

CHRIST: THE CENTER OF THE GOSPEL

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HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE FOR A GROUP STUDY

This Bible study can be used by an individual or a group. If you intend to lead a group study, follow these simple suggestions.



- 1** Make enough copies of the article for everyone in the group. If you would like your group to have more information, feel free to copy the leader's guide for them as well.
- 2** Don't feel that you have to use all the material in the study. Almost all of our studies have more information than you can get through in one session, so feel free to pick and choose the teaching information and questions that will meet the needs of your group. Use the teaching content of the study in any of these ways: for your own background and information; to read aloud (or summarize) to the group; for the group to read silently.
- 3** Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential for getting people to open up.
- 4** When working through the questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for your group to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.
- 5** Begin and end the session in prayer.

INTRODUCTION



The center of the gospel is Jesus Christ. But what does that mean? This group of studies hopes to help answer that question.

“RESTORING OUR VISION OF GOD” focuses on the fact that Jesus enables us to see God not as a stern taskmaster but as our loving Father—a fact that is essential if we are going to have any kind of relationship with him.

“GOD OF POWER, GOD OF LOVE” looks at the dual aspect of God’s nature and how his power is demonstrated in both strength and weakness, as evidenced by Christ’s death and resurrection. Is that power found in weakness, humility, and death? Or in faith, hope, and even aggressive love? The answer to both questions is “yes.”

“THE UNIQUENESS OF JESUS” zeroes in on Jesus’ statement, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). If we are going to believe that statement, what difference does his uniqueness make for our faith?

“THE JESUS WE’LL NEVER KNOW” examines why the quest for the Historical Jesus has failed, but acknowledges that our faith is founded on something deeper. Jesus explodes our categories, defines his identity and mission, and exposes himself as the unique Son of God.

“THE GOSPEL DEFINED” is not about what we can do for Jesus, or what he can do for us, but what he has already done. We are tempted to live a Christless Christianity because we are human centered rather than God-centered. The gospel is not a matter of doing the right things or trying harder. The gospel is: Jesus Christ came to save sinners.

RESTORING OUR VISION OF GOD

Jesus enables us to see God not as a stern taskmaster but as our loving Father.

Evangelicals are good at explaining how our sin separates us from a holy God. “I was raised to understand that sin’s gravest consequence is the way it forces God to perceive me: *God is holy, I’m not, and there’s no way he can even look at me until I have the covering of Christ’s blood,*” Carolyn Arends writes in her column, “Our Divine Distortion.” Arends continues: “In my teens, I clipped a poem out of a youth magazine in which the poet asks—and answers—a pressing question: ‘How can a righteous God look at me, a sinner, and see a precious child? Simple: The Son gets in his eyes.’” This is good theology, but incomplete. We need to also get a good dose of biblical anthropology so that we may grasp how sin warps our perceptions, not just of ourselves, but of God himself.



Scripture: Genesis 3; Psalm 5; John 1:1–18; 2 Corinthians 3:12–18

Based on: “Our Divine Distortion,” by Carolyn Arends, *CHRISTIANITY TODAY*, December 2009



Christ: The Center of the Gospel

RESTORING OUR VISION OF GOD

Leader's Guide

Part 1 IDENTIFY THE CURRENT ISSUE

Note to leader: Provide each person with the "Our Divine Distortion" from CHRISTIANITY TODAY, included at the end of this study.

Carolyn Arends, noting how sin distorts relationships on the human level, failed to fully grasp the way sin subtly but powerfully alters the way we see God. "I've often been oblivious to one of the most insidious byproducts of the Fall: Sin affects my perception of God. Or, to turn a phrase from that poem, *the sin gets in my eyes*." She says the guilt and shame of our sinfulness lead us to see God not as our Father but as our Godfather—someone we would do well to avoid. Of course the Bible presents a much different picture, but our spiritual myopia can prevent us from seeing it.

Discussion Starters:

- [Q] How do you respond when someone points out your mistakes or sins? Why do you think you respond that way?
- [Q] What are some of the common stereotypes about God in our culture?
- [Q] What are some of the common stereotypes about Jesus?
- [Q] How close are these stereotypes to reality?

Part 2 DISCOVER THE ETERNAL PRINCIPLES

Teaching Point One: God unalterably opposes sinners but rescues the righteous.

Carolyn Arends tells how she saw sin as a kind of spiritual tripwire that causes God to turn away from us. While there are dangers in this perception, there is truth in it too. Unfortunately, many Christians today downplay the seriousness of sin and see it more as a mistake or blunder than as a moral trespass. Read Psalm 5.

King David seeks the Lord's help (vv. 1–3). Employing the parallelism characteristic of Hebrew poetry, he implores God to "give ear," to "listen," to "hear." David speaks, sighs, cries, lays his requests before God, and waits for an answer. In David's relationship with the Lord we see passion and expectancy. This is the context for what is to follow.



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[Q] In verses 4–5, the Lord's hatred of sin (and sinners) is clear. God takes no pleasure in evil and abhors those who are bloodthirsty and evil. If God is love (1 John 4:16), how is this attitude toward sinners possible?

- Do you have the same hatred for sin in yourself? Others?
- How do we integrate this attitude with the love and humility God calls us to?

[Q] David clearly feels unworthy to come before God (v. 7) but does not pull away. Why not?

David describes his enemies and calls for God's judgment on them (vv. 9–10). The apostle Paul universalized this section to show the utter wickedness of humanity (Rom. 3:13). We sometimes airbrush sin, but David and Paul present it in the starkest of terms. We human rebels are guilty before God and deserve to be banished before the righteous Judge.

[Q] Does knowledge of our true spiritual condition make you more or less likely to come to God?

[Q] How do verses 11–12 give perspective on this whole issue?

Teaching Point Two: Sin separates us from all that is good, but no gulf is too wide for God.

Sin, which always promises to add to our lives, only subtracts. Based on the lie that God is keeping something good from us because he really doesn't have our best interests at heart (Gen. 3:5), sin separates us from our loving Creator, from other people, and from Creation. Arends feels keenly a relational separation when she sins, saying we need to pay attention to the misperceptions of God that it produces in us. Yet whatever we think of God, he remains inclined to save us.

Read Genesis 3.

[Q] What three things did the serpent do to persuade Adam and Eve to fall into sin (see verses 1, 4, and 5)?

Leader's Note: *Questioned God's word (v. 1), contradicted God's word (v. 4), and attacked God's motives (v. 5).*

[Q] How do verses 8–10 support Arends's claim that due to our sin, we view God not as our loving Maker but as an ogre, bookkeeper, or monarch?

[Q] How do people today express that separation from and fear of God?



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[Q] How does God treat sin in verses 11–19?

- Why doesn't God simply write off the sin?
- Do you wish that he would? Why or why not?

[Q] What hope do we see in the midst of judgment (vv. 15, 21–22).

- How is the promise in verse 15 ultimately fulfilled?

Leader's Note: *In Christ's victory over Satan (Rom. 16:20).*

[Q] Do you beat yourself up when you sin, or do you actively look to God's victorious hope?

- If the latter, how do we keep from turning our freedom into license?

Teaching Point Three: Jesus perfectly reveals both God's grace and his truth.

Carolyn Arends discusses both objective and subjective results of our sin. Objectively, sin separates us from God and makes us objects of his wrath (Rom. 2:5). Subjectively, it makes us flee his presence and fear him (Gen. 3:8–10). While there is much truth in this subjective understanding, this distance from God keeps us from seeing the grace God offers to sinners. Jesus Christ, however, cures our spiritual myopia by dealing with both the objective and subjective aspects of our sin. He does this by revealing both God's grace and his truth.

Read John 1:1–18.

[Q] Misunderstanding and fear are common responses to the goodness of God. Why do we struggle to relate to him?

[Q] John [the Baptist] was a witness that “all men might believe” in this light-giving Word (v. 7). How is our calling the same as John's? How is it different?

[Q] We see two main reactions to the Word (vv. 10–13). What are they? What are their characteristics?

- How does a person come to believe in him?

[Q] The Word took on flesh, became incarnated, and lived among us, allowing us to see his glory, “full of grace and truth” (v. 14). How do grace and truth balance one another in the life of God?

- In the life of the Christian?



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[Q] Instead of fear and punishment, we receive grace and blessing (vv. 15–17). Are you living in this reality? Why or why not?

[Q] Jesus the God-Man reveals the invisible God as a Father to us (v. 18). How does he do this? What does this say about our perceptions of God?

Teaching Point Four: Jesus produces in us a holy boldness with God and a growing inner transformation.

Now that Jesus gives us access to the Father, how do we live as God's children? What difference should any of this make? Do we misperceive and shun God's company because we feel unworthy? Or do we use our God-given freedom to draw near and become progressively transformed into Christ's likeness?

Read 2 Corinthians 3:12–18.

[Q] What state accompanies the Spirit of the Lord in this new life (v. 17)?

- How does this state apply when we sin?

[Q] The Christian life is to be a process of “being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory” (v. 18). What role does our spiritual vision play in this?

- What can we do to sharpen it?

Optional Activity: *The apostle Paul contrasts life in Christ with the old life under the law (vv. 12–16). Using a white board or poster board, label one side “The Law” and the other side “Life in Christ.” Ask the group to look at verses 12–16 and call out the characteristics of each as you record their answers. Then discuss what differences you see.*

Part 3 **APPLY YOUR FINDINGS**

Carolyn Arends points out, “Sin affects my perception of God.” We misperceive him as our enemy rather than as our friend. And while it is true that sin has dire consequences for our standing with God, it never changes the fact that he loves us and desires the salvation of sinners. This loving character is reflected most clearly in Jesus Christ, the perfect representation of God and man. By bringing the two together in the Incarnation, Jesus makes possible the bridging of the gulf, both objective and subjective, between God and humanity.



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Jesus also provides the pattern and the power for us to love and follow God and to experience ever-increasing inner transformation. This is a state of grace in which we live every day, gratefully receiving his gift of life and light and responding with a desire to reflect his glory in the world.

The question for us, his followers, is how to maintain our spiritual focus, how to ensure that Jesus makes a difference today and every day. How do we avoid maintaining an outward religiosity while experiencing a heart that grows ever colder to God and to those made in his image? Arends says we will not make true progress “until the Son gets in our eyes.” The key is not mere outward obedience, but an inner transformation that only the Savior can bring. May God help us to keep our spiritual vision clear

Action Point: *Brainstorm on the topic “Ways We Can See Jesus Today.” Have someone write all the ideas down, then discuss as a community how you will apply the most helpful ones both corporately and as individuals. Plan to have each member report back about how he or she has seen Jesus more clearly as a result*

— *Stan Guthrie is author of* *Missions in the Third Millennium: 21 Key Trends for the 21st Century*. *A CT editor at large, he writes a column for* BreakPoint.org *and blogs at* stanguthrie.com.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

📖 Check out the following Bible studies at: ChristianBibleStudies.com

📖 **Gospel of John: Knowing Jesus** This basic ten-session Bible study identifies the seven names and titles of Jesus that reveal him as the eternal God, who came to transform us.

📖 **Jesus As Your Mentor** We often want mentors to show us how to live. Who does that better than Christ himself? This four-session Bible study will show that Jesus lived the best life ever, and when we let him mentor us, he will show us how to be the best leader, friend, and lover, living the best way possible.

📖 **Matthew: Jesus the Messiah** This seven-session Bible study takes a close look at the first four chapters of the Gospel of Matthew and looks at the importance of obedience to God, the power of Jesus' name, living outside our comfort zone, gaining power over temptation, discovering what God expects of us, and staying on task with our mission.



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☞ Mark Galli, **Jesus Mean and Wild: The Unexpected Love of an Untamable God**, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: BakerBooks, 2006). Seeing Jesus for who he is involves discarding some of our comfortable stereotypes.

☞ John Piper, **What Jesus Demands from the World** (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2006). Following Jesus isn't easy, but it is satisfying.

☞ **Confessions**, Saint Augustine (Penguin Classics, 1979). To start seeing God rightly, we have to grapple with the reality of our own sinfulness.

🌐 **www.jesusfilm.org**. Information about the classic Jesus Film, seen by millions around the world.





Our Divine Distortion

We can't see God clearly without Jesus. O come, Emmanuel.

WHEN I FOUND a brand new laptop for half price on eBay, I told my friend and musical colleague Spencer about my bargain of a find. He was worried: "Usually when something's too good to be true..."

"I know," I replied impatiently, "but the seller has a 100 percent approval rating."

"Be careful," warned Spencer.

"Of course," I assured him, annoyed. I wasn't born yesterday.

I sent the seller \$1,300 and discovered in very short, sickening order that I had fallen prey to a classic scam. A fraudster had hacked someone's eBay identity in order to relieve easy marks like me of our money.

I felt an absolute fool—and didn't want to tell Spencer. The next time I saw his number on my caller ID, I didn't answer. I could just imagine his "I told you so."

Soon, I was avoiding Spencer completely. And I started to resent him. Why did he have to be so judgmental? Why couldn't he be on my side? Why was I ever friends with that jerk?

Eventually, we had to fly together to perform at a concert. "Whatever happened with that computer thing?" he asked an hour into the flight. Cornered, I finally confessed my foolishness, dreading the inevitable response. But as soon as I told Spencer about my mistake, a strange thing happened. The enemy I had turned him into evaporated. Spencer turned into Spencer again, my teasing but deeply empathetic buddy.

As embarrassed as I was by my eBay error, I felt even dumber about the way I had allowed my shame to distort my perception of a best friend. If my hand had not been forced, I would have remained estranged from him indefinitely.

I've always considered myself perceptive, but the longer I live, the more I discover my susceptibility to misinterpretation. This is true of the way I view my friends, truer of the way I see my enemies, and perhaps truest

of the way I perceive God.

I was raised to understand that sin's gravest consequence is the way it forces God to perceive me: *God is holy, I'm not, and there's no way he can even look at me until I have the covering of Christ's blood.* In my teens, I clipped a poem out of a youth magazine in which the poet asks—and answers—a pressing question: "How can a righteous God look at me, a sinner, and see a precious child? Simple: The Son gets in his eyes."

But what about how I look at God? I've often been oblivious to one of the most insidious byproducts of the Fall: Sin affects my perception of God. Or, to turn a phrase from that poem, *the sin gets in my eyes.*

Before Adam and Eve had fallen for the first lie, they basked in God's company. But after a few bites of forbidden fruit, they no longer looked forward to seeing their Maker. When he came calling, they hid.

Had God changed? No. Adam and Eve's brokenness altered their perception of God, not his character. Ever since, we humans have been letting our shame poison our understanding of God. He becomes an ogre, or a bookkeeper, or maybe just a disinterested, detached monarch.

Many of us unconsciously relate to God our Father as a Godfather—there's a lot he can do for us when he likes us, but don't get on his bad side. So we avoid him. And the longer we refuse to take his calls, the worse the distortion becomes.


But here is some good news: Jesus is the

antidote to our misperceptions. When we speak of the Incarnation, we acknowledge that Jesus is "God con carne"—God with meat on. Our questions about God's character—*Is he really about mercy, justice, and a love that just won't quit?*—are answered in the person of Jesus.

In one sense, Adam and Eve were right to fear facing God. The consequences of their choices were painful. But even God's

seemingly harshest judgment—banishment from the Garden and the Tree of Life—was rooted in love. If the first humans had accessed eternal life in Eden, they would have remained in their brokenness forever. God chose another way—a death and resurrection way that would cost him much—because he was and is and always will be with us and for us.

Christmas clarifies this resoundingly. That's why every time the angels announced Christ's birth they said, "Do not be afraid." Yes, we should fear sin's consequences. But we need not fear the perfect love of a God willing to come and shiver in our skin to save us.

We do not have the power to change God's character. Our Father is our Father. Always has been, always will be. But we will never see him for who he really is until the Son gets in our eyes. 

Go to ChristianBibleStudies.com for "Restoring Our Vision of God," a Bible study based on this article.



We've let our shame poison our understanding of God. He becomes an ogre, or a bookkeeper, or just a disinterested monarch.

GOD OF POWER, GOD OF LOVE

God demonstrates his power in strength and in weakness.

Who is God? Sometimes our conceptions of God fall into one of two unfortunate but common stereotypes. Is he the commanding God of the Old Testament or the forgiving God of the New Testament? Is he the submissive Jesus of Good Friday or the triumphant Jesus of Easter Sunday? We all desire God's power in our lives, but our understanding of his power often neglects the paradoxes of Scripture. We need to understand how he is omnipotent in both strength and weakness.



Scripture: Luke 22:39–23:56; 24; Philippians 2:5–11

Based on: "Serving a Two-Handed God," by Mark Galli, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, 2009



Christ: The Center of the Gospel

GOD OF POWER, GOD OF LOVE

Leader's Guide

Part 1 IDENTIFY THE CURRENT ISSUE

Note to leader: Provide each person with the article "Serving a Two-Handed God," from CHRISTIANITY TODAY, included at the end of this study.

