outside in comparison with the calm demeanor of Sol in his language was something that made me want to know more about who he was and how he got to be where he is.

Did the sample of chapter 5 make you want to continue reading? Why or why not?

Yes, it made me want to continue reading. There were a lot of pieces of information and vocabulary about the vibe/lens and the reality Xi came from as well as the story of the outside family that I want to know more about and see if they end up coming into Sol's world.

Did any part of this resonate with you? Why or why not?

Yes, it did. Coming from a Catholic childhood and most of my extended family being Catholic, when we left the Catholic church there was a lot of hurt caused and also a lot of separation that happened between my family and the teaching of the Catholic church. Rather than keep the beautiful parts of the church, we had a negative view of the whole picture. It was not until my adulthood that I was able to start to recognize the beauty of the Catholic church and other denominations besides my own and see the unity and the ultimate goal of following Jesus that church's share. I very much resonate with the heart and challenge of the book

What would you change about the book idea?

The thing that I would change is to make the concept of the System and the Real w/ the vibe and the lens - basically the pieces outside the conversation between Xi and Sol on the porch - slightly less complex depending on what the first four chapters say in their explanation of all of it. Solely from reading chapter 5 and the description I was a little confused about the separation of the worlds and how all the pieces fit together.

Learning Summary

This project, from the beginning, has been participatory. The value of feedback has allowed for key aspects to be noticed. It was a pleasant surprise to hear some of the stories that came from this. Hearing that people wanted to keep reading and keep listening was an encouragement. Many voiced that both are needed. There are also key findings that will allow for adjustments and begin a smarter trajectory for a final project. From people looking for a podcast like this to children practicing breath prayers to people wanting more of the story in the book, the entire project feels worthwhile. Much of the positive feedback came from the parents being excited that their children enjoyed it. The three areas of targeted engagement (Jesus, humor, story) were all commented on and successfully discussed. For the book, the readers discussed the longing to read more. I am discovering the need to be intentional with character development and the storyline. The comments were encouraging because of the discussions around a need for a book like this. It has enough excitement to keep people engaged that would normally not read theology. It has enough theology to keep people engaged that would never pick up a dystopian novel. The development of suspense, storyline, character development, and rich theology need to be cornerstones with continuation.

There were also critiques that will continue to be helpful in the formation of the final project. A comment helped lead to a needed change in character development. An opening one-minute-long podcast with a brief description of characters and plots will help this. The sound was also an issue. It will be necessary to properly mix every part of the future project in order for sound quality to emerge. There was also a comment about making sure more female voices are present moving forward. This is important to make sure each listener feels represented. More critiques were needed, but this will help formulate a final product that will connect without distraction. With the book, there was not as much critique, but more a desire to know more about how all of the pieces of the sample come together.

I am finding with the book that it connects with all age groups. I questioned young adults as well as older adults and they all wanted to read more. The critiques targeted the sample pages and needed more dots connected. These will come from the connection of the first part of the book. It could have worked better to include the sample pages from the first chapter.

Most Important Discovery

The most important discovery for the podcast was finding the target age of the listeners. In my findings, the most engagement came from ages 7-12 year-olds. There is a 12% increase of podcast listeners from the age group of 6-8 to 9-12 in the United States.⁷² This gifts the research with another reason to target this audience and age group and continue forward with this to the final project.

⁷² Götting, M. C. (2022, January 25). *Children listening to podcasts by age 2020*. Statista. Retrieved April 29, 2022, from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1186587/podcast-listening-among-children-us-by-age/>

This will not be limited to this certain age group being that ages lower and higher remained engaged, but simply a target audience for the creation of the content and exercises in the podcast.

The most important discovery for the book was hearing how the message was coming through the metaphor and the story. Some comments resonated with people that were not expected. People who would never want to read theology voiced their favorite parts being theological. People who have never ventured into a Sci-Fi genre voiced their entertainment with the book. This is the goal. If trigger words were used or someone was telling them directly, the message would not have been listened to. Coming from the gentle character of Sol, the answers to the questions revealed how his message through metaphor was compelling.

