

The Healer Messiah

Turning Enemies into Trustworthy Opponents

By John Fairfield

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Introduction

This book is about how to live well with people who deny our core beliefs, or whose actions we consider immoral, or who have traumatized us. Such people may be our spouses or kin, or international enemies.

Our societies are polarized around various issues—in the United States, it's things like deficit spending, abortion, sexuality, race, Christianity/Islam, red/blue, the list gets long. Our polarization is fed by media which play on our fears to gain our attention. Political leaders rouse their base instead of speaking effectively to people on the other side. Leaders are chosen by favoring those who can denigrate the other side most convincingly. We have a political dynamic that says I win only if my opponents lose. This book is about depolarizing, while getting what you need.

And many have a deep faith that, when all's said and done, freedom can only be won by violence—that the sole effective rejoinder to oppression is violence, that those who won't kill to defend their rights don't deserve them, and certainly won't obtain them. This book offers a new nonviolent weapon, and tries to sort out when one should run, when one should use violence, and when one should use the new weapon.

This book presents a theology that doesn't talk about the hereafter. Rather, the issue is how to heal *this* world. The great religions have a common shortcoming. They've been around and had their impact on whole civilizations that have honored them for centuries, and yet violence still ravages this earth. Arguably it would be far worse without the great religions, and equally arguably, religion has been a root cause of warfare. For me, a touchstone which validates or invalidates religious thought is whether or not it decreases oppression, rape and slaughter.

To my secular, Muslim, Hindu, Jewish, Buddhist, Atheist and other non-Christian brothers and sisters: This book is written to Christians in Christian parlance. For me, the Bible is rich with language that speaks about what living is like, and that frames how I understand myself. This language is not yours, though if you have the grace to look over my shoulder, I trust you'll find much of value. I speak to Christians, using biblical language, because that is what I am and know. I'm not competent to speak using the language, the framework of your tradition. I have standing to speak to my own culture, not yours. I am looking for partners from other traditions to voice the message of this book in their language, to their culture.

Those who argue that we should ditch God language because of its association with toxic concepts and abuses that can't be shaken from it, have a solid point. But I choose to study, develop and use God language because it is my mother tongue, and because of the richness and sophistication of the thought of previous generations that it taps into, and in particular to identify a certain quality of character—God's spirit. Non-Christian friends, I think you may also value that quality, described in the second chapter. Note well how I disparage propositional belief, in the sixth chapter. And don't miss the eighth chapter, where I both welcome and challenge you to join me in a place owned by none of us.

Autobiographical note: I really am interested in language. I've lived in Canada, the United States,

Germany, Belgium, the Congo (Kinshasa), France, and Nepal. In the early 80's, when the first wave of personal computers swept the country, I implemented a virtual computer in which every bit of memory in the computer was visible as a fleck of color on the screen. The point of this visible memory was to help kids learn to program, because every step in the execution of the program made tracks in the display. I made up a language for manipulating this visible memory. I called the language "Spellcaster" because each program was a "spell" that you could even say aloud (for example MUTUbarZIM was a spell that repeated another spell named "bar" a random number of times). My wife's older brother Allen Stoltzfus helped me with that project, and others, but not with the engineering. He was interested in how they might make money, in how to do the marketing, in how to turn them into a business. He was interested because he dreamed of using a virtual environment to teach foreign languages by immersion. But the consumer technology of the 80's couldn't handle the pictures, utterances and interaction that it would require. I was a professor of computer science doing research in computer perception when the first personal computers equipped with CD readers and presentation software came out in the early 90's. I realized that the technology was ripe for Allen's dream, and we founded Rosetta Stone (www.rosettastone.com). Allen's brother Eugene soon joined us, and Greg Keim, a student who had done some great work in my lab at the university. Under the four of us the company grew, and I headed R&D until we sold the very successful business in 2006.

My point being that I've had a longstanding interest in what happens to our minds when we learn a new language. Many churchgoers tune out Sunday morning theological language because it doesn't speak to them—they're there for the social interaction, for the ethics, for the support of community, for reaching out to help the needs of the world. For some, theology is at best to be ignored, at worst an embarrassment and a game stopper. My motive for writing this book is to provide new theological language for the church.