We naturally tend to associate power with strength because that's how power works in the world. The powerful have authority to get things done, to make decisions. They will do whatever it takes to keep others from standing in their way. But sometimes power expresses itself more subtly. Great leaders are persuasive; by their examples they make others want to follow.

God displays both kinds of power in Scripture. He casts violent judgments upon individuals, cities, and even the entire human race. But he also tells us to turn the other cheek. He forgives people who have done horrible things, and through Jesus humbly submits himself to death at the hands of the Roman authorities.

As Mark Galli demonstrates in his article, "Serving a Two-Handed God," excerpted from his book *A Great and Terrible Love* (Baker, 2009), the events of Holy Week present a microcosm of this power paradox: the "impotent" God of Good Friday dies on a cross and yet saves the world, while the "powerful" God of Easter Sunday conquers all, including death itself, and thus saves the world. Is power found in weakness, humility, and death? Or in faith, hope, and even aggressive love? The answer to both questions is "yes."

Discussion Starters:

- [Q] What illustration or idea in the article is most compelling to you?
- [Q] Where do you find yourself disagreeing with the author?
- [Q] When have you felt most thankful for God's power, or seen his power most clearly?

Part 2 DISCOVER THE ETERNAL PRINCIPLES

Teaching Point One: The left hand of God's power, revealed in suffering and death, moves hearts.

It can be easy to interpret the events of Good Friday as merely a means to the end of Easter Sunday. But the meekness Jesus shows in surrendering himself to death on a cross reflects a pattern of submission that can be traced throughout the Bible. As Galli says in the article, "the God of power is the one who constantly disappoints." The Habakkuk passage he references (Hab.1:2–4) demonstrates a longing for the right-handed power of God familiar to anyone who



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Leader's Guide

has ever wondered at God's silence when his unlimited power seems most needed. Surely the disciples felt something akin to this as they watched Jesus die on the cross. But it is in this moment that he is actually conquering sin by accepting the punishment we deserve. In redemption there is power; he does for us what we cannot do on our own. It is this lefthanded power that transforms lives by bridging the gap between us and the holy, all powerful God.

Read Luke 22:39–23:56.

[Q] When, like Habakkuk, have you felt most frustrated by God's seeming lack of power?

[Q] Why do you think God has decided to display his power not only in strength but also in weakness?

Teaching Point Two: The right hand of God's power, which saves and destroys, brings justice.

The God of Easter Sunday embodies our traditional image of God as strong and powerful. This is evident in the names we use—Lord, almighty, redeemer, giver of life—and the songs we sing—“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” “Awesome God,” “Indescribable.” This God commands awe and worship: he is strong and powerful, able to create and destroy (see verses 52–53).

At times his power comforts—“no one is able to snatch them out of my father's hand”—but at times it also frightens. When Christ rose from the dead, the disciples were “startled and frightened” and at first they did not believe it. Like Peter (Luke 5:8), we are sometimes unsettled by God's sovereign power. Particularly in the Old Testament, we struggle to understand a God who judges the people he loves.

But, however unfair they may seem, these displays of right-handed power reflect God's justice. They take seriously the problem of sin; they remind us of who we are, and who God is. We might call this “tough love.” But the same power that requires retribution for sin ultimately conquers it, administering God's justice once and for all.

Read Luke 24.

[Q] What is difficult to accept about God's right hand of power? How would you explain God's judgments on individuals and groups of people?

[Q] Where in your life do you now need an “able God”?



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Teaching Point Three: We are called to do God's work by reflecting both arms of his omnipotent power.

We are created in God's image and called to pursue Christ-likeness in everything we do. This means we are called to follow his example. At times we must stand up to evil and call upon God's right-handed power. At other times we must emulate his left-handed power in submission and forgiveness. Both responses demonstrate a holy strength that transcends our natural inclinations and is possible only when we know, love, and follow the God of Good Friday and Easter.

Read Philippians 2:5–11.

[Q] In this passage, how are we called to embody God's right-handed power?

- His left-handed power?
- How are the two connected?

[Q] When have you demonstrated the different aspects of God's power?

- When is it appropriate to display each?
- When is it not appropriate?

[Q] How can the complementary "hands" of God's power communicate his glory to others?

Part 3 **APPLY YOUR FINDINGS**

"O God omnipotent, you are able to do that which you mercifully intend, in apparent weakness and in seeming strength. Help us to know and trust your power, if not fully comprehend it, that we might rest secure in the knowledge that nothing can alter your loving purpose toward us and your creation. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

Action Point: *On your own this week, think through which form of God's power—left-handed or right-handed—you most attracted to and why. Ask God to help you find balance as you get to know him better.*

— Study by *Laura Leonard*, associate editor with *Christianity Today International*



RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

📖 Check out the following Bible studies at: ChristianBibleStudies.com

📖 [Essentials in Knowing God](#) – 10-session Bible study

📖 [John Piper on the Nature of God](#) – 5-session Bible study

📖 [Who Is God?](#) – 12-session Bible study

📖 [Jesus Mean and Wild: The Unexpected Love of an Untamable God](#), Mark Galli (Grand Rapids, Mich.: BakerBooks, 2006). Seeing Jesus for who he is involves discarding some of our comfortable stereotypes.

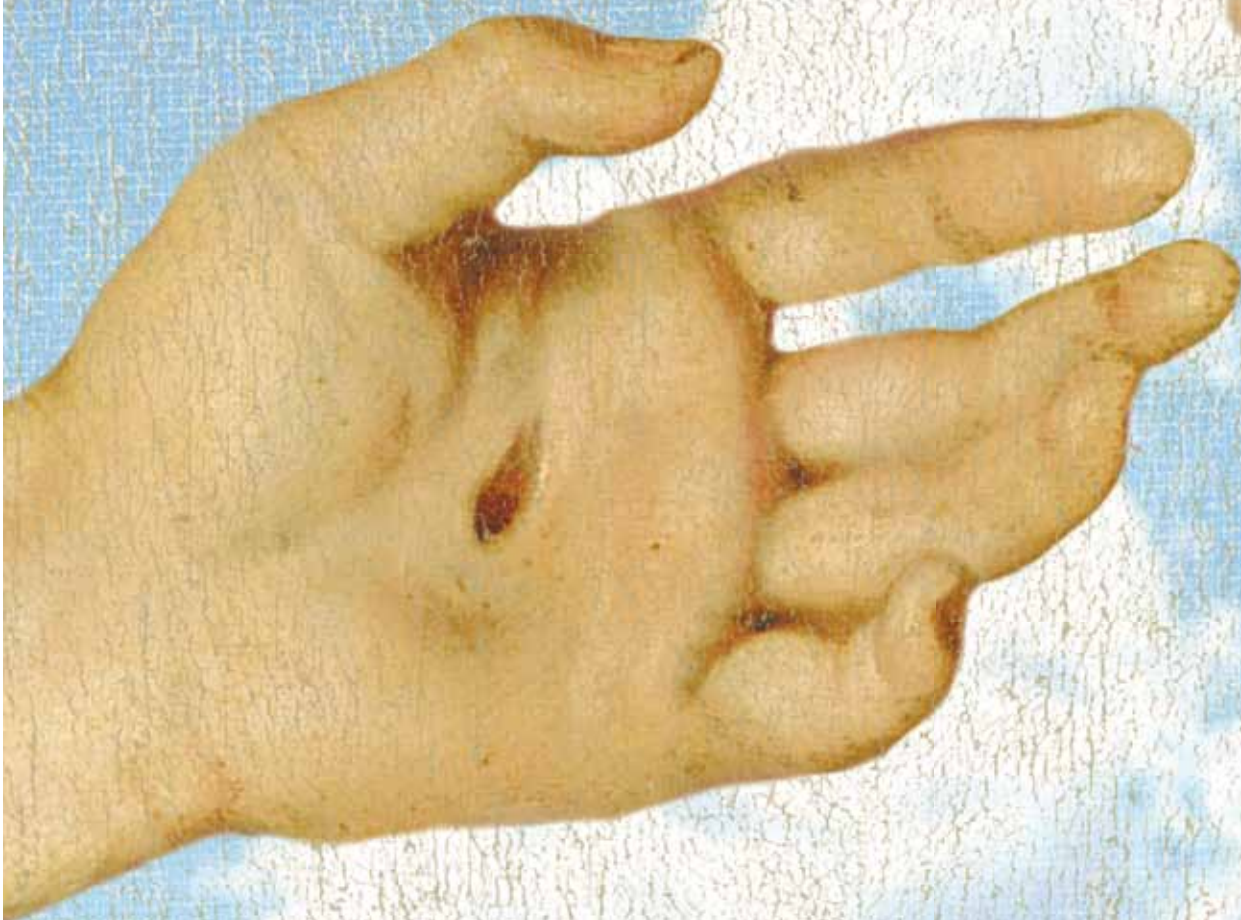
📖 [What Jesus Demands from the World](#), John Piper (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2006). Following Jesus isn't easy, but it is satisfying.

📖 [Confessions](#), Saint Augustine (Penguin Classics, 1979). To start seeing God rightly, we have to grapple with the reality of our own sinfulness.

Serving a Two-Handed

How we love our neighbor depends on what we think divine power looks like.

by Mark Galli



God

HOLY WEEK presents us with a number of theological problems. One of them has to do with the nature of God's power.

On the one hand, we remember the "impotent" God of Good Friday. He's the one who dies on a cross and yet saves the world. So, some Christians conclude, power is found in weakness, humility, and death. We are not only *not* to wield the sword, we should also never be angry, aggressive, strong, or forceful. Gentleness and mercy, in every and all situations, becomes the ethical mantra.

On the other hand, Holy Week culminates in Easter, when we remember the omnipotent God who conquers all, including death itself, and thus saves the world.

The conclusion of many today is that power is to be found in faith, hope, and even aggressive love. We can do all things through the power of the resurrected Christ. We are already victors! For some, this means exerting a positive, can-do attitude in daily life; for others, it entails a hope-filled and energetic work of justice. In either case, it's all about defeating

the powers by holy strength.

So the theological problem of Holy Week is a very practical problem. Jesus gave us authority to confront evil in all its forms (Matt. 10:1). Our answer to the Holy Week question about power goes a long way in determining how we do God's work in the world.

On the one hand, the Bible reveals an extraordinary God of extraordinary ability. From the opening words of Genesis—"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1)—

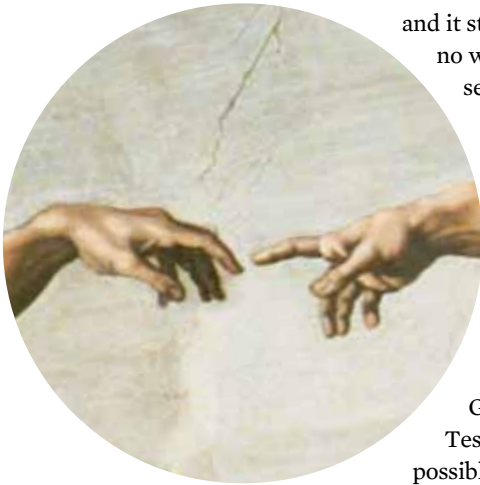
Book Excerpt



to the closing of the Book of Revelation—"the Lord God omnipotent reigneth" (Rev. 19:6, KJV)—the Bible showcases a divine being who possesses unparalleled power.

This is the God who, without any materials to work with, fashions a universe. He destroys the pretenses of the haughty in Babel, and creates life in the barren womb of Sarah. The biblical God causes famines, instigates plagues, divides waters, and destroys armies. He demands obedience from his people, and when ignored, he raises up other nations who drag his people into exile—and then, when it is in his good will, God ushers them back to their land.

This God does not strain nor sweat, but performs majestic deeds as easily as human beings talk. As the psalmist puts it, God "spoke and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm" (Ps. 33:9). It is no wonder we find Jeremiah sensing God telling him, "I am the Lord, the God of all mankind. Is anything



Right-handed power brings order.

too hard for me?" (Jer. 32:27).

Apparently not, for this God shows up in the New Testament as one who makes possible both virgin conception and miraculous resurrection. The

birth of the God-man is accompanied by an army of angels, and the life of the God-man is characterized by healing the blind, curing the lame, casting out demons, and raising the dead.

A Roman centurion, a man who understands power, intuitively grasps this. When Jesus offers to walk to the centurion's home to heal his servant, he refuses: "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. Therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed. For I too am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me: and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it" (Luke 7:6–8, ESV). Jesus marvels at this, and tells those standing nearby that "not even in Israel have I found such faith." Faith in Jesus' power.

We smile knowingly when we read that Jesus' contemporaries looked for a political messiah who would usher in the kingdom with the sword. Yet for the longest time in Jesus' ministry, it was an easy mistake to make. Jesus comes across as one who very much looks like the God of Israel, who the prophet Isaiah said "comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him" (Isa. 40:10, ESV).

And then there is the Rambo Jesus of Revelation, pictured with a sword "to strike down the nations," with a robe monogrammed with "KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS" (Rev. 19:15–16).

So it makes sense that when the early church wanted to sum up the faith, it would reverberate in words of authority: "We believe in God the Father *almighty* . . . in Jesus Christ our *Lord* . . . in the Holy Spirit, the *Lord* and giver of life."

In the Bible, God's almighty power is also the cause of much lament. The God of power constantly disappoints. Many of these expressions of lament cannot be understood apart from a bedrock belief in God's omnipotence. For example, when injustice prevailed in his day, the prophet Habakkuk understandably whined,

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not hear?

Or cry to you "Violence!"
and you will not save?

Why do you make me see iniquity,
and why do you idly look at wrong?

Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.

So the law is paralyzed,
and justice never goes forth.

For the wicked surround the righteous;
so justice goes forth perverted. (Hab. 1:2–4, ESV)

Where is almighty God when unlimited power is most needed?

In our own day, we find this question dressed up in fresh garb: How can a good and all-powerful God allow so much evil? Today we do not presuppose God's omnipotence, but we continue to long for it. What we're wondering is, *Is God not so powerful after all?*

This picture becomes clearer but even more confusing in the New Testament.

We see "God almighty" lying in a manger in the form of a helpless baby. And in God incarnate's refusal to use raw miracle to satisfy his hunger or to prove himself, in a decided lack of interest in the Devil's offer of "all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor" (Matt. 4:8). And in his repeated refusal to retaliate in the face of injustice, from his arrest to the crucifixion. And in his teaching about turning the other cheek and going the extra mile. It's not a picture of omnipotence as much as it is of impotence.

Or of God's left hand.

THE HANDS OF GOD

When the biblical writers reach for a metaphor for divine power, they often talk about God's "right hand." The psalmist proclaims that the Lord will save his anointed "with the saving power of his right hand" (Ps. 20:6b), and the author of Exodus says, "Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power, your right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy" (Ex. 15:6, ESV).

By contrast, Father Leslie Chadd, in the article "God's Left Hand," summed up the nature of left-handed power:

At the centre of it is a baby in a makeshift cot in a mucky stable, before whom the kings, symbols of the world's right-handed wisdom and power, bend the knee. He is the Messiah who turns all our cherished right-handed ideas upside down and says that children are [at] the top of the pile, not at the bottom of it. He is the one who rebukes the strong right-handed Boanerges brothers who would knock out those difficult Samaritans with

a divine thunderbolt. He is the King who could call an army of angels to his aid but who refuses the help of Peter's sword-bearing right arm. He is the God who will not slay his enemies with his strong right arm but who says instead, "if there is any killing to be done, it will be done to me, not by me."

This leads some to assume that true disciples of Jesus must reject power, because when the God-man was offered it, he refused. Any dabbling in power, or associating God with right-handed power, is to bow to the god of this world and not the God who transcends it and its entire value structure on the Cross.

Well, yes and no. There were plenty of moments when Jesus did, in fact, use raw power, from the healing of lepers to the calming of storms to raising Lazarus from the dead to the cleansing of the temple with a whip of cords, made with his own hands. And as Paul said, Jesus "was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead" (Rom. 1:4, *ESV*).

What God is doing in the New Testament is not denying his right-

as an apparently impotent or absent God. Not a great marketing strategy. While we can never fathom why God is now "displaying" his power in this obtuse way, two things seem apparent.

First, God wants us to move beyond naïve belief in an all-powerful god who magically rescues us from all our problems and makes us happy. This is the health and wealth god, the 10-steps-to-a-full-life god. This is the triumphalist god of social reformers who imagine that with a little more prayer and social elbow grease, we can establish a pure outpost of the kingdom in our day. This is the god who has nothing better to do than to make us happy or make the world a better place to live. The religion that emerges when we worship this god is, in the end, a religion whose totem is the self. It is a religion about my life, my problems, my happiness, or our political life, our social problems, and our nation's well-being.