Background Research Essay on the Emerging Solution

The Evolution

From the beginning, the target audience has been youth. The focus on the next generation emerges from their formation. Theological formation of youth in a rapidly changing world is necessary for followers of Jesus. The greatest way for this to be done is through imagination. Engaging the imagination of the youth is the goal. Albert Einstein said that “imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination circles the world.” It was a difficult choice to pick a podcast over a YouTube channel for children, but the engagement of the imagination is lost with film. There are over 2,000,000 podcasts in existence.⁷³ The question must be asked, “Why another podcast?” There are also a sea of dystopian books, “Why another book?” The strategy of this podcast and book will inadvertently stand out as something that does not exist. Since the 2000s, there has been a dramatic rise in the need for dystopian novels because of the many stresses and anxieties that youth and young adults are dealing with.⁷⁴ What makes these projects unique is the centralization of Jesus over the bible and storytelling. Looking at these two powerful aspects will further the idea that this can create unity in the church.

Centralizing Jesus

An astoundingly high percentage of podcasts and books in the Christian community find a centralization in the Bible. Much research on children’s podcasts has still not led to finding one that

⁷³ Winn, R. (2021, December 28). *2021 podcast stats & facts (new research from APR 2021)*. Podcast Insights®. Retrieved April 29, 2022, from <https://www.podcastinsights.com/podcast-statistics/>

⁷⁴ Shiao, Y., About the Author Yvonne Shiao is a staff writer at Reedsy, & Yvonne Shiao is a staff writer at Reedsy. (2019, March 25). *The rise of dystopian fiction: From Soviet dissidents to 70's paranoia to Murakami*. Electric Literature. Retrieved May 20, 2022, from <https://electricliterature.com/the-rise-of-dystopian-fiction-from-soviet-dissidents-to-70s-paranoia-to-murakami/>

centralizes Jesus. This creates the issue for which disunity in the church exists in the first place. Christian dystopian novels often point to biblical truth instead of the one that is truth.

Factionalism and partisanship continually pull groups into further division from their understanding of the bible.⁷⁵ This furthers the need for more works that focus on the author and finisher of Christianity. When a book is written or podcast recorded by a certain worldview of denomination, specific church, or part of the body of Christ, it is rooted in their understanding of scriptures. It is their learned worldviews and scriptural understanding that they are teaching. By using different parts of the body of Christ to unify around Jesus, the centralization does not rest on a singular person's view but on the way, truth, and life of Jesus. This creates steps towards unity instead of indoctrination. Why Jesus and why not the bible?

Pastor and theologian Brian Zahnd says, "the Bible is the penultimate word of God that points to the Word of God who is Jesus."⁷⁶ Jesus was, is, and always will be a decisive view of God here on earth without question in the Christian faith. The understandings of the Bible on their own were, are, and continue to be divisive. As children are beginning to learn scripture, it is best for them to learn who scripture is about. This is not making a case to lower the view of the Bible, it's quite the opposite. The word becomes alive more than ever when read through the lens of Jesus, the ultimate word. The Bible is a story of God's people journeying in an evolving understanding of who He is. It has not always been the case, but it is now known that God has always been like Jesus (John 14:8-10).

Divisiveness is a key root in why churches are not unifying in the first place. Satan himself attempted to divide the mission of Jesus by using scriptures (Matthew 4:1-11). The enemy works very hard to capture the minds of children in factionalism and groups at a young age. If Jesus captures children's minds, their view on life will be much more inclusive rather than exclusive. Jesus is clear in his mission for his church in John 17:20-23:

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one - I in them and you in me - so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

To further prove that these projects are needed, it is necessary to find unity and not uniformity. This means each Christian on this earth has something to learn from other Christians outside their circle. The circle is not bad within itself, but it becomes a Trinitarian power when it overlaps. Jesus' nature

⁷⁵ Jersak, Bradley. *A More Christlike Way: a More Beautiful Faith*. Pasadena, CA: Plain Truth Ministries, 2019: p. 135

⁷⁶ Zahnd, Brian. *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God: the Scandalous Truth of the Very Good News*. CO Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2017: 50.

is to sprout beautiful differences that can be unequivocally embraced, but only if an understanding exists to make room for Jesus expressed in “the other.”