A language is a deep framework that structures our perception. We humans live in tension between what we have learned and can voice and use—which is always partial and imperfect—and what we are currently learning. We have to be forthright in our use and teaching of what we know, and forthright in our openness and vulnerability to what is new. To be finite implies we need it both ways—our knowledge and our language are great and effective, and partial and faulty.

We need to assert a strong identity, rooted in our past and our culture and our received language, and at the same time we need to be hospitable to strangers who have a different framework. Each of us speaks in a different language—even if we both use English, the meanings we give to many words and phrases are different. The language skills you are using right now to understand this sentence by stretching your own language a bit in order to understand mine, are the same ones you use to learn a new language. Many people can't stand that tension between the static and the changing. May this book give you insight as to why that tension is such a good place to be. It is our birthright, it is the best possible place for us.

We can't afford consistency. We need each other.

Synopsis:

Chapter 1 introduces Ruach, an interpretive language of the Bible. The Hebrew word "ruach" conflates wind, vitality, breath, motivator, character and spirit. In Genesis God breathes God's spirit into the nostrils of an earthen body to create humanity. We are never fully human until we breathe with that

spirit, God's ruach, which we have lost. We need healing.

Chapter 2 asks what that spirit is like, that we should want to get it back. Jesus teaches and demonstrates that God's spirit would have us relentlessly seek communion with those who hate us, and within that hospitality confront them with our identity and our understanding, while truly struggling with theirs. We must give up on control (fight) or hiding (flight) to risk conflicted life together. Ruach calls this kind of relationship "confrontational communion", and claims it as a prime trait of the Holy Spirit. Health, wholeness, the ideal relationship that God seeks with us, and we seek with each other, is not without conflict.

Chapter 3 tells my personal story of being healed by confrontational communion.

Chapter 4 describes Paul's teaching about the church. Paul taught that the assembly of the committed is the body of the Christ [Greek for Messiah], and in that logic, the body of the Messiah plus the spirit of God incarnated in Jesus is the living, breathing Messiah. I call this breathing Messiah the Church+. In Ruach, the gospels are read as narratives about the Church+.

Chapter 5 describes cases where Jesus commended the faith of Samaritans, Canaanites, and other Pagans for demonstrating God's spirit of confrontational communion.

Chapter 6 takes on our modern notion of belief, contending that belief in a set of propositions about Jesus is not what saves us. What heals and saves us is the experience of incarnating the spirit of confrontational communion incarnated in Jesus.

Chapter 7 describes how the early Church, bearing this spirit, accepted people of different religions within a commitment to life together in tension. There was no creed required, they just worked out how to live together.

Chapter 8 argues that even polytheists and atheists can sit at the table of confrontational communion in the Church+, though that's not what they'd call it. We don't own it. We need them. They need us. It also concludes that sometimes conversion is a very good thing.

Chapter 9 speaks of the risk and cost of confrontational communion, and of the power of this cross.

Chapter 10 describes how the Church+, the Healer Messiah, has a weapon called "ignition," and examines historical cases of the successful use of ignition, and nightmare scenarios for its most likely failure.

Chapter 11 argues that wielding this risky but healing weapon may enable the Church+ to establish peace and justice on this earth.

Chapter 1

We're human only when we incarnate God's spirit

A person who speaks “Catholic” may have difficulty understanding a person speaking “Southern Baptist”. They frame the world differently even though they may both use English, and the same scriptures, and even many of the same terms (church, Holy Spirit, salvation) though the meaning they give those terms is different. Here I'm going to define and start to use a new such language—call it “Ruach” (the “ach” rhymes with “Bach”). Ruach is a Hebrew word often translated as “spirit”.

It is difficult to teach Russian using only English, and difficult to teach Catholic using Southern Baptist. Yet that's sort of the position I'm in. I've got to define and teach Ruach, using the language of average western Christianity, mixed with some secular language. That's what I assume you are familiar with.

Teaching, defining, and using a new language is a rum business. I can't be scientifically precise in my speech, because I am redefining my language. Some simple statements in one language are difficult to make in another, because the conceptual niches occupied by words are different. Suppose you're trying to translate between two languages, say Hebrew and English (or Southern Baptist and Ruach). A given word in Hebrew occupies a niche—all the meanings and related concepts surrounding that word. And there might not be a word with a niche like that in English.