But God knows we need something bigger than this, so he has pulled away the

Left-handed power transforms lives.

handed power, but helping us see and experience his left-handed power—and grasp the manifold mystery of divine power.

Many suppose they can grasp the nature of divine power by magnifying the most powerful energy they know to the *n*th degree. That is to get stuck in the right-hand metaphor. And that is to severely limit the nature of God's power.

What we see in light of Good Friday is that divine power is also revealed in suffering and death. The moments of apparent divine defeat are, in fact, moments of victory. When God looks most weak, that's when he is most omnipotent.

Habakkuk's question—which is our question as well—is turned on its head. "How can an all-powerful God stand by and do nothing while the planet writhes in travail?" But of course, he isn't doing nothing. The suffering of the planet has become his suffering, and divine suffering is always redemptive. The apparent weakness of God during a tsunami or an AIDS epidemic is like unto the God whose arms are nailed to the cross while onlookers mock his impotence.

AMBIDEXTROUS LOVE

In the end, we still have an omnipotent God, but we don't exactly get the omnipotence we imagined. He's the God whose power is manifested in paradoxical ways. He is the one who says, "Is anything too hard for me?" (Jer. 32:27). Apparently not; even impotence cannot sap his strength.

We often wish we lived in a time of glory and power made manifest, of miracle and might as daily bread, as did Abraham and Moses, and Miriam and Mary, and the disciples in the Upper Room. But in these latter days, God seems to have decided to reveal his power mostly in weakness.

This certainly makes our lives interesting. On the one hand, it saves us from having to dig through history to try to prove that God is in charge of this mess. God has providentially ordered things so that there is little evidence of his power in history—another aspect of his apparent weakness. For some reason, he wants to be known mostly

crutch so we might learn to love him and not his power.

Second, God is trying to expand our understanding of the power we have. Since we are created in his image, we are called to embody his paradoxical power.

So, often we are called to wield the left arm, the power of Good Friday. Such as when a coworker insults us and we do not retaliate. Or when a friend betrays us and we forgive. When a church is burned to the ground by a group that despises the faith.

But sometimes we are called to wield the right arm, the power of Easter Sunday. We see the righteous use of the right arm when a mother, by the force of her will, insists that her daughter not cross the street without holding her hand. Or when a coach chews out a player for inattention. Or when a police officer chases down a thief. Or when soldiers attack a terrorist hideout.

Both are forms of divine power; both are able to get things done. Right-handed power can insist on obedience and justice, but it can't change people. Left-handed power cannot bring justice, but it can move hearts. Right-handed power brings order. Left-handed power transforms lives.

In this small way, we alone and in community reflect the very omnipotence of God, a God who aims to bring justice to the earth and change human hearts, one by one. This God is not limited to right-handed power, but is so powerful that even his apparent weakness is a sign that he is able to do what he intends to accomplish for us. This is the God of both Good Friday and Easter.



Mark Galli is senior managing editor of *CHRISTIANITY TODAY*. This article is an edited excerpt from his new book, *A Great and Terrible Love: A Spiritual Journey into the Attributes of God* (Baker). Download a companion Bible study for this article at ChristianityTodayStore.com.

THE UNIQUENESS OF JESUS

Jesus called himself the Way, the Truth, and the Life for a reason.

In the 1977 movie *Oh, God!*, Jerry Landers, the assistant manager of a grocery store, asks God (played by George Burns) whether Jesus is his son. God/Burns says, “Yes”—then adds that Muhammad, Buddha, and others are also his children. In other words, Jesus is neither more nor less special than anyone else. While this approach wins plaudits in our pluralistic times, it runs counter to the witness of Scripture and the words of Jesus, who said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). So are we going to believe a comedian or Jesus? And if we are going to believe Jesus, what difference does his uniqueness make for our faith?



Scripture: John 13:36–14:7; 15:18–27; Acts 4:8–12; 1 John 4:7–12

Based on: “Still the Way, the Truth, and the Life,” by John R. Franke, *CHRISTIANITY TODAY*, December 2009



Christ: The Center of the Gospel

THE UNIQUENESS OF JESUS

Leader's Guide

Part 1 IDENTIFY THE CURRENT ISSUE

Note to leader: Provide each person with the "Still the Way, the Truth, and the Life" from CHRISTIANITY TODAY, included at the end of this study.

Christians, writes John R. Franke, "believe that Jesus is nothing less than the incarnate Son of God in whom the fullness of Deity dwells in human form; fully divine and fully human—and the Way, the Truth, and the Life." Yet that belief, which is at the heart of orthodox Christianity, is increasingly under fire in Western culture. Sadly, even the church itself seems to be succumbing to this temptation.

According to a Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life survey, over half of all American Christians hold that non-Christian faiths can lead to eternal life. Or, as Franke observes, "While many factors may account for these findings, it seems clear that more and more Christians, including evangelicals, are not convinced about Jesus' unique nature. Some Christians even argue that, in the midst of our pluralist and religiously diverse culture, it might be better to ease off of the talk of Jesus as exclusively unique. Aren't such assertions 'hegemonic' or 'triumphalistic' in a multicultural society?"

So we need to reflect on how Jesus is uniquely the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] Do you believe that Jesus has a unique relationship to God the Father that other religious figures do not? Why or why not?

[Q] Do you think there are other ways to get to heaven besides Jesus? What are your criteria?

[Q] What are the differences between the three elements of Jesus' self-description (Way, Truth, and Life)? How else would you describe him?

[Q] Are the exclusive claims of Christ a source of comfort or discomfort for you? Why?

Part 2 DISCOVER THE ETERNAL PRINCIPLES

Teaching Point One: We can trust Jesus because he is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Many people in our society, and even many Christians, take comfort in the idea that Jesus is just one way to God. "Yes," they sometimes say, "Jesus is the way for Christians or for those who



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choose to embrace Christianity. But it is the height of arrogance to claim he is the *only* way. What about all those good Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, atheists, New Agers, Wiccans, tribal religion followers, and just plain ol' agnostics? It wouldn't be fair if they couldn't get to heaven, too!" Scripture, however, throws a bucket of cold water on that thesis.

On the night Jesus was to be betrayed, his disciples felt his enemies closing in. They were scared and confused, and they said so. It is in this context that Jesus told them of his unique identity. It was a word of comfort in the face of a rapidly approaching storm.

Read John 13:36–14:7.

Jesus has told his disciples that he is going away and they cannot follow (13:33). Ever-impetuous Peter speaks for all of them when he blurts out, "Lord, where are you going?" (13:36a). Jesus doesn't answer the question directly, but clarifies that while they will not be able to go with him immediately, they "will follow later" (13:36b). The relationship they have will be altered, but not sundered. This is not good enough for Peter, who pledges that he is ready to die for Jesus (13:37). Now Jesus, who has been holding back the details of what is to come, reveals that Peter not only will not die for him, he will deny his faith. It is a crushing blow.

[Q] Think of a time when you had great confidence in yourself as a Christ-follower, only to fail miserably. How did you cope?

[Q] Jesus further reassures the disciples, pointing out that if they have Jesus, they have the Father as well (14:7). It is a package deal. So if someone does not have Jesus, does he or she have the Father? Explain

Teaching Point Two: The Way: Jesus is the unique and only Savior.

Franke writes, "I was once with a group of Christian students who were happy to maintain that Jesus was unique, but also quick to affirm that so is every human being, since all are made in the image of God." The apostle Peter could never fall into such a relativistic error. He had been in the Upper Room when Jesus made his famous declaration of uniqueness (John 14:6). We are all unique creations of God, of course, but Jesus' uniqueness is a *necessary* uniqueness, because Jesus declares, "No one comes to the Father except through me." Being related properly to God the Father and God the Son is the necessary starting point for salvation and all that follows, including, as Franke says, the way of love. Read Acts 4:8–12. In this section Peter lays the foundation by telling the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem that life is found only in Jesus.



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[Q] Using irony, Peter tells the rulers and elders what they don't want to hear, that the healing was done not in their name or in anyone else's, but solely in the name (by the authority of) "Jesus of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead" (v. 10b). How did Peter name the leaders' sin but also point to salvation?

[Q] When others oppose you, what is harder for you—speaking convicting words or showing love and grace? Explain.

[Q] Peter refers the Jewish leaders to their own Scriptures, specifically Psalm 118:22; Isaiah 28:16; and Zechariah 10:4. Their rejection of Jesus, however awful, was a necessary part of God's saving plan (v. 11). How have you seen God bring good from evil?

- How does this passage suggest we might use Scripture to speak with our Jewish friends?

[Q] Peter, having marshaled his evidence, now closes his case (v. 12). What is his case?

[Q] Do you think God is fair in providing only one way to come to him? Why or why not?

Teaching Point Three: The Truth: The Holy Spirit will help us speak the truth about Jesus.

Many people do not accept that Jesus is the only way, of course. "Phrases such as 'you have your truth and I have mine' or 'that may be true for you but it's not true for me' also express [our] cultural mood," Franke says. "Such expressions imply that truth is determined by the particular culture or community one happens to be in. Cultural relativists deny that any particular set of ideas, beliefs, or practices can provide the basis for shared convictions about ultimate truth."

Franke rightly points out that part of our problem is that we are looking at truth as something that is strictly objective—a set of propositions—rather than as a Person. Propositions can be debated; people can be encountered. Jesus reveals *himself* as the Truth, and he has a strong supporting witness, the Holy Spirit. This Witness helps us in *our* witness, in a world where truth is up for grabs, to the One who is the Truth.

Read John 15:18–27.

[Q] Jesus, about to depart, warns his disciples that they will face opposition (vv. 18–20). The world will hate them because it hates him. What has (or does) this hatred look like in your life?

[Q] Yet the disciples are not left defenseless and alone in such a world (vv. 26–27).



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Jesus promises to send them “the Counselor” or “the Spirit of truth.” So we have truth squared—truth testifying to Truth. Give an example of how the Holy Spirit’s presence has helped you testify to the Truth.

Optional Activity: *Ask the members of your group to name a local person or group that is opposed to Christ. It might be an atheist organization, a disgruntled and bitter neighbor, or even a Wicca group. Then discuss how your group might reach out to this person or group by demonstrating love and yet standing for truth. Be prepared for opposition—and for the Spirit’s help.*

Teaching Point Four: The Life: Our love is based on the self-giving love of God.

We have seen that Jesus is unique, and this uniqueness makes him the Way to God and the Truth whom we can speak up about. But how is he uniquely the Life, and how do we live in such a way that his life becomes ours? Franke reminds us that Christ’s life is connected to the loving community that is the essence of the Trinity. “The church, the community of Christ’s intentional followers, is called to be a foretaste of this life, this relational fellowship of love, a provisional demonstration of God’s will for all of creation,” Franke says. “We are a people who, because we share in the Holy Spirit, participate in the eternal love of God. As such, we represent God in the midst of a fallen world through lives that reflect God’s own loving character.” Read 1 John 4:7–12.

[Q] The apostle John, who was also in the Upper Room, instructs his “dear friends” to “love one another,” not because it is the right thing to do or because we will get something out of it, but because “love comes from God” (v. 7). How does knowing the ultimate Source of love help us to live it? What is the connection between our love and our identity?

[Q] Because “God is love,” John says we ought to fear if we do not love. The one who fails to love “does not know God.” Is it possible to love God and not love fellow human beings (v. 8)? Explain.

[Q] How does verse 9 confirm God’s love for us no matter what kind of difficulties we are going through?

[Q] John indicates that we can make the invisible God visible to others by our love for one another (v. 12). Who might God be nudging you to show love to as a demonstration of his love?



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Part 3 **APPLY YOUR FINDINGS**

Jesus is the Way. In a world in which there are many confusing paths, it is good news indeed that Jesus provides us with a clear path to the Father. The Way may bring troubles, but they will be overwhelmed by the joy that awaits us beyond them. *Jesus is the Truth.* He is not the answer to a math problem or a scientific formula. The Truth is a Person, attested by another Person, the “Spirit of truth,” who helps us share Jesus with others. *Jesus is the Life.* He not only, as the third Person of the Trinity, has life in himself; he shares that life with others. Jesus’ followers, because of our relationship with God and helped by the example of Christ’s sacrifice, are to demonstrate that Life to others.

In a world that sees the exclusive claims of Christ as bad news, his followers are to show why they are good news indeed. And with the help of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we can.

Action Point: *Take one of the four teaching points in this study and devise a simple way to show and tell it in your neighborhood or church. For example, write a letter to the editor at Christmas or Easter demonstrating why Jesus is the Way. Or take a concordance and list all the ways that the Spirit testifies to Jesus in the New Testament. Then commit to talk with a friend about Jesus, asking the Spirit to help you. Or visit a church member who is in a hospital or nursing home.*

— *Stan Guthrie is author of Missions in the Third Millennium: 21 Key Trends for the 21st Century. A CT editor at large, he writes a column for BreakPoint.org and blogs at stanguthrie.com.*

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

📖 Check out the following Bible studies at: ChristianBibleStudies.com

📖 **Gospel of John: Knowing Jesus** This basic ten-session Bible study identifies the seven names and titles of Jesus that reveal him as the eternal God, who came to transform us.

📖 **Jesus As Your Mentor** We often want mentors to show us how to live. Who does that better than Christ himself? This four-session Bible study will show that Jesus lived the best life ever, and when we let him mentor us, he will show us how to be the best leader, friend, and lover, living the best way possible.



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📖 **Matthew: Jesus the Messiah** This seven-session Bible study takes a close look at the first four chapters of the Gospel of Matthew and looks at the importance of obedience to God, the power of Jesus' name, living outside our comfort zone, gaining power over temptation, discovering what God expects of us, and staying on task with our mission.

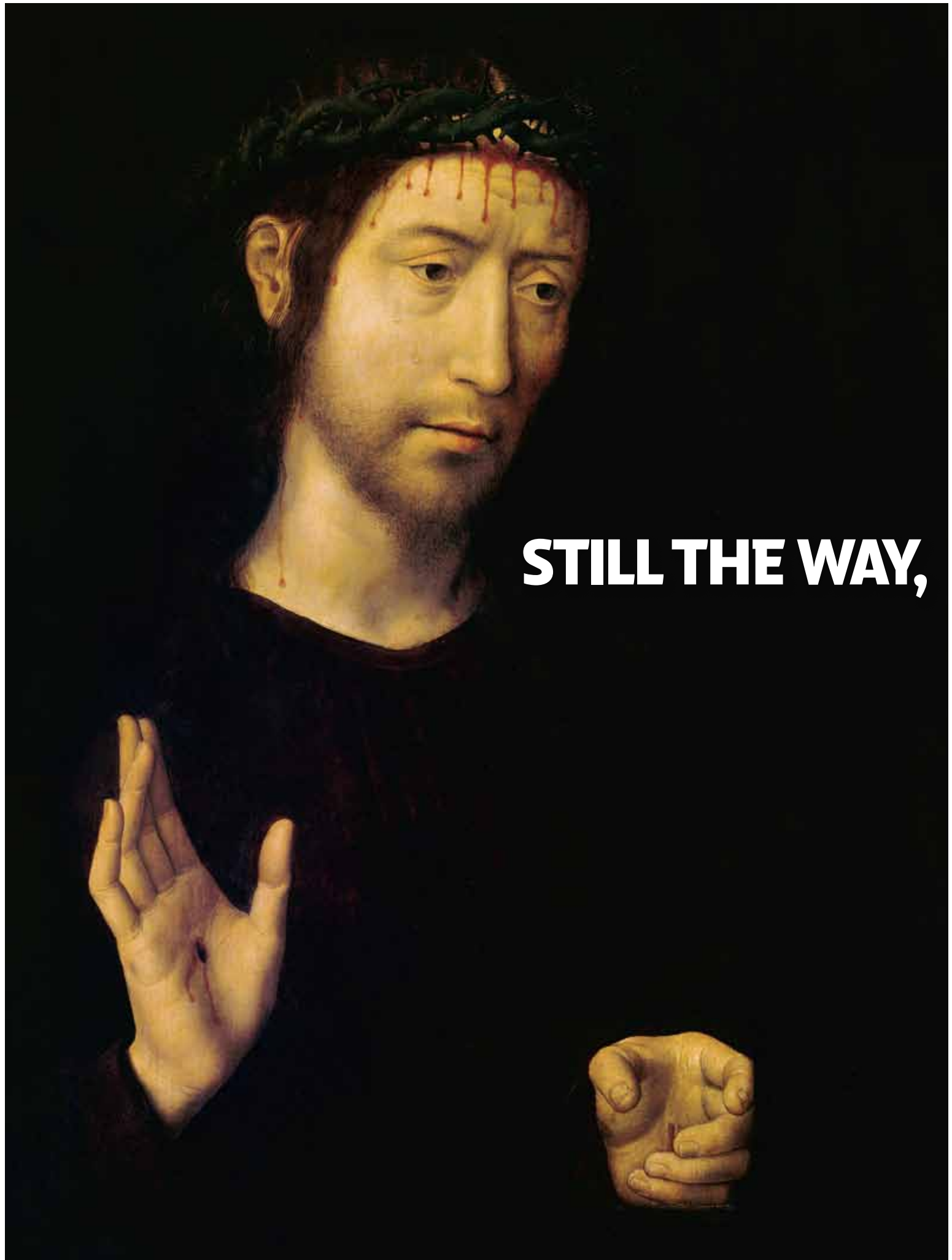
📖 **The Universe Next Door**, fourth edition, by James W. Sire (IVP, 2004). Clear explanations of Christian theism, deism, naturalism, nihilism, existentialism, Eastern pantheistic monism, New Age philosophy, and postmodernism.