Many current Christian podcasts and fiction books are based on “the word.” When that is stated, it tends to mean the Bible. The Bible often references the word, but when it does, it reveals that Jesus is the word (John 1:1) and always has been. The bible within itself, without experiencing Jesus in the pages, has proved over history to lead to more groups. The church must realize there has been a trajectory hermeneutic, or an evolving interpretation, throughout history and in scripture which continues to bring everyone closer to seeing Jesus in God.⁷⁷ This revelation brings about a new way to read the Bible through the lens of Jesus. By storytelling Jesus instead of a biblical worldview, black pages remain waiting to be written.

Storytelling

Youth identify with stories in a way that captures their imaginations in relation to the characters they listen to. There is a reason why youth and young adults long for a story to see themselves in. It shapes worlds and creates realities. The teachings of Jesus that were most powerful were stories and metaphors that made a way to follow instead of a rule to follow. In this project, the goal is to create stories that capture the imagination and create unifying thoughts. The essential elements of a story are the following: A theme, characters, setting, point of view, plot, conflict, and resolution.⁷⁸

Each podcast will start with a theme for each episode. The book will do the same. Each narrative that is shared is rooted in scripture and tradition but focused on Jesus. This is the beauty of the bible when read in the light of Jesus. The bible has a narrative in 5 acts, of which much of the 5th is missing. There is creation, the fall, Israel, then Jesus. The beginning of a fifth act is the resurrection, ascension, and Holy Spirit. The end of the fifth act is sketched loosely with the new heaven and new earth, and we are like actors being told to know the play and improvise, so you get to that goal.⁷⁹ Each child's listening or youth's reading plays a part in this project. The goal is for listeners and readers to feel empowered to play a part in the story of Jesus in their lives and in the lives of others. The stories within themselves place them in the bigger story which brings about unifying minds and hearts.

Another important part of these works will be utilizing humor. James says, “Common sense and humor are the same things, moving at different speeds. A sense of humor is just common sense, dancing.” When finding the debt of human behavior, laughing and smiling are weaved into the

⁷⁷ Rohr, Richard. (Guest). (2017, March 26) *Episode 2: The Bible for Normal People* (audio podcast)

⁷⁸ Jenkins, J. (2022, April 28). *The 7 main story elements (and why you need them)*. Jerry Jenkins | Proven Writing Tips. Retrieved April 29, 2022, from <https://jerryjenkins.com/story-elements/>

⁷⁹ Wright, N. (2018, June 28). N.T. Wright - philosophy of the Bible. Retrieved April 16, 2021, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZQU83Lfdi8w>.

fabric. We live in a world that is increasingly more stressful for children. Something that is continually clinically proven to help is laughter. It is a subject that is growing in literature and proving to be a crucial aid. There is a reason the bible speaks of laughter being like good medicine (Proverbs 17:22).

The science behind it is a given, and laughter draws youth in. It is a form of agreement that places an advantage on togetherness when used correctly. In using humor in this project, youth and young adults can accept an idea different from their disposition of laughter alone. It is also contagious, and a part of the podcast that is funny will be repeated from the mouths of youth and spread. The ultimate goal is for the story to connect with the listener or reader in a way that encourages them to embrace the beautiful differences in the body of Christ.

Unification

Ultimately, the goal of this project is to unify the body of Christ, as seen in the NPO. The uniqueness of this project is in the planting of universal seeds into individual youth germinating the love of Jesus to his church. The important point is to portray unity, not uniformity. Each listener will be brought on a journey of seeing the beauty of difference, not the safety of sameness. Each youth within the body of Christ will be challenged in their listening or reading, but not marginalized or embarrassed about their part of the body of Christ. They will feel dignified in their tribe while seeing God in the other.

God loves the “other” youth and group just as much as he loves the group or origin of each listener or reader. The word for “other” in Greek is *allos* which is where the word allergen comes from.⁸⁰ When allergies occur, a natural human reaction is to medicate and build a defense against them. Avoiding contact is the ultimate goal. Human nature is to remain in the places and with those in which they are used to. Continued research on interpersonal attraction suggests the most powerful predictor of friendship is familiarity.⁸¹ There are ways that natural human reactions can be pushed against and corrected. A natural reaction is not always a good reaction. An organic remedy for allergies is to consume honey that derives directly from the source of those allergies. Another treatment for allergies is immunotherapy. This process introduces a small amount of the allergen over a long period of time.⁸² This takes a continual introduction which begins to build up immunity

⁸⁰ Downing, Crystal. *Changing Signs of Truth: A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication*. IVP Academic, 2012: 174.