📖 **Manifold Witness: The Plurality of Truth**, by John R. Franke (Abingdon, 2008). Appreciating the many ways that Christian traditions have understood the faith, Franke argues, saves us from becoming a legalistic and rigidly dogmatic religion, rather than a faith that is expressed beautifully in many ways under the cross of Christ.

📖 **Is Jesus the Only Savior?**, by James R. Edwards (Eerdmans, 2005). Assembles extensive support to show that Jesus considered himself the unique and saving mission of God to the world.

📖 <http://www.ccci.org/wij/index.aspx>. How to begin a relationship with God.





STILL THE WAY,

By John R. Franke

Billions seem happy in their non-Christian faiths. More people than ever doubt that anyone has a corner on truth. So why do Christians keep insisting that Jesus is . . .

THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE

A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO, I participated in a conference in which two prominent postmodern philosophers addressed a group of Christians on a range of theological, philosophical, and practical issues. Those attending were largely committed to addressing some of the postmodern challenges in North America.

I was happy to hear some commonly held misconceptions of postmodern thought—like texts can mean anything that readers would like them to say—decisively critiqued and corrected. At another point, presenters demonstrated how deconstruction can be an ally of vibrant Christian faith.

On the last day, the discussion focused on Christian engagement with other religions. I resonated with much of what was said: the need for respectful dialogue, the willingness to listen and learn, and the intent to promote peace and understanding. But I also experienced a growing sense of unease. As my concern crystallized, I asked our distinguished guests: As those who self-identified with the Christian tradition, how did they understand the uniqueness of Jesus Christ?

Their response was that of course Jesus is unique. But, they continued, so are the leaders of the other world religions. While it was certainly true that Jesus is unique and different from other religious leaders, they said, it is also true that they are unique in relation to him. The uniqueness of Jesus was no different from that of any other important religious figure. Only in this way, they suggested, is equality among religions established as a basis for interreligious dialogue.

This view is not held merely by those in the lofty climes of the

academy. I was once with a group of Christian students who were happy to maintain that Jesus was unique, but also quick to affirm that so is every human being, since all are made in the image of God. This reminded me of a statement from George Burns, playing the title role in the 1977 movie *Oh, God!* When asked if Jesus was his son, he says, yes, Jesus was his son—and Buddha was his son, and Muhammad was his son, and in fact, all human beings are his sons and daughters since he created them all.

This is predictable Hollywood fare, but Christians have historically affirmed much more than this when we confess the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the Son of God. We believe that Jesus is nothing less than the incarnate Son of God in whom the fullness of the Deity dwells in human form; fully divine and fully human—and the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

However, recent evidence suggests that what Christians have historically affirmed is now up for grabs. According to a 2008 national survey conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 52 percent of all American Christians believe that non-Christian faiths can lead to eternal life. Further, despite a recent countertrend, the number of evangelicals who believe this remains remarkably high (see “Do Evangelicals Believe in Exclusivity?” page 30). While many factors may account for these findings, it seems clear that a surprising number of Christians, including evangelicals, are not convinced of Jesus’ unique nature.

Some Christians even argue that, in the midst of our pluralist and religiously diverse culture, it might be better to ease off the talk about Jesus as exclusively unique. Aren’t such assertions “hegemonic” or “triumphalistic” in a multicultural society?

In fact, there is a great deal at stake in denying that Jesus is *the Way, the Truth, and the Life*.

THE WAY

In the midst of a world teeming with religious diversity, what does it mean to say that Jesus is the Way? Simply put, it means we should look to Jesus to discover how God acts in the world. As the divine incarnation of God's love and mission, Jesus exemplifies the Way of God in the world. He was with God "in the beginning" and was sent into the world not only to tell us about God but also to demonstrate how God wants us to live.

And how does God want us to live? The short answer is that God calls us to love: "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 John 4:7–8; all biblical quotations are from the TNIV). But the question is, What is love?

Many assume they know what love is. Love makes you feel good. Love doesn't judge. Love means never having to say you're sorry. From the perspective of the Christian faith, such answers are both inadequate and false. These common ideas about love are shaped by our culture—the music we listen to, the movies we watch, and the books we read. Instead, we learn about love by looking at Jesus.

Jesus Christ is the living embodiment of God's gracious character as the One who loves. This love is not an abstract notion or a set of feelings, but is rather characterized by the *action* of God in the person of Jesus Christ. Commitment to Jesus as the Way means we do not presume to know the nature of divine love ahead of time. We certainly do not let our culture tell us what love is. Rather, our understanding of true love, the love of God, is shaped by the particular way in which God loves in and through Jesus Christ.

The affirmation of Jesus as the Way means to acknowledge that he shows us who God is and how God acts in the world.

As the One sent by the Father, Jesus exemplifies the Way of love in his mission to the world. Three biblical texts help us to understand his mission and how we participate in it.

In the first, Jesus goes to the Nazareth synagogue on the Sabbath and takes onto himself the words of the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18–19). In calling disciples and creating a community of the Way, Jesus calls us to join him in his struggle for the liberation of human beings from all the forces of oppression.

In the second, the tax collector Zacchaeus, in response to Jesus, promises to give half of his possessions to the poor and pay back fourfold anyone he has cheated. Jesus says to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and

to save what was lost" (Luke 19:9–10). The church, after the pattern of Jesus, is to seek the lost and to proclaim the good news of salvation in Christ. Hence, evangelism is central to the liberating and reconciling mission of God.

A third text stands at the heart of the gospel: "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Phil. 2:6–8). Faithfulness to the mission of Jesus means emulating his humility by valuing others above ourselves. This is the Way of Jesus.

The affirmation of Jesus as the Way, then, means to acknowledge that he shows us who God is and how God acts in the world, and the unique nature and character of the divine mission. All roads do not lead to God. The Way of Jesus is not simply about an inwardly focused or otherworldly spirituality, or a social activism that is often viewed as its alternative. Rather, it is the Way of humility and self-denial for the sake of others. Denial of the unique nature of Jesus compromises the redemption accomplished through his life and death as well as the Way of life he models for us and calls us to follow.

THE TRUTH

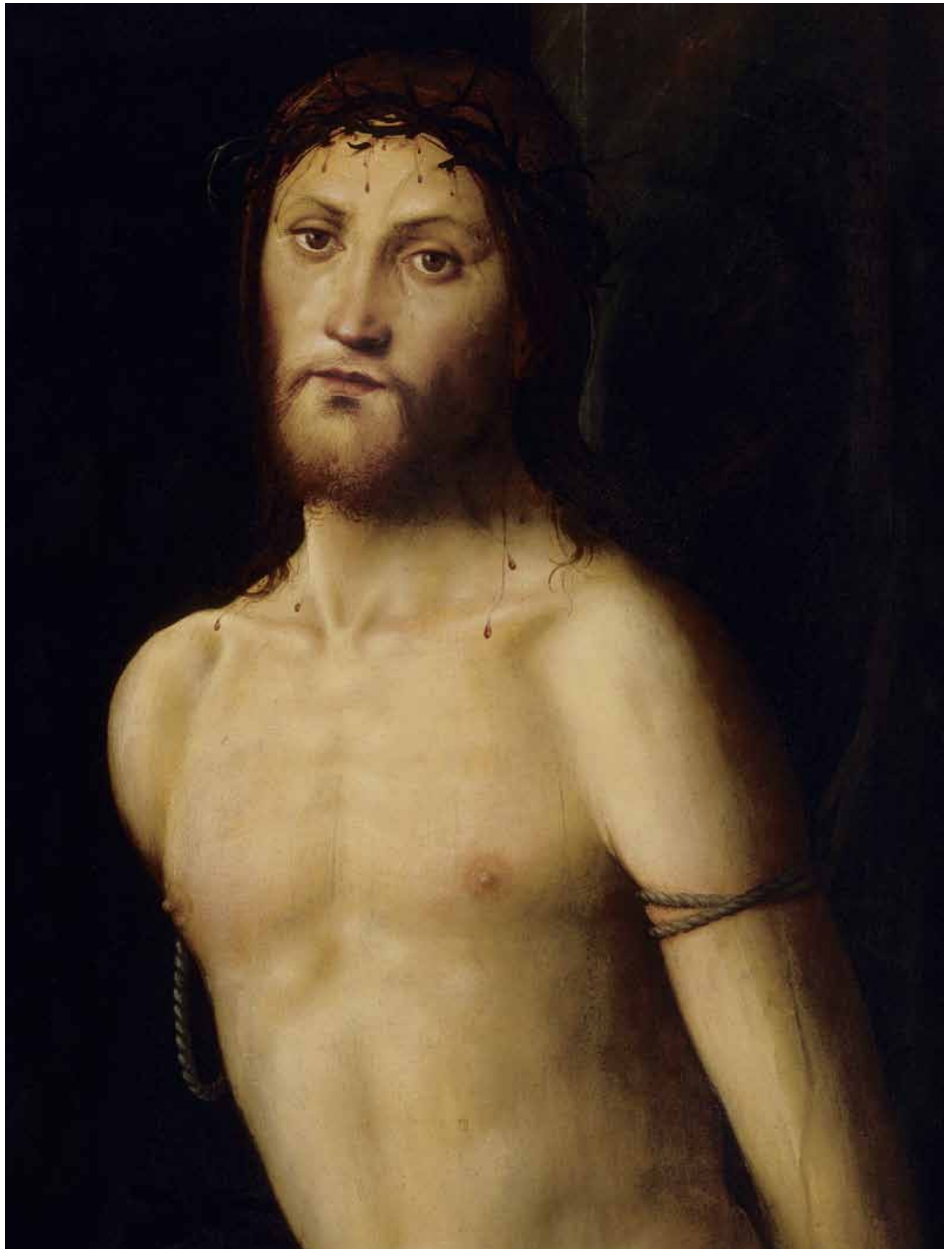
What does it mean to say that Jesus is the Truth in a world filled with competing truth claims, as well as people who doubt the very existence of truth? Convoluted and inconclusive speculation about truth has led many to become, like Pilate, cynical about the very idea—"What is truth?" The Christian belief that Jesus Christ is the Truth suggests a hopeful answer.

Truth is not finally to be found in abstract notions or theories, but rather in the person of Jesus Christ, the unique Son of God and the living embodiment of truth. From this perspective, knowing truth depends on being in proper relationship to this one person who is divine truth. Jesus is categorically different from all other prophets, witnesses, and messengers from God. Jesus is all of these things, yet more. Along with the Father and the Spirit, Jesus himself is God.

In the Gospel of John, this affirmation is expressed by calling Jesus the *logos* of God, the living and active Word of God, the very basis of creation: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (1:1–5).

John explicitly says what he means when he says Jesus is the *logos* of God—and he certainly means more than abstract truth: "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known" (1:17–18).

Jesus, then, is presented as the all-encompassing Truth of



God, a truth that is personal, active, relational, and gracious.

John fills out this picture in terms of Jesus' relationship to the Spirit. "When the Advocate comes," says Jesus, "whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me" (15:26). The Spirit of truth bears witness to Jesus (not to some philosophy or theory) as the incarnate manifestation of truth—truth that has "moved into the neighborhood," as Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*. And clearly, an important aspect of the Spirit's truth-bearing work is found in the inspired Scripture, which is at its core a witness to Jesus Christ the Truth.

This too has many consequences, but let me note three. First, because Jesus is the Truth, the very Truth of God, we cannot limit our understanding of him as merely a good moral teacher and significant religious leader, one ethical genius among others. This is to pull the rug out from under the most basic Christian understanding of Jesus. When we claim Jesus is unique, we mean that he is in an altogether different category from Moses, Buddha, Muhammad, or whomever. Such religious geniuses have indeed spoken many truths, but those truths are truths only insofar as they finally point to the Truth of God, that is, the life and work of Jesus Christ, the Truth. As Christians enter into interfaith conversations, it is important that we maintain this fundamental understanding of Jesus.

A second consequence is illustrated by a discussion I was in recently. A pastor who wanted to demonstrate the strength of his conviction said that if Jesus himself were to appear and affirm the opposing view, he would look him straight in the eye and say, "No, Jesus, you are wrong, I know this based on

my experience, and nothing you can say will lead me to believe otherwise."

Phrases like "you have your truth and I have mine" or "that may be true for you but it's not true for me" also express this cultural mood. Such expressions imply that truth is determined by the particular community one happens to be in. Cultural relativists deny that a particular set of ideas, beliefs, or practices can provide the basis for shared convictions about ultimate truth. Thus, it is impossible for people to arrive at common conceptions of truth, except perhaps to affirm their commitment to the idea that there is no ultimate truth. Everything is interpretation: mine, yours; ours, theirs; each as good as another.

The Christian church has the audacity, in this climate, to insist that some things are true for everyone regardless of their social location, beliefs, or particular opinions. Not everything that is *claimed* to be true actually *is* true. Some beliefs and convictions, no matter how sincerely held, are false and untrue and must be opposed. We must assert this in humility—because the Christian message is not "our" truth, but is a divine gift to us, as it is a gift to the world. Nor do we claim to know truth fully and completely—that only God can do—but what we are given to know by God in Christ, we know truly and confidently. Christians cannot adopt moral relativism without compromising the conviction that God, the source of all truth, speaks in and through Jesus Christ, the Truth.

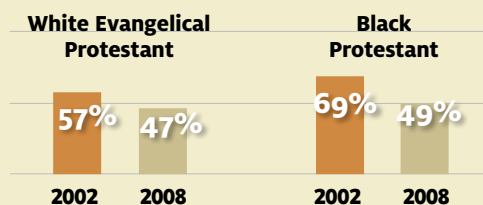
Finally, this affirmation that Jesus is the Truth is a stark challenge to abstract ideas of truth. As noted above, in Jesus we discover that truth is not merely intellectual or even moral, but personal and relational—truth for Christians is very much woven

DO EVANGELICALS BELIEVE IN EXCLUSIVITY?

Last year the Pew Forum surveyed American Christians, asking them to choose between the statements 'Many religions can lead to eternal life' and 'My religion is the one, true faith.'

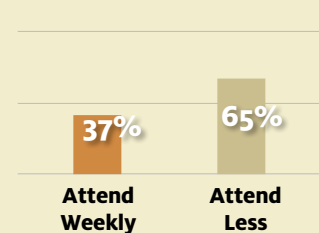
Becoming More Exclusive

Christians who chose 'Many religions can lead to eternal life.'

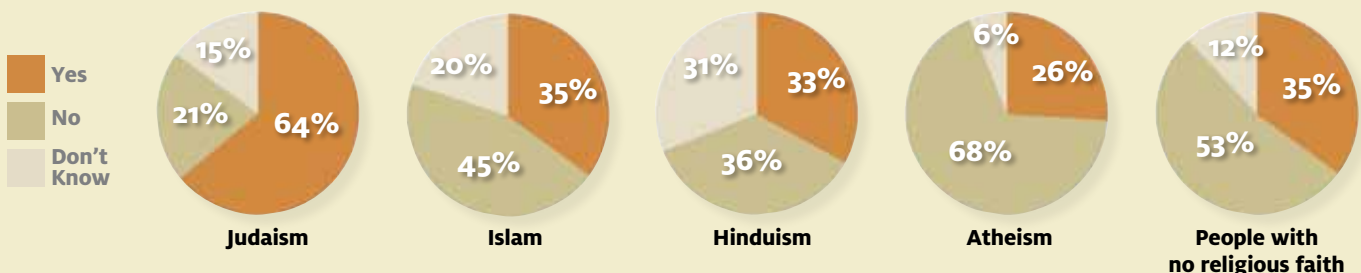


Church Attendance Matters

Evangelicals who chose 'Many religions can lead to eternal life.'



Which Other Religions? Among those evangelicals who chose 'Many religions can lead to eternal life,' those who believe that includes . . .



Source: Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. Evangelicals in the survey are Protestants who self-identified as "born-again or evangelical."

into the theme of love. Some of that was noted in the section about Jesus as the Way. Another dimension is outlined below.

THE LIFE

The fullness of Life in Jesus is found in proper relationship to the Father through the person of Jesus. This life is not simply an escape from the divine judgment of death and destruction, but also a quality of life, in particular, a life lived in fellowship with the triune God through Jesus.

In thinking about the divine life we should ask, What was God doing before the creation of the world? We might at first be tempted to reply, with some early Christian writers, that God was preparing a place for people who asked such questions! And some speculations about God in church history might make this seem the best answer. But answering this apparently abstract question can help us understand what we mean when we say that Jesus is the Life.

Admittedly, we do not know much about the activity of God before creation, but this much seems incontrovertible: Throughout all eternity, God lives a life of love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When Scripture says that “God is love” (1 John 4:8), it points not simply to God’s feelings but to the life that God lives. Love is a verb. God is involved in giving, receiving, and sharing love from all eternity as three distinct persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Without denying the traditional teaching that the unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is found in a common essence or substance, thinking about God in such terms can become overly abstract. God’s unity can also be understood through the idea of relationality. The three persons of the Trinity, while wholly distinct from each other, are also bound together in such a way that they depend on each other for their very identities as Father, Son, and Spirit. In other words, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one by virtue of their interdependent relationality. From the beginning and throughout all eternity, the life of the triune God has been and continues to be characterized by love.

Indeed, there is no God other than Father, Son, and Spirit bound together in the actions of love throughout eternity. And the love lived out by the Trinitarian persons among themselves provides a description of the inner life of God apart from any reference to creation.

God does not create humans in order finally to have someone to love. Creation reflects the expansive love of God, whereby the triune God brings into being another reality, that which is not God, and establishes a covenantal relationship of love, grace, and blessing—to draw creation into the divine fellowship of love. To participate in this fellowship is the Life. Jesus, as the unique Son of God, lives his eternal life in this reality, and he invites all of humanity to participate in this life through him.

The church, the community of Christ’s intentional followers, is called to be a foretaste of this life, this relational fellowship of love, a provisional demonstration of God’s will for all of creation. We are a people who, because we share in the Holy Spirit, participate in the eternal love of God. As such, we represent God in the midst of a fallen world through lives that reflect

God’s own loving character. Only through relationships and in community can we truly show what God is like, for God is the community of love, the eternal relational dynamic enjoyed by the three persons of the Trinity.

Again, the consequences are immense. Take apologetics and evangelism. When we have conversations with people of other faiths or no faith, we must of course give a credible intellectual account of the faith. But recognizing that Jesus is not just the Truth but also the Life means that we’re not just calling them to change their worldview or to take up a new moral agenda. We’re inviting them into a relationship with God. Not an abstract, ethereal relationship, but rather a concrete fellowship of love with God through his people, a fellowship

Jesus is the all-encompassing Truth of God, a truth that is personal, active, relational, and gracious.

experienced here and now in the life of the church, a fellowship lived in anticipation of the climax of God’s work of new creation. To be a Christian means to participate in Life, that is, in Jesus Christ as he participated in the life of the triune God.

And once more we see that this approach to Life is so unique, we simply cannot abandon it—as if it were just another way of approaching God or living spiritually. Denial of the uniqueness of Jesus as the Life ends up compromising the distinctive Christian teaching that God is triune. Doing so cuts the heart out of Christian witness in the world.

BEARING WITNESS

As we try to witness to our relativistic world about the uniqueness of Christ, we have to abandon the idea that this is something we can demonstrate with definitive proof, particularly to those who are predisposed to deny this. It is beyond the scope of human ability to produce in others the faith to see Jesus as he is. But it is the church’s calling to continue to bear witness to Jesus and demonstrate the significance of his person for the whole fabric of Christian faith.

The belief that Jesus Christ is none other than God come in the flesh shapes our understanding of every point of distinctive Christian teaching. I’ve argued in a recent book that the diversity of the church is not a problem to be solved but is, in fact, the blessing of God. Indeed, the proper expression of orthodox, biblical faith can only be characterized by plurality. But in the midst of our diversity, we must remain unified on this point—Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. If we fail to stand fast here everything else will be in vain and the Christian church will lose its bearings. We will fail in our missional vocation to be the image of God and the body of Christ in the world. ☩

John R. Franke is the Lester and Kay Clemens Professor of Missional Theology, Biblical Seminary, Hatfield, Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Manifold Witness: The Plurality of Truth* (Abingdon).

Go to ChristianBibleStudies.com for “The Uniqueness of Jesus,” a Bible study based on this article.

THE JESUS WE'LL NEVER KNOW

The quest for the Historical Jesus has failed. But our faith is founded on something deeper.

In the CHRISTIANITY TODAY article “The Jesus We’ll Never Know,” author Scot McKnight points out that we all tend to remake Jesus in our own image. New Testament scholar McKnight gives students in his classes a standardized psychological test. “The results are nothing short of astounding,” he says. “The first part is about Jesus. It asks students to imagine Jesus’ personality, with questions such as, ‘Does he prefer to go his own way rather than act by the rules?’ and ‘Is he a worrier?’ The second part asks the same questions of the students, but instead of ‘Is he a worrier?’ it asks, ‘Are you a worrier?’ The test is not about right or wrong answers, nor is it designed to help students understand Jesus. Instead, if given to enough people, the test will reveal that we all think Jesus is like us.” Much of the recent Jesus scholarship, McKnight insists, reveals more about the scholars who promulgate it than it does the central figure of the New Testament.



Scripture: Mark 4:35–41; 8:27–38; 9:1–8; Acts 9:1–19

Based on: “The Jesus We’ll Never Know,” by Scot McKnight,
CHRISTIANITY TODAY, 2010



Christ: The Center of the Gospel

THE JESUS WE'LL NEVER KNOW

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Part 1 IDENTIFY THE CURRENT ISSUE

Note to leader: Provide each person with "The Jesus We'll Never Know" from CHRISTIANITY TODAY, included at the end of this study.

Depending on whom you talk to, there is not just one Jesus, but many. McKnight lists several currently in fashion: There is the "Jewish Jesus," who through historical studies has been set in his Jewish context. He is "the Jesus who was crucified under Pontius Pilate and, according to the witness of many, was raised again." Then there is the "canonical Jesus," as interpreted by the writers of the New Testament. This Jesus was "interpreted ... [in] terms like 'Messiah,' 'Son of God,' and 'Son of Man,' ... [and] the agent of God's redemption." Next we have the "orthodox Jesus," the one further interpreted by the creeds and traditions of the church as "God from God, Light from Light," and so on. Finally we come to the "historical Jesus," a figure reconstructed from the gospels using narrow historical criteria such as the principle of "double dissimilarity" to decide which parts of the gospel accounts are true and which are false. Complicating matters, each scholar has a different "historical Jesus" in mind, usually fashioned in his or her own image. Some of these scholars then worship the Jesus they have created. How about us? Given all these options, what's a Christian to think ... and believe?

Discussion Starters:

- [Q] What are some popular conceptions of Jesus in art and in the media? Which aspects of Jesus do they emphasize, and which do they leave out?
- [Q] In what ways is your mental picture of Jesus like you and not like you?
- [Q] Scholarship is held in high regard in our culture. In what ways is it an asset in evaluating who Jesus is, and in what ways is it a liability?
- [Q] If there are so many pictures of Jesus, how do we decide which is right?

Part 2 DISCOVER THE ETERNAL PRINCIPLES

Teaching Point One: Jesus explodes our categories.

Every scholar thinks he or she has a handle on Jesus. Some say he is a first-century revolutionary; others that he is a prophet-healer; others, a pithy cynic. Even the disciples had their preconceived notions of the carpenter's son from Nazareth. Certainly at first they saw him on a human level as a representative of God, a teacher, and perhaps a prophet. They saw him as Messiah, but did not yet grasp the full import of what that meant. Yet one day on the



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Sea of Galilee they were suddenly faced with something—*Someone*—utterly beyond their categories. As the 13 men sat in a fishing boat built for 15, which recent archaeology suggests was around 26.5 feet long, 4.5 feet high, and 7.5 feet wide, an unexpected storm came up in an area prone to them. Fearing for their lives, they encountered a Force both wilder and more shocking than the storm. In the end, they saw their old notions as wholly inadequate.

Read Mark 4:35–41.

[Q] After a long day of ministering to the crowds, Jesus suggests that they get in the boat and go to the other side of the lake (v. 35). They go, taking other boats along (v. 36). What does it mean that Jesus was the instigator of this incident? How does this fact apply to our own lives?

[Q] Have you ever found yourself in a storm on the water? If so, describe it for us.

[Q] Contrast the responses of the disciples and Jesus. What upset the disciples? What upset Jesus? Why the difference?

[Q] Jesus controlled the wind and the sea (v. 39). What does this say about his power? About his identity? About his ability to help us in times of extremity?

Teaching Point Two: Jesus defines his identity and mission—and ours.

Scholars often pick and choose what aspects of the life and ministry of Christ they will highlight—and believe. “Most historical Jesus scholars assume that the Gospels have overcooked their portrait of Jesus, and that the church’s Trinitarian theology wildly exceeds anything Jesus thought about himself and anything the evangelists believed,” McKnight says. “These scholars pursue a Jesus who is less than or different from or more primitive than what the Gospels teach and the church believes. There is no reason to do historical Jesus studies—to probe ‘what Jesus was really like’—if the Gospels are accurate and the church’s beliefs are justified. There are only two reasons to engage in historical Jesus studies: first, to see if the church got him right; and second, if the church did not, to find the Jesus who is more authentic than the church’s Jesus.”

Read Mark 8:27–38. Jesus clearly was interested in how others understood him and his mission. In this passage, the disciples held to certain sincerely held beliefs that needed correcting—much as some of today’s scholars do.



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Jesus takes his Jewish disciples to a pagan area—Caesarea Philippi—and launches the conversation about his identity with a question: “Who do people say I am?” Upon hearing the various theories, he follows up with another question: “Who do *you* say I am?” (v. 29a, emphasis added).

[Q] Why does Jesus use questions to establish his identity, instead of making a statement?

Peter answers that Jesus is the *Christ*, the Greek word for the Hebrew *Messiah*, which means “anointed one.” Jesus doesn’t deny the title, but tells his followers to keep this knowledge quiet, since they believe it is the job of the Christ to “liberate the Jewish people from the yoke of Rome.”¹

[Q] In what ways do our ideas of Jesus solving our problems similarly miss the mark?

[Q] Jesus tells the disciples that his identity and mission involve suffering, which clearly upset Peter. How does knowing your own mission can include suffering hit you?

[Q] How do we ensure we are following God’s agenda instead of our own, more comfortable one?

[Q] Jesus explains what the “things of God” mean for his disciples: self-denial, taking up one’s cross, following him, losing one’s life to save it, standing for Christ when the temptation is to be ashamed (vv. 34–38). How does this alter your thinking about who Jesus is?

Optional Activity: *Give each person a piece of paper with a vertical line drawn down the middle. On the left side, have them list the “things of man” that they struggle with. On the right, have them list “things of God” that they believe the Lord is calling them to. Then spend one minute per person praying for one item on their lists.*

Teaching Point Three: Jesus is the unique Son of God.

McKnight argues that much of the historical Jesus scholarship rests on a platform of unbelief. Given that fact, Christians must make a choice. “We must be willing to ask, Whose Jesus will we trust?” McKnight says. “Will it be that of the evangelists and the apostles? Will it be that of the church—the creedal, orthodox Jesus? Will it be the latest proposal from a brilliant historian? Or will it be our own consensus based on modern-day historical scholarship? There is an irreducible futility to the historical Jesus enterprise.” Perhaps the voice we should listen to is the voice of God.

¹ ESV Study Bible, p. 1910.



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Read Mark 9:1–8.

Having just warned his followers of the cost of discipleship, Jesus promises them the reward of seeing the coming of the powerful kingdom of God (9:1). While the interpretations of this saying are many, it is clearly linked with what has come before in 8:27–38.

[Q] Why do these experiences of suffering and glory go together—why does one help us in the other?

[Q] Then comes the transfiguration (v. 2–7). Describe its elements: What happened to the appearance of Jesus? Who arrived? What was Peter's response? Whose voice came from a cloud, and what did it say?

How do these words inform our understanding of Jesus scholarship?

Teaching Point Four: Jesus demands our allegiance.

Much of contemporary scholarship attempts to put us in the driver's seat. We decide which Jesus we will follow. We decide whether we believe the records of his words and deeds. We fashion God in our own image. But the real Jesus remains beyond our futile attempts to fit him into our boxes. At some point we must choose to believe.

"[O]ne thing the historical method cannot prove is that Jesus died *for our sins* and was raised *for our justification*," McKnight admits. "At some point, historical methods run out of steam and energy. Historical Jesus studies cannot get us to the point where the Holy Spirit and the church can take us. I know that once I was blind and that I can now see. I know that historical methods did not give me sight. They can't. Faith cannot be completely based on what the historian can prove." Yet in his grace, Jesus can break through the clutter and reach even the hardest of hearts.

Paul, a zealous persecutor of the fledgling Christian church, was also blind to God. On his way to Damascus, he was stopped in his tracks. Read Acts 9:1–19.

[Q] Jesus demanded Paul's obedience and gave him his marching orders (v. 6–16). Here again we see suffering intertwined with glory. Is Paul given an option? What information is he given about Jesus? What is his response? How can we emulate Paul's obedience to the Lord?

[Q] Ananias also obeys (v. 17). How can we be an Ananias to those to whom Jesus is speaking? Name at least one person?



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Part 3 **APPLY YOUR FINDINGS**

Scot McKnight has shown how we often make Jesus in our own image. Many of today's scholars searching for the historical Jesus are susceptible to the same temptation. Their creations are as varied as they are, and they rarely bring us closer to the real Jesus. This study has shown us that the real Jesus can be reliably found in the pages of Scripture. And he is the One to whom we must conform our lives, not him to ours.

First, we see that Jesus explodes our categories. He is bigger and wilder than anything we can reason out or imagine. While such knowledge can bring fear, it should also bring comfort and security. Second, Jesus defines who he is and what he came to do—and what we are to do if we follow him. The scholars and everyone else may have their say, but Jesus gets the final word. Third, Jesus is not one prophet among many. He is the unique Son of God. Fourth, Jesus is a Lord who demands our faithful obedience. But he rewards that commitment to him out of his grace.

So even if the search for the historical Jesus has come to a dead end, the search for the real Jesus has the prospect of a happy conclusion. That's because, though the other Jesuses are made in our image, the *real* Jesus is the image of God and can make himself known. We can know him if we are willing to follow him.

Action Point: *Break into pairs and pray for the person you can be "Ananias" to. Consider how you might suffer for them so that they can know Jesus' glory.*

— *Stan Guthrie is author of Missions in the Third Millennium: 21 Key Trends for the 21st Century and of the forthcoming All That Jesus Asks: How His Questions Can Teach and Transform Us (Baker). A CT editor at large, he writes a column for BreakPoint.org and blogs at stanguthrie.com.*



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RECOMMENDED RESOURCES


ChristianBibleStudies.com

- **Essentials in Knowing God:** This 10-session Bible study will deepen your relationship with God by focusing on him and discovering what he is like. This course will also teach you how to repent, find forgiveness, and get rid of guilt. Finally, it will help you fill your prayer life with joy and beauty.
- **Who Is God?:** This 12-session Bible study will help you think realistically and practically about who God is. It will help you understand what the Scriptures have to say about him, and how to make him a part of your daily experience.

 **The Story of the Christ**, by Scot McKnight (Baker, 2006). McKnight's compelling introduction provides helpful background information on the sources of our information (the Gospels), the religious setting of Jesus' life, the heart of Jesus' teaching, and a summation of what kind of person Jesus was. The book then offers a continuous narrative account of the life and words of Jesus, woven together from the four canonical Gospels.