⁸¹ Cleveland, C. (2013). *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the hidden forces that keep us apart*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. 28.

⁸² Serrano, K., MD. (2008, June 30). Immunotherapy. Retrieved April 01, 2021, from <https://health.howstuffworks.com/diseases-conditions/allergies/allergy-treatments/immunotherapy.htm#:~:text=How%20Immunotherapy%20Works%20to%20Treat%20Allergies201%20Immunotherapy,way%20your%20body%27s%20immune%20system%20responds%20to%20>

toward the allergen. The more introduction to the allergy, the less of a reaction is had. It is fitting that a taste of something sweet from an area other than our own creates an adaptation in a way that does not react. God shows us all throughout nature how he longs for us to live united. The introduction of stories of other groups and people that are different will only grow an appreciation for other parts of the body of Christ.

Combining a centralization of Jesus and storytelling places this project in a singularly unique class. This project makes room for more dystopian novels that places Jesus at the center instead of scripture. In an anxiety-fueled world, an escape is needed. When the escape pushes readers to be present, this is when it can become powerful. It also makes more room for creating a youth podcast. This is intentionally sensitive in the language used. Many “trigger” words automatically shut down some parts of the body of Christ and end thought of other parts of the body of Christ. There are political phrases that will end conversations, and no one will learn. The goal of this project is to kindly reframe words to bring other thought and thought of the other. It is designed to be an encouragement and a challenge to form youth and young adults in the way of Jesus.

The church began with one foundation and centrality, which is found in Jesus. Jesus is the great unifier, and youth seem to get this best. Key characters and stories throughout the story of the Bible reveal an evolutionary shift in understanding who God is. Deep within the story of Emmanuel’s arrival, the way forward is illuminated. When perfect love, found solely in Jesus, arrives on the scene, fear has no ground to stand on (2 Timothy 1:7). Tribes form and tribes divide over words on pages, but Jesus stands patiently with an open invitation to walk hand in hand back into a condition of harmony. Each reader and listener will be invited into this.

The great hope of unity is added when fear subsides. When following the way of love, who is God, we step out to see neighbors. Youth begin to see God in others that they were trained to hate. Churches begin to come together in their communities, and systemic change begins to form. It lifts the most marginalized and walks together in moral dignity. Unity is never about uniformity but about those brave enough to unite in love.

Most Christians are quick to state where their salvation is, but if they are all honest, they do not know where it isn’t.⁸³ Jesus is not asking every individual in the church to become a part of one denomination or all become the same, but to learn and celebrate the beautiful differences of His children as one body. When formative in the ears of children, this can change the world.

20allergens.

⁸³ Jersak, Brad. *In: Incarnation & Inclusion, Abba & Lamb*. Abbotsford, BC: St. Macrina Press, 2019: 94.

MVP (Most Viable Prototype)

The most viable prototype is the book *Sol's Porch*. The findings reveal the need for more dystopian genre books and the longing to find one unique. This book has the opportunity to impact the category of youth and young adults. If successful, adults will read as well and be impacted. The ultimate goal of this book is church unity, but it is not the only positive outcome. For each reader, the findings were fascinating. Many comments revealed how they were able to hear and learn from the characters. They found themselves relating to Xi's journey and listened and took in the wisdom of Sol. A continued study of how to best bring people along on a more unifying journey is necessary for this work to connect. A community will begin to form if this book is successfully after the program. As a community forms, a forum will be created for more interaction between people of different parts of the body of Christ. When this takes place, different action steps will be made to involve other followers of Jesus in their communities or cities. This forum will include introductions to various churches, Non-profits, and community centers working towards a more unified landscape.

If successful, this will be more than another young adult novel, but a movement that allows people of all walks of Christianity to feel part of something much bigger and more unifying. As a follower of Jesus, being a part of the church should certainly feel bigger than being a part of a particular tribe. *Sol's Porch* will, at the very least, plant seeds of unity in people by seeing the beauty of Jesus and the "other."

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