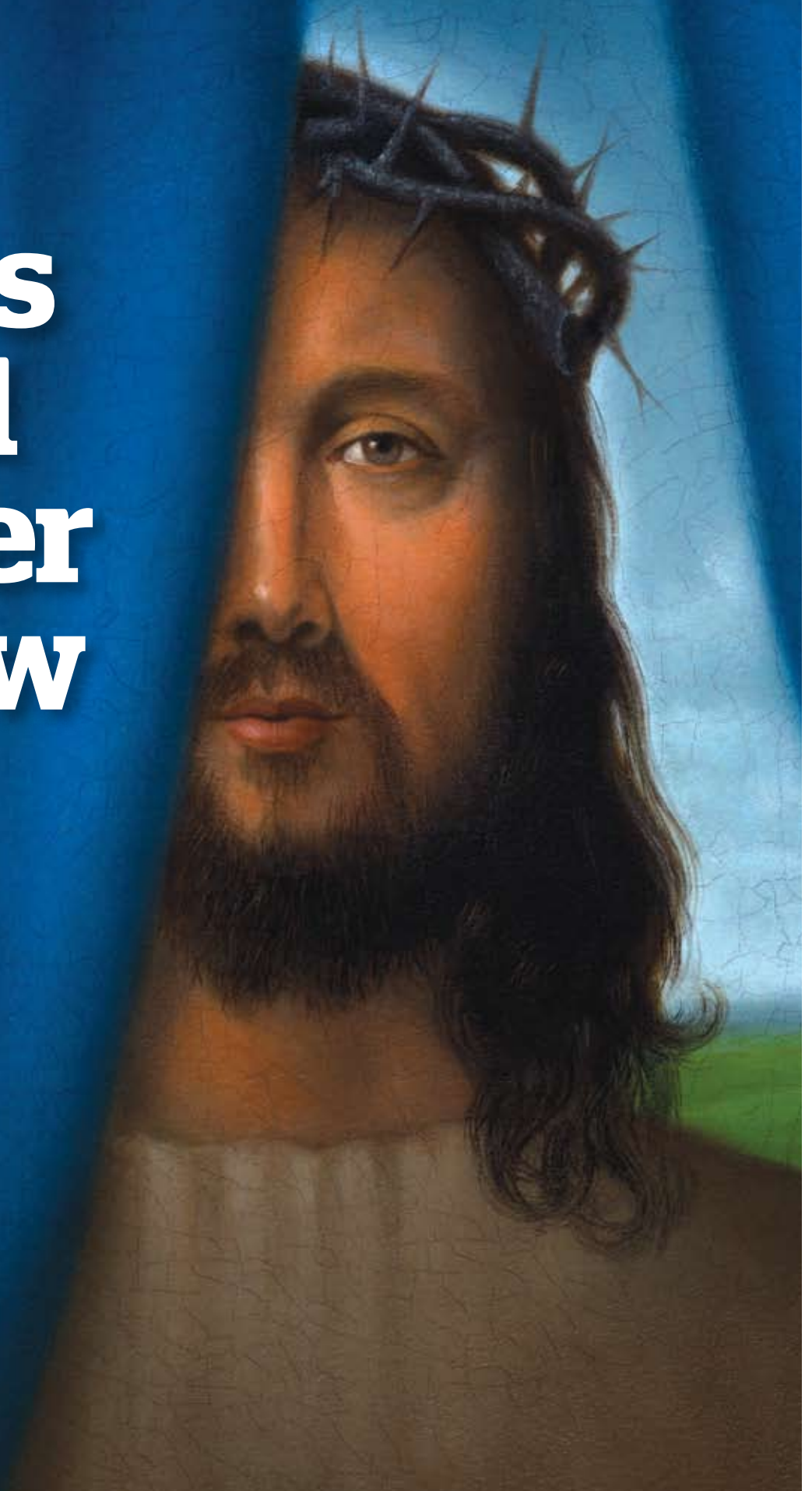
 **Introducing New Testament Interpretation**, by Scot McKnight (Baker, 1990). A strong foundation in biblical exegesis. Written for those with some knowledge of Greek, seven detailed essays by noted scholars cover New Testament background and social settings, theological synthesis, textual criticism, Greek grammar and word analysis, and more.

 **Jesus Mean and Wild: The Unexpected Love of an Untamable God**, by Mark Galli (Baker, 2008). This award-winning study of troubling passages in the Gospel of Mark reveals an untamable and militant Messiah—and offers proof that we should be anything but comfortable with Christ. A bold wake-up call for sleeping believers and a training manual for devoted disciples.

 ntwrightpage.com. Information and insights about N. T. Wright, one of the leading biblical scholars of this generation.



The Jesus We'll Never Know



Why scholarly
attempts to discover
the 'real' Jesus have
failed. And why
that's a good thing.
By Scot McKnight

IN THE OPENING DAY of my class on Jesus of Nazareth, I give a standardized psychological test divided into two parts. The results are nothing short of astounding.

The first part is about Jesus. It asks students to imagine Jesus' personality, with questions such as, "Does he prefer to go his own way rather than act by the rules?" and "Is he a worrier?" The second part asks the same questions of the students, but instead of "Is he a worrier?" it asks, "Are *you* a worrier?" The test is not about right or wrong answers, nor is it designed to help students understand Jesus. Instead, if given to enough people, the test will reveal that we all think Jesus is like us. Introverts think Jesus is introverted, for example, and, on the basis of the same questions, extroverts think Jesus is extroverted.

Spiritual formation experts would love to hear that students in my Jesus class are becoming like Jesus, but the test actually reveals the reverse: Students are fashioning Jesus to be more like themselves. If the test were given to a random sample of adults, the results would be measurably similar. To one degree or another, we all conform Jesus to our own image.

Since we are pushing this point, let's not forget historical Jesus scholars, whose academic goal is to study the records, set the evidence in historical context, render judgment about the value of the evidence, and compose a portrait of "what Jesus was really like." They, too, have ended up making Jesus in their own image.

HEYDAY FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS

In the 1980s, the central academic organization for biblical studies, the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), was energized in remarkable ways by a renewed interest in the historical Jesus, a project that had been abandoned for some decades. At that time, the Jesus Seminar, designed by former childhood preacher and fervent critic of all things orthodox Robert Funk, frequently made headlines. Noted scholars sat at

Illustrations by Rob Day

tables and voted on what Jesus really said and did based on the historical evidence. Funk and others drew up their conclusions in books that supposedly revealed the real Jesus.

Some of these studies were outlandish, some much closer to orthodoxy and the canonical Gospels. The headline-grabbing names included Ben F. Meyer, E. P. Sanders, John Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, Paula Fredriksen, and N. T. (Tom) Wright. I have sat in packed lecture halls to watch Tom and Dom go at it, and I've listened in as two friends, Marc and Tom, bantered back and forth about who was getting it right. Paula, a Catholic convert to Judaism, continued to warn the entire discipline that too many errors were being made about Judaism. Those were heady days, and I remember giving a paper to over 500 scholars about how Jesus understood his own death. The neon-light days for the historical Jesus are now over.

So, what did the loaded expression “the historical Jesus” really refer to?

To begin with, “Jesus” refers to the Jesus who lived and breathed and ate and talked and called disciples. This Jesus is the Jesus who was crucified under Pontius Pilate and, according to the witness of many, was raised again. Through historical studies, this Jesus has been set in his Jewish context. We might call this Jesus the “Jewish Jesus.”

Then again, the four evangelists and the other New Testament authors, because they encountered Jesus in the context of how Scripture unfolded, interpreted Jesus by using terms like “Messiah,” “Son of God,” and “Son of Man,” understanding him as the agent of God’s redemption. We might call this Jesus the “canonical Jesus.”

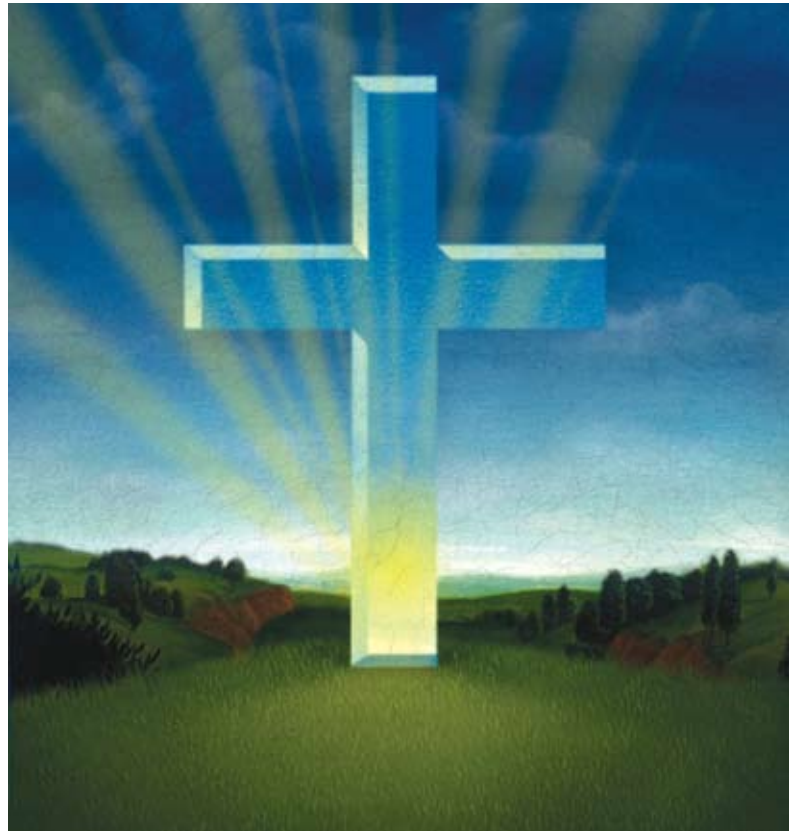
One more level needs to be observed: the church has amplified its understanding of “Jesus,” because it has interpreted Jesus in light of theological concerns. Let us refer to this Jesus as the “orthodox Jesus,” the second person of the Trinity, God from God and Light from Light.

But the historical Jesus is someone or something else. The historical Jesus is the Jesus whom scholars have reconstructed on the basis of historical methods over against the canonical portraits of Jesus in the Gospels of our New Testament, and over against the orthodox Jesus of the church. The historical Jesus is more like the Jewish Jesus than the canonical Jesus or the orthodox Jesus. Drawing distinctions between these various Jesuses is important in order to understand what has happened in the contemporary academic scene.

First, the historical Jesus is the Jesus whom scholars reconstruct on the basis of historical methods. Scholars differ, so reconstructions differ. Furthermore, the methods that scholars use differ, so the reconstructions differ all the more. But this must be said: Most historical Jesus scholars assume that the

Gospels are historically unreliable; thus, as a matter of discipline, they assess the Gospels to see if the evidence is sound. They do this by using methods common to all historical work but that are uniquely shaped by historical Jesus studies. The essential criterion used in most historical Jesus studies is called “double dissimilarity.” Even though it is riddled with holes, this method is still used by many historical Jesus scholars.

According to the criterion of double dissimilarity, the only sayings or actions of Jesus that can be trusted are those that are dissimilar to both Judaism at the time of Jesus and to the beliefs of the earliest Christians immediately after Jesus. One



of the most noteworthy examples is Jesus’ characteristically calling God *Abba*, a title for God rarely found in Judaism or in earliest Christianity.

This example, though, is problematic from the get-go: *Abba* (an affectionate term for “Father,” something akin to “Daddy”) is in fact not genuinely doubly dissimilar, for it is found in Judaism, if rarely, as well as in Aramaic in the New Testament; moreover, the word *Father* is found everywhere. But, historical exceptions aside, that Jesus called God *Abba* won the day as a historically reliable attribute, and therefore won the hearts of all historical Jesus scholars.

Other criteria were developed, criticized, dropped, and modified, but all have this in common: Historical Jesus scholars reconstruct what Jesus was like *by using historical methods to*

determine what in the Gospels can be trusted.

Second, the word *reconstruct* needs more attention. Most historical Jesus scholars assume that the Gospels have overcooked their portrait of Jesus, and that the church's Trinitarian theology wildly exceeds anything Jesus thought about himself and anything the evangelists believed. These scholars pursue a Jesus who is less than or different from or more primitive than what the Gospels teach and the church believes. There is no reason to do historical Jesus studies—to probe “what Jesus was really like”—if the Gospels are accurate and the church's beliefs are justified. There are only two reasons to engage in historical Jesus studies: first, to see if the church got him right; and second, if the church did not, to find the Jesus who is more authentic than the church's Jesus.

This leads to a fundamental observation about all genuine historical Jesus studies: *Historical Jesus scholars construct what is in effect a fifth gospel.* The reconstructed Jesus is not identical to the canonical Jesus or the orthodox Jesus. He is the reconstructed Jesus, which means he is a “new” Jesus.

I can establish that the tomb was empty and that resurrection is the best explanation for the empty tomb. But one thing the historical method cannot prove is that Jesus died for our sins and was raised for our justification.

Furthermore, these scholars by and large believe in the Jesus they reconstruct. During what's called the “first quest” for the historical Jesus, in the early 20th century, Albert Schweitzer understood Jesus as an apocalyptic Jesus. In the latest quest, Sanders's Jesus is an eschatological prophet; Crossan's Jesus is a Mediterranean peasant cynic full of wit and critical of the Establishment; Borg's Jesus is a mystical genius; Wright's Jesus is an end-of-the-exile messianic prophet who believed he was God returning to Zion. We could go on, but we have made our point: Historical Jesus scholars *reconstruct what Jesus was really like and orient their faith around that reconstruction.*

This leads to a third point, one that needs renewed emphasis today: Historical Jesus scholars reconstruct Jesus in conscious contrast with the categories of the evangelists and the beliefs of the church. Wright is the most orthodox of the well-known historical Jesus scholars; I can count on one hand the number of historical Jesus scholars who hold orthodox beliefs. The inspiration for historical Jesus scholarship is that the Gospels overdid it, and that the church more or less absorbed the Galilean prophet into Greek philosophical categories. The quest for the historical Jesus is an attempt to get behind the theology and the established faith to the Jesus who was—I must say it this way—much more like the Jesus we would like him to be.

One has to wonder if the driving force behind much historical Jesus scholarship is more an *a priori* disbelief in orthodoxy than a historian's genuine (and disinterested) interest in what really happened. The theological conclusions of those who

pursue the historical Jesus simply correlate too strongly with their own theological predilections to suggest otherwise.

The question that many of us in the discipline must ask is this: Can theology or Christology or, more importantly, faith itself be connected to the vicissitudes of historical research and results?

WHOSE JESUS WILL WE TRUST?

The last session on the historical Jesus that I attended at the SBL meetings met in a small room, and there were about 20 of us there. The session, during which I gave a short paper, tells the story of the discipline itself.

The scholarly hope that we would discover the original Jesus had crashed against the rugged rocks of reality, and on that day we witnessed the end of a disciplinary era. One by one, most of us had become convinced that no matter how hard we tried, reaching the uninterpreted Jesus was nearly impossible—however fun and rewarding it was and however many insights about the Gospels we discovered along the way.

Furthermore, a reconstructed Jesus is just that—one scholar's version of Jesus. It is unlikely to convince anyone other than the scholar, his or her students (who more or less feel obligated to agree), and perhaps a few others.

German theologian Martin Kähler convinced his generation that faith in Jesus could not and should not rest on historians' conclusions about what did and did not happen and the consequent reconstructions that entailed. We must be will-

ing to ask, *Whose Jesus will we trust?* Will it be that of the evangelists and the apostles? Will it be that of the church—the creedal, orthodox Jesus? Will it be the latest proposal from a brilliant historian? Or will it be our own consensus based on modern-day historical scholarship? There is an irreducible futility to the historical Jesus enterprise.

We have now seen the death of latest historical Jesus studies as we know them. Well, not for all, because some are busy trying to reconstruct Jesus for themselves and for any who will listen. Still, the enthusiasm is gone, and the critical proposals are more often met with a ho-hum “yet one more” than a hope that we may once and for all have found the one who was buried under the interpretation of the earliest Christians.

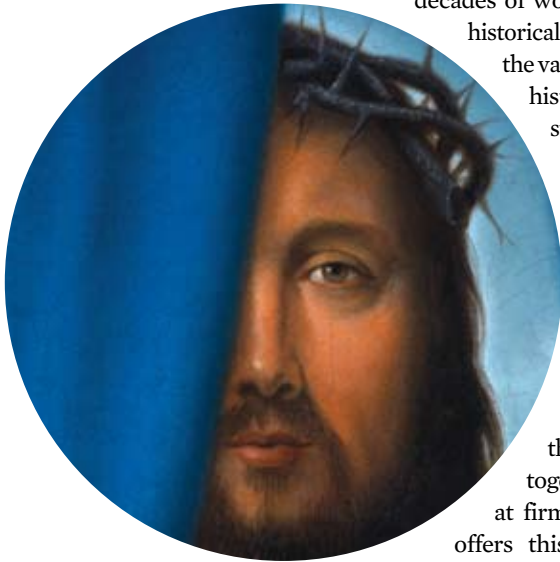
Sitting on my desk is volume four of J. P. Meier's *Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. What began as a two-volume venture has doubled, and one or two more volumes are forthcoming. Volume one generated all kinds of conversation; volume four entered the market with barely a notice. Sitting next to Meier on my desk is Martin Hengel's *Jesus und das Judentum*, over 700 pages and perhaps the last volume from the titan of scholarship. Someone will translate Hengel, doctoral students will read it, professors will use it, reviewers will say that it's brilliant, an occasional pastor will find it useful, but in a decade it will all be forgotten. Why? Historical Jesus scholarship has come to the end of the road.

Two recent scholars have read the obituary for historical Jesus studies. James D. G. Dunn, in both the hefty *Jesus*

Remembered and the slender *A New Perspective on Jesus*, argues that the furthest we can get behind the Gospels is to the underlying strata of Jesus as his earliest followers remembered him. That is as far as we can go. That is the Jesus who gave rise to the Christian faith, and that is the only Jesus worth pursuing. In Dunn's view, the "remembered" Jesus contains the faith perspective of the earliest followers of Jesus, and behind that faith perspective we cannot go.

Dale Allison, whom I consider the most knowledgeable New Testament scholar in the United States, is less sanguine and more cynical than Dunn in his newest book, *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus*, which in my judgment plays *Taps* for the quest for the historical Jesus. After three

decades of work in and around the historical Jesus, Allison sketches the variety of views about the historical Jesus and the supposed modern theory



We must be willing to ask, Whose Jesus will we trust? Will it be that of the evangelists and the apostles? Will it be the church's orthodox Jesus? Or will it be the latest proposal from a brilliant historian?

that if we put our heads together we will arrive at firm conclusions. Allison offers this depressing conclusion: "Progress has not touched all sub-

jects equally, and whatever consensus may exist, it remains mostly boring."

Allison admits this about one of his own books on Jesus: "I opened my eyes to the obvious: I had created a Jesus in my own image, after my own likeness." He's not done: "Professional historians are not bloodless templates passively registering the facts: we actively and imaginatively project. Our rationality cannot be extricated from our sentiments and feelings, our hopes and fears, our hunches and ambitions." So, he ponders, "Maybe we have unthinkingly reduced biography [of Jesus] to autobiography."

On top of this genuine problem is the problem of method. Allison: "The fragmentary and imperfect nature of the evidence as well as the limitations of our historical-critical abilities should move us to confess, if we are conscientious, how hard it is to recover the past." With one ringing line, Allison pronounces death: "We wield our criteria to get what we want."

There is, in other words, no value- or theology-free method that will enable us to get back to Jesus. Allison is not a total skeptic; he thinks that we can get behind the Gospels to find some genuine impressions. But his book led me to conclude, "The era is over."

Two scholars, both highly devoted to the discipline of historical Jesus studies, come from two angles to relatively similar

conclusions: the historical Jesus game has run its course and it cannot deliver us the original Jesus.

WHAT HAS BEEN SHOWN

I now make a confession. For the better part of my academic career, I have participated in studies of the Gospels and the historical Jesus. I am an insider to the conversation, and have been part of the steering committee for the SBL's Historical Jesus Section. In fact, I was once asked to be the chair. Had that invitation come five years earlier, I would have eagerly accepted the responsibility. But that invitation came at the end of a long project of mine that culminated in my book *Jesus and His Death: Historiography, the Historical Jesus, and Atonement Theory*. I declined the position because I could no longer commit myself to historical Jesus studies. The last thing I wrote in that book was the first chapter, which was an essay about method and what historical Jesus studies can accomplish.

Attentive readers will observe that the first chapter relativizes the theological significance of historical Jesus efforts. I had tried my best to see where the methods would lead if I sought to examine *if* and *how* the historical Jesus understood his own death. Some of my results disappointed, because I wanted to be able to prove some texts as authentic that I found stubbornly resistant to the methods available to us. Historiography, I concluded, can only do so much. One day, while editing the final draft, I came across these words from Romans 4:25: "He was delivered over to death *for our sins* and was raised to life *for our justification*."

This is what I said to myself: As a historian I think I can prove that Jesus died and that he *thought* his death was atoning. I think I can establish that the tomb was empty and that resurrection is the best explanation for the empty tomb. But one thing the historical method cannot prove is that Jesus died *for our sins* and was raised *for our justification*. At some point, historical methods run out of steam and energy. Historical Jesus studies cannot get us to the point where the Holy Spirit and the church can take us. I know that once I was blind and that I can now see. I know that historical methods did not give me sight. They can't. Faith cannot be completely based on what the historian can prove. The quest for the real Jesus, through long and painful paths, has proven that much. ✚

Scot McKnight is professor of religion at North Park University in Chicago, and the author of many books, including *The Jesus Creed*.

Go to ChristianBibleStudies.com for "The Jesus We'll Never Know," a Bible study based on this article.

Should We Abandon Studying the Historical Jesus? **Two Responses.**



No, We Need History **N. T. Wright**

SCOT MCKNIGHT ADVOCATES a kind of fasting. I am to give up the lifetime habit of studying Jesus historically. Okay, it's Lent, but this is going to be harder than doing without Merlot. Or even Macallan.

But is this necessary? Or even coherent? Three comments, then three conclusions.

THERE'S HISTORY AND THEN THERE'S HISTORY

First, the words *history* and *historical* can refer to two different things: (a) past events, or (b) what people write about past events. Most people assume the former—"the historical American Civil War" means the Civil War that actually happened, not historians' reconstructions of the Civil War. Scot, however, suggests that "the historical Jesus" must *only* mean (b). I doubt that this will catch on. Yes, that's how many scholars use it, but not all. English usage allows, nay, encourages, sense (a). Even Scot uses it like that in his penultimate paragraph.

Second, Scot makes no distinction between different types of historical Jesus studies. Following Ben F. Meyer (*The Aims of Jesus*, 1978; new edition, 2002), I have demonstrated a massive gulf between the kind of historiography Scot describes and the kind I christened the "third quest." I reject the double dissimilarity criterion and have proposed the balancing "double *similarity*": Jesus must have been recognizably (if crucifiably) Jewish, and



No, We Need to Stay in the Conversation **Craig Keener**

SCOT MCKNIGHT IS RIGHT to insist that the Gospels rather than scholars' speculations are where we encounter Jesus. I myself recently argued in *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* that the Gospel writers' portrait of Jesus makes much better historical sense than scholars' historical reconstructions do.

But, while I agree wholeheartedly with Scot's main point, I want to make a case for why historical Jesus studies remain valuable.

IS JESUS RESEARCH DEAD?

I believe Scot underestimates the continued interest in historical Jesus research and, therefore, the importance of engaging it. While the historical Jesus group may have declined at the Society of Biblical Literature meetings, publishers and the media continue to address the topic. Likewise, scholars continue to publish and hold international symposiums on historical Jesus topics (e.g., the 2007 Princeton-Prague Symposium). Quests for the historical Jesus come and go, but no sooner are postmortems pronounced for one than another quest in a new form seems to rise. The persistence is inevitable so long as public interest in Jesus remains and current historical approaches survive.

As long as the historical questions are being asked, then, it is important for the Tom Wrights, Ben Witheringtons, and the many other believing scholars engaged in the discussion to articulate their

recognizably (if uniquely) the starting point for what we now call “the church.”

Not all historical Jesus scholarship is skeptical in intent or effect. Genuine historical study is necessary—not to construct a “fifth gospel,” but rather to understand the four we already have. History confounds not only the skeptic who says “Jesus never existed” or “Jesus couldn’t have thought or said this or that,” but also the shallow would-be “orthodox” Christian who, misreading the texts, marginalizes Jesus’ first-century Jewish humanity. Puzzle: I think Scot believes this too.

Third, when German scholars gave up historical Jesus research in the 1920s, they left a vacuum into which the “German Christians”

History cannot compel faith. But it is very good at clearing away the smoke screens behind which unfaith often hides.

inserted their non-Jewish Jesus, with appalling results. That was why New Testament scholar Ernst Käsemann insisted that, despite difficulties, we had to study Jesus historically. How will we ward off the next generation’s dangerous follies (not just Dan Brown, though he matters too) if we don’t do history?

CLEARING AWAY SMOKE SCREENS

Now three conclusions.

First, this isn’t about an “uninterpreted” Jesus. Jesus’ contemporaries perceived him within a network of narrative, symbol, and hope, and their stories about him reflect that. To say that “we can’t go behind that faith perspective” so that “the past is hard to recover” capitulates to a reductive modernist epistemology.

Second, of course history isn’t enough by itself. Back to Reformation theologian Philip Melancthon: It isn’t enough to know that Jesus is the Savior; I must know that he is the Savior *for me*. History cannot tell me that. But it can reconstruct the framework within which it makes sense—the biblical framework that Jesus and his followers took for granted. If Jesus didn’t really exist, or was really a revolutionary Zealot, or a proto-Buddhist mystic, or an Egyptian freemason, the “for me” floats like a detached helium balloon on the thin, vulnerable air of subjectivism. It is when we put Jesus in his proper *historical* context that the Resurrection proposes that he was the Messiah, that the Messiah is Lord of the world, and that he died and was raised *for me*. History is challenging, but also reassuring.

Third, history cannot compel faith. But it is very good at clearing away the smoke screens behind which unfaith often hides. History and faith are, respectively, the left and right feet of Christianity. Modernism hops, now on this foot (skeptical “historiography”), now on that (unhistorical “faith”). It’s tiring, dangerous, and unnecessary. Puzzle: I think Scot believes this too. ⚡

N. T. Wright is Bishop of Durham in the Church of England. He is the author of many books, including *The Resurrection of the Son of God* and *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Augsburg Fortress).

perspective. While historical methods do not answer theological questions or compel faith, I can testify that in my much younger days as an unchurched atheist, they would have invited me to consider it.

Used rightly, these methods can be friends rather than foes of faith. The academy’s ground rules are limited, not always fair, and themselves open to challenge. Some methods, such as the double dissimilarity criterion, are now widely rejected. But many of the principles provide a minimal basis for dialogue among scholars of different persuasions. Through that dialogue, we can establish at least some historical information on which most scholars can agree.

For example, historians would normally take very seriously biographies written within a generation or two of their subjects. I contend that if skeptics really treated the Gospels as they treat other historical documents, they would be less skeptical. Using standard historical methods, we can challenge many skeptics’ doubts about Jesus.

PROBLEMS WITH CONVENTIONAL METHODS

Some helpful criteria used by historians today go back to ancient historians, who probably indirectly provided models for Luke the Evangelist. Conventional historical methodology, however, never tells us everything about someone in the past. Nor does it provide the theological meaning of their actions or bring us into a living relationship with that person. Historical methods merely offer probabilities based on limited evidence. It is the nature of these methods that some events deemed historically improbable by scholars actually happened, while some events deemed probable actually did not.

Quests for the historical Jesus come and go, but no sooner are postmortems pronounced for one than another quest in a new form seems to rise.

Historiography—particularly the method by which historians weigh evidence and write history—thus proves inadequate to arbitrate revealed truth about God’s activity in history. Critics often work, to varying degrees, from a hermeneutic of suspicion, but Christians live by what New Testament scholar Richard Hays calls a hermeneutic of trust. Some skeptical scholars argue that we can believe only what we can prove using their methods (and then often place the bar of evidence impossibly high). In such cases, dialogue may require not just providing historical evidence, but also challenging our critics’ starting assumptions. Some further define historical method as excluding supernatural causes. Many philosophers today rightly challenge this assumption.

The historical Jesus dialogue will not go away. It affects public discourse; hence, evangelical scholars dare not ignore it. If you desire to experience the risen Lord personally, however, trust God, read the Bible, worship, pray, evangelize, and engage the world’s need. Scot’s reminder is therefore critical. ⚡

Craig Keener is professor of New Testament at Palmer Theological Seminary at Eastern University, Pennsylvania. He is the author of various books, most recently *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Eerdmans).

THE GOSPEL DEFINED

It's not about what we can do for Jesus, or what he can do for us, but what he has already done.

The gospel of moralistic therapeutic deism is running rampant in the church. In an interview with Mark Galli, theologian Michael Horton says we are tempted to live a Christless Christianity because we are human-centered rather than God-centered. Conservative-leaning believers say, "These are God's commandments. The culture is slipping away from us. We have to recover it, and you play a role." Meanwhile, others say, "You can be happier if you follow God's principles." But as good as following these imperatives might be, the gospel is not a matter of doing the right things or trying harder. Horton says, "The gospel isn't 'Follow Jesus' example' or 'Transform your life' or 'How to raise good children.' The gospel is: Jesus Christ came to save sinners—even bad parents, even lousy followers of Jesus, which we all are on our best days."

Scripture: Romans 1:14–17; 1 Corinthians 1:18–25; 15:1–11; Galatians 3:1–11

Based on: "Christ at the Margins," interview by Mark Galli, from *CHRISTIANITY TODAY*, 2010



Christ: The Center of the Gospel

THE GOSPEL DEFINED

Leader's Guide

Part 1 IDENTIFY THE CURRENT ISSUE

Note to leader: Provide each person with the article "Christ at the Margins," from CHRISTIANITY TODAY, included at the end of this study.

In our therapeutic, pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps society, the message of God doing all the work attacks our egos. "In this culture, religion is all about being good, about the horizontal, about loving God and neighbor," Horton says. "[But] the gospel is entirely a message about what someone else [Jesus Christ] has done not only for me but also for the renewal of the whole creation." Compounding the problem, Christians today are faced with increasingly militant opposition to Christianity. So we face the temptation to live a Christless Christianity both from without and from within. Horton notes with dismay that while all this is occurring, people in the pews, pastors, and theologians seem to be incapable of articulating and defending the Christian faith. Much of the time our Christian leaders simply assume that we know the gospel before telling us what we ought to be doing, and the radical, God-centered message of the gospel is obscured in a flurry of good works. What we need is a refresher course on the gospel.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] Horton, referencing Paul, says the gospel is foolishness to Greeks, and most Christians today are "Greeks." Does the gospel seem foolish to those you know? Explain.

[Q] What does Christless Christianity look like, and why is it so pervasive? Can you give examples?

[Q] What is the relationship between faith and good works?

[Q] Which is a bigger temptation for you: moralism or a therapeutic gospel?

Part 2 DISCOVER THE ETERNAL PRINCIPLES

Teaching Point One: The gospel applies to everyone.

There are many human-centered gospels out there. Some imply you can be saved by works, or that the gospel is about self-improvement, making a better life for yourself. Yet the apostle Paul says there is only one gospel, and it is God-centered. This gospel applies to all—Greeks and non-Greeks, wise and foolish. The old divisions of ethnicity and learning no longer apply when it comes to the gospel, because the gospel, which means "good news," is not something you do. It is something you hear and believe. It comes from God to humanity. The gospel therefore applies to everyone.



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Read Romans 1:14–17.

[Q] The apostle says he is *obligated* to preach the good news to all (v. 14). If the gospel is not about works, why does he feel he *must* do this? Do we feel this same sense of obligation?

[Q] Paul also says he is *eager* to preach the gospel, and that his eagerness flows out of his sense of obligation (v. 15). Do you experience the same eagerness? Are you willing to go out of your way, as Paul did, to share the good news? Explain.

[Q] Then Paul says he is *not ashamed* of the gospel, “because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (v. 16). Why might Paul have been tempted to be ashamed of the gospel? Why might we? What is the antidote?

[Q] The gospel reveals a righteousness from God (v. 17). Where does righteousness come from in the gospel and how does it come to us? Why is this good news?

Teaching Point Two: The gospel is about the death and resurrection of Christ.

We often confuse the gospel itself with the fruits of the gospel: sanctification from a life of sin, a better marriage, a renewed passion for social justice or world evangelization. These are all good things, but they are *not* the gospel. “All of that is the fruit of the gospel,” Horton reminds us. “The gospel is entirely a message about what someone else has done not only for me but also for the renewal of the whole creation.” So what has that “someone else” done for us? What is the core of the gospel? That’s what Paul addresses in this passage.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1–11.

[Q] Paul is reminding the Corinthian believers about the gospel (v. 1). What verbs does he use in relation to the gospel? What implications do these verbs have for the Christian life?

[Q] What saves us (v. 2)? How do we know whether we are saved?

[Q] Paul says he both learned and taught something “of first importance” (v. 3). Here Paul says that some truths take priority, and that what follows is more important than other teachings. How do we determine what is “of first importance” in a culture where everyone is entitled to his or her opinion?

[Q] Paul lists the core elements of the gospel (vv. 3–8). What are they? What have we added to them?



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[Q] Paul says he did not deserve to see the risen Christ, but by God's grace he was prepared to preach and represent the gospel (vv. 9–11). How do grace and works come together in our lives?

Teaching Point Three: The gospel challenges all human-centered religious notions.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18–25.

Apart from Christ, all human religious impulses boil down to what *we* must do to please the divine. Christianity, however, asserts that God was pleased to do something for us—he sent his only Son to die for us on the cross. This solution is so counter-intuitive, it so devastates our pride, that our first response is to reject it. Salvation cannot be so simple, we think; surely we must add *something*. This prideful dynamic is on display in this passage, where the wisdom-seeking Greeks despise the simple message of the cross, and the unbelieving Jews demand further miraculous authentication. But the message also finds both Jews and Greeks who will hear and believe.

[Q] The gospel produces two responses among its hearers: Some call it foolishness, while others recognize it as “the power of God” (v. 18). What makes the difference in people's responses and what does this say about our evangelistic efforts?

[Q] God says he will “destroy the wisdom of the wise” and frustrate the intelligence of the intelligent (v. 19, see also Isa. 29:14). The context indicates that God is not against human intellectual pursuits but against human religious pride. Why is the latter such a persistent temptation? Why is God *not* impressed?

[Q] Paul contrasts God's wisdom with the world's wisdom (vv. 20–25). The wisdom of the world is a spiritual dead end, so God provides a “foolish” way forward. What is his solution? To whom does it apply?

Teaching Point Four: The gospel is about faith, not works.

Christians often start their walk with God by faith but end up relying on their works. As Horton says, “A lot of Christians, especially people who have had dramatic conversion experiences, go sailing out of the harbor with wind in their sails. They are so confident in Christ and what he has done for their salvation, and that gospel wind in is in their sails. Yet after two years, they have heard just one imperative after another. They have lots of course plotting, lots of books on how to do this and that. They've read every manual on spiritual disciplines. They have heard their pastor tell them they need to pray more, to read the Bible more, to evangelize more. Now they are dead in the water. There's no wind in the sails.”



Christ: The Center of the Gospel

THE GOSPEL DEFINED

Leader's Guide

Read Galatians 3:1–11, which is about getting the wind back in our sails.

[Q] Paul uses direct, even harsh language with the Galatian church. They are “foolish ... bewitched.” Their error points not to ignorance, but moral failure (v. 1). Paul seems stunned that they have moved away from the heart of the gospel, Christ crucified, and is rhetorically shaking them by the shoulders. How might we defend the gospel enthusiastically in our culture?

[Q] What do we learn about faith and works from Abraham (vv. 6–9)? What does this tell us about the nature of faith in the Old Testament and in the New?

[Q] Trying to live according to the law is not only misguided, it's dangerous (vv. 10–11). How do we keep ourselves from this error—or its opposite, licentiousness?

Optional Activity: *Using a whiteboard or poster board to record their answers, ask the group to list the questions Paul asks in Galatians 3:2–5. What are the results of belief versus human effort (v. 3)? Why does God reward the one and not the other?*

Part 3 **APPLY YOUR FINDINGS**

Christians are often caricatured as narrow-minded bigots because of our exclusive claims for the gospel. But ultimately, they are not our claims, but God's. The gospel is good news because it is available to anyone, does not rely on human wisdom or effort, is received by faith, and is completely God's doing. The gospel is not a training regimen whereby we clean up our acts and receive God's favors. It is good news. The point of the gospel is that we are unworthy sinners who cannot clean up our acts. The gospel is about grace—receiving God's unmerited favor.

The gospel is not about good works. This does not mean Christians are free to live any way they please, however. Paul said that by God's grace he “worked harder than all of them.” While the gospel is a free gift, it is not a free ride. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” Good works don't save us or keep us, but they do follow us.

How do we keep these truths in balance? Horton tells us to be involved in a church and become recipients of God's grace and “allow the imperatives that arise out of that to be our reasonable service [see Rom. 12:1–2]. Instead of trying to live the victorious Christian life, instead of trying to get into God's favor by following tips and formulas, let's receive the gospel and then follow the commands of God's law.”



Christ: The Center of the Gospel

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Action Point: Write out on a piece of paper in two columns your hopes and fears about God's grace. When finished, we will each read our thoughts aloud. Group members are not allowed to criticize or critique. Then we'll discuss: Why is God's grace such a difficult truth to live?

— Stan Guthrie is author of *Missions in the Third Millennium: 21 Key Trends for the 21st Century*. A CT editor at large, he writes a column for BreakPoint.org and blogs at stanguthrie.com.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

📖 Check out the following Bible studies at: ChristianBibleStudies.com

📖 **The Gospel and Social Issues** Is the gospel getting lost in our concern for social issues?

📖 **The Gospel, a Napkin, and Four Circles** Examine a new way of expressing the gospel especially designed to explain God's "Big Story" with diagrams simple enough to be drawn on a napkin at a coffee shop.

📖 **Is Our Gospel Too Small?** Authentic ways of believing, sharing, and living a rich gospel message. This six-session study is part of the Christian Vision Project.

📖 www.desiringgod.com. God-centered resources from the ministry of John Piper.

📖 **The Cost of Discipleship**, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Touchstone, 1995). The classic work by one who knew the difference between cheap grace and costly grace.

📖 **Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church**, by Michael Horton (Baker, 2008). A call to put Christ at the heart of our discipleship.

📖 **The Gospel-Driven Life: Being Good News People in a Bad News World**, by Michael Horton (Baker, 2009). How to start living the gospel.





The gospel isn't 'Follow Jesus' example,' or 'How to raise good children.' The gospel is: Jesus Christ came to save sinners—even bad parents, even lousy followers of Jesus.

CHRIST AT THE MARGINS

Michael Horton says we need to once again let our lives and churches be driven by the gospel.

Interview by Mark Galli

DESPITE THE TITLE of one of his recent books, Michael Horton doesn't believe the American church embodies Christless Christianity. But he is convinced that we are sorely tempted by it. So he has written two books—*Christless Christianity* and *The Gospel-Driven Life* (both with Baker Books)—to outline the problem and articulate the solution.

Horton is a professor of systematic theology and apologetics at Westminster Seminary in Escondido, California, and the author of many books (as well as the ghost writer for John Calvin's *Christianity Today* column this year). CT senior managing editor Mark Galli recently spoke with Horton about the concerns raised in his latest books.

What is at the core of the temptation to practice a Christless Christianity?

When the emphasis becomes human-centered rather than God-centered. In more conservative contexts, you hear it as exhortation: "These are God's commandments. The culture is slipping away from us. We have to recover it, and you play a role. Is your life matching up to what God calls us to?" Of course there is a place for that, but it seems to be the dominant emphasis.

Then there is the therapeutic approach: "You can be happier if you follow God's principles." All of this is said with a smile, but it's still imperative. It's still about techniques and principles for you to follow in order to have your best life now.

In both cases, it's law rather than gospel. I don't even know when I walk into a church that says it's Bible-believing that I'm actually going to hear an exposition of Scripture with Christ at the center, or whether I'm going to hear about how I should "dare to be a Daniel." The question is not whether we have imperatives in Scripture. The

question is whether the imperatives are all we are getting, because people assume we already know the gospel—and we don't.

But aren't many churches doing good preaching about how to improve your marriage, transform your life, and serve the poor?

The question is whether this is the Good News. There is nothing wrong with law, but law isn't gospel. The gospel isn't "Follow Jesus' example" or "Transform your life" or "How to raise good children." The gospel is: Jesus Christ came to save sinners—even bad parents, even lousy followers of Jesus, which we all are on our best days. All of the emphasis falls on "What would Jesus do?" rather than "What has Jesus done?"

Why is this such a temptation for the church?

It's our default setting. No one has to be taught to trust in themselves. No one has to be taught that what you experience inside yourself is more authoritative than what comes to you externally, even if it comes from God. Since the Fall, it has been part of our character to look within ourselves. And it is part of our inherent Pelagianism to think we can save ourselves by following the right instructions.

In such a therapeutic, pragmatic, pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps society as ours, the message of God having to do all the work in saving us comes as an offensive shot at our egos. In this culture, religion is all about being good, about the horizontal, about loving God and neighbor. All of that is the fruit of the gospel. The gospel has nothing to do with what I do. The gospel is entirely a message about what someone else has done not only for me but also for the renewal of the whole creation.

Is this a new challenge?

Of course it's perennial. That's why Paul said that the gospel is foolishness to Greeks, and most of us in the church are Greeks.

But today we have a new situation. We face a bewildering diversity of opposition to Christianity that is increasingly explicit—at the same time that not only people in the pews but also pastors and theologians seem the least capable of articulating the Christian faith, much less of offering persuasive arguments for it.

A recent issue of *Newsweek* featured an article, “We Are All Hindus Now,” by Lisa Miller. She acknowledges that, of course, most Americans aren’t practicing Hindus. But she appeals to various surveys to show that most Christians, including many evangelicals, embrace more Hindu tenets than Christian ones.

Two examples: First, the resurrection of the body. Miller points out that most Americans assume that at death, the soul, which they think of as the real part of a person, is finally released from its bodily prison to float off somewhere or to be reincarnated. Second, she refers more generally to the widespread belief that all paths lead to God or the divine, another major Hindu tenet but of course opposed to Christianity’s central claim that Jesus is the only Mediator and Savior.

What specifically do you mean by “a gospel-driven life”?

Because I live in San Diego, I think of a sailboat decked out with all of the latest equipment that tells you where you are and where you need to be. It plots your course, but it’s a sailboat, so you need wind in your sails. You start out, and it’s a beautiful day with wind in your sails. You’re out in the middle of the ocean when the wind dies down. You’re just sitting there dead calm. And your radio tells you that a hurricane is approaching. But all of your sophisticated equipment will not be able to get you to safety. What you need is wind in your sails.

A lot of Christians, especially people who have had dramatic conversion experiences, go sailing out of the harbor with wind in their sails. They are so confident in Christ and what he has done for their

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salvation, and that gospel wind is in their sails. Yet after two years, they have heard just one imperative after another. They have lots of course plotting, lots of books on how to do this and that. They’ve read every manual on spiritual disciplines. They have heard their pastor tell them they need to pray more, to read the Bible more, to evangelize more. Now they are dead in the water. There’s no wind in the sails.

Paul calls the gospel “the power of God unto salvation,” and I don’t think he meant the power of God just unto conversion. The gospel remains the power of God unto salvation until we are glorified. Calvin once said we need the gospel preached to us every week, and the Lord’s Supper to ratify that promise, because we are partly unbelievers until we die.



In *The Gospel-Driven Life* you use news as a metaphor. Why?

I stole it from the apostles! Their dominant metaphor for the gospel message is “good news.” The content is that God has done all the saving, no thanks to us. Someone asked Martin Luther what we contribute to salvation, and he said, “Sin and resistance!”

The gospel is not even my conversion experience. If somebody asks me what the gospel is, I’m not going to talk about me; I’m going to talk about Christ. All of the testimonies we find from the apostles’ lips are not testimonies about what happened in their hearts. They are testimonies about what happened in history when God saved his people from their sins. That’s the gospel. Although the gospel makes all sorts of things happen inside of me and gives me the fruit of the Spirit, the gospel itself is always an external word that comes to me announcing that someone else in history has accomplished my salvation for me.

Someone comes with instructions and says, “Here’s what your life could be like if you do x, y, or z.” Good news is, “Let me tell you what has happened!” The gospel is not good instructions, not a good idea, and not good advice. The gospel is an announcement of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

You also say it's not "a personal relationship with God" or "making Jesus your Lord and Savior." What do you mean?

I realize that those are deeply held, personal convictions among many evangelicals. But everyone has a personal relationship with God. In Romans 1–3, Paul says Gentiles have a relationship with God, even when they are engaging in idolatry. The question is whether the relationship is with a father, who has justified and adopted his heirs, or with a judge.

The phrase "making Jesus Lord and Savior" does not appear anywhere in Scripture (any more than does "personal relationship"). It assumes we are the ones who make God something. It is hard to imagine a Jew saying he made God his liberator and Lord in the Exodus. No. God made the Israelites the recipients of his saving and lordly work. So we don't make God anything; it is he who makes us his people. The Good News is not that Jesus has made it possible for you to make him Lord and Savior. The Good News is that he has actually saved and liberated you, and that he is your Savior.

Another popular way of conceiving the Christian life is to describe it as simply "following Jesus," but you have concerns.

It's an explicit confusion of the law and the gospel. People talk about living the gospel and quote the line from Francis of Assisi (at least it's attributed to him), "Preach the gospel at all times, and if necessary use words." Well, Paul says that faith comes from hearing the word of Christ (Rom. 10:17). He says that salvation comes by hearing words, good words. And it's great news for me and for the people I'm witnessing to that my life isn't the gospel.

When we set things up in terms of following Jesus' example rather than looking to Jesus first and foremost as Savior, we set ourselves up as the gospel and preach ourselves rather than Christ. We also set ourselves up for a fall, when we fail to live up to the commands of Christ that we profess.

Wouldn't it be better to tell them, "Look, don't believe in Christ because I'm a marvelous person with wonderful experiences and morality. Look at Christ, because you and I both are so sinful and so prone to evil that we need a Savior." Unbelievers should see our testimony to Christ primarily when we are in church confessing our sin and confessing our faith in Jesus Christ.

Yes, our lives are a fragrant aroma that brings attraction to or repulsion from the gospel. But our transforming work is not the gospel. The gospel is Jesus Christ's objective work in history.

Given your identification with Reformed theology, some might wonder if you're just preaching to Arminians.

Well, William Willimon, an Arminian and United Methodist bishop, wrote the foreword to *Christless Christianity*. One point I wanted to make in both books is that this is not about Calvinism versus Arminianism. As a Calvinist, I might think that focusing on Christ makes sense within a Reformed paradigm. But my argument is that this creeping fog of moralistic therapeutic deism is as obvious in Reformed churches today as it is in Methodist churches. None of us has clean hands here. This is not restricted to any one tradition.

Some theologians argue that classical Protestantism—with its concern for the individual's relationship with God—leads to

individualism and to a withdrawing from the world, because it becomes about me getting my soul saved for heaven.

It's exactly the opposite. I go into great detail about this in *The Gospel-Driven Life*. The Word creates community. All the Reformers said that if you read the Bible by yourself in a corner, there's no telling how many spirits you'll be filled with. That just means, as Luther said, that every man will go to hell in his own way. An external Word takes the form of a corporate event. It is preached. It's not us determining for ourselves over in a corner what we believe and how we'll live. It's the obsession with the spiritual disciplines that's actually very individualistic.

I've been in emerging church services where you have one person going up to take Communion, another person going up to watch a video, and another person going up to have a conversation. Talk about individualism.

No, the corporate event is highlighted when God says, "Assemble before me, all of you people. I am going to make you one people in Christ. I'm going to draw all of you into my Son by my Spirit, and make you united not only to Christ but also to each other."

Baptism is not only a sacrament of our union with Christ; it is also a sacrament of our communion as the body of Christ. Paul upbraided the Corinthians for their individualism by appealing to the practice of the Lord's Supper and by saying we are all one body because we eat of one loaf. The word-and-sacrament ministry [of Reformation Protestantism] is precisely what we need in order to uproot the narcissism and individualism that pervade our culture.

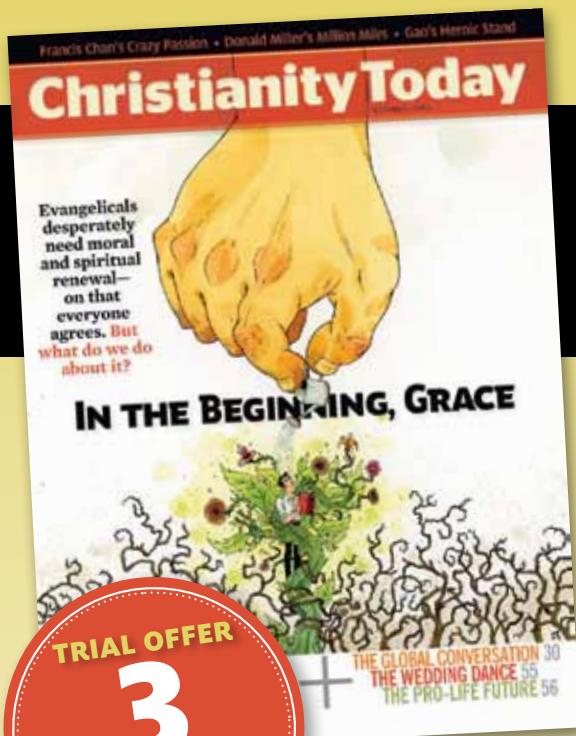
So what is the first step in living a gospel-driven life?

The fog of moralistic therapeutic deism is as obvious in Reformed churches today as it is in Methodist churches.

Become a recipient again. Mary and Martha, the two sisters and disciples of Jesus, had different relationships with Jesus. Martha busied herself with many tasks, and she was getting mad at Mary for making her do all the work. Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet, learning from him. Jesus rebuked Martha for criticizing her sister and said Mary had chosen the better part.

First and foremost, disciples are recipients of Jesus Christ's teaching. His teachings are really teachings concerning his person and his work. He has accomplished our salvation. He has accomplished our redemption. So first, allow the gospel to soak in again.

Then allow the imperatives that arise out of that to be our reasonable service. Instead of trying to live the victorious Christian life, instead of trying to get into God's favor by following tips and formulas, let's receive the gospel and then follow the commands of God's law when it comes to directives. Then our sailboat is perfectly equipped. Now we have the wind in our sails—the gospel—and we also have God's own wisdom to guide us in that gospel-driven life.



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