So please forgive some repetition, ambiguity and what can feel like bad rhetoric. I'm teaching a new language. My goal is to add to your toolbox. For instance, if you are a Southern Baptist, my hope is not that you convert to Ruach, but that, learning Ruach, you become a better Southern Baptist.

Starting at the beginning

The Jewish Bible, basically the Christian Old Testament, is written mostly in Hebrew. Genesis 2:7 is translated (I use the NIV except where noted otherwise):

Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

In Hebrew the word for humanity that is here translated “man” is *adam*, and the word for “ground” is *adamah*. In this passage *adam* is made from *adamah* (matter, stuff of this planet) made alive by the breath of God. (What is God? Worried about creationism or evolution? See the Note at the end of this chapter.) In ancient Hebrew experience, death was signalled when breathing stopped. In their language, breath/spirit is what animates a body—without spirit/breath a body is dead, and the two concepts of breathing and spirit are tied together in the very framework of the Hebrew language.

Strong's Concordance says that in the New American Standard Bible (NASB), the Hebrew word *ruach* is translated 98 times as *wind* (associated with flows of all sorts including fire, mist and streams of

water, and thereby with movement and animation and being alive), 31 times as *breath* (associated with being alive and with speech), and 203 times as *spirit* or *Spirit* (associated with all these things plus character).

Actually there's another Hebrew word that covers similar territory. The word *nismat* is sometimes translated as *breath* (examples include Isaiah 30:33 “and the breath [nismat] of the LORD, like a stream of burning sulfur, sets it ablaze”, and Gen 2:7 cited above, “the breath [nismat] of life”), and sometimes as *spirit* (Proverbs 20:27 “The human spirit [nismat] is the lamp of the Lord that sheds light on one's inmost being.”). Genesis 7:22 uses *nismat ruach* side-by-side, which the NASB translates as “breath of the spirit of life.” My point is that the Hebrew language packages together the concepts of life, breath and spirit. These connections are part of the framework, the point of view, of someone who thinks in Hebrew.

That's an interesting niche. English doesn't have a word to fit, though Greek does: the word *pneuma* in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Jewish Bible, done by Jews a couple of centuries before Jesus' time) and in the New Testament occupies the same territory: wind, breath, and spirit.

When I say spirit I'm not talking ghosts, nor am I referring to some sort of unreal spiritual world. Spirit implies character and motivation. A spirit is a *motivating relationship*. Someone who is spirited is lively and bears up well, if they are dis-spirited, they can't get up in the morning—no motivation. If someone is a coward, or a bully, they are plenty motivated but we question the quality of their character, they are mean-spirited. We might say someone is ill-spirited if their *motivating relationship* to something is dysfunctional or unhealthy.

Descriptions of character (brave, kind, cowardly, bullying, persistent, deceptive, truthful, etc.) are the same way, they entail motivation and relationships. To be kind you need someone to be kind to, and kindness entails doing something, having some motive force. Ditto bullying. For bravery you need an enemy or some other threat to be brave about, and you need energy. It is this combination of relationship and vitality, of character, motive and animation, that is wrapped up in *ruach*.

And you use your breath to speak. The first use of “ruach” in the Bible is associated with speech: “Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit [ruach] of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, ‘Let there be light’...” (Genesis 1:2-3). Ruach is the power of speech. The incarnational language of Genesis, where the speech/spirit/breath of God is incarnated in the clay of Adam, is evoked in the Greek New Testament. In John 1 it is the Word (logos) of God, the source of all creation, who is incarnate in Jesus. “In the beginning was the Word...Through him all things were made... In him was life.” (John 1:1-3) “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” (John 1:14a).

In Ruach, the interpretation of God blowing into Adam's nostrils to make him alive is that the character of God animates humanity, at the beginning. At creation, mankind is matter plus God's spirit, mankind is a material incarnation of the spirit of God—*anything less than that is less than human*. Humans are capable of breathing out, speaking, voicing that character. Job 27:3-4 “as long as I have life [nismat] within me, the breath [ruach] of God in my nostrils, my lips will not say anything wicked, and my tongue will not utter lies.” Note the connection here between God's breath and speech and character.

But the Genesis story of Adam does not end well. We have turned away from our nature, we disregarded God and then couldn't take the conflict of the relationship, we hid from God. Genesis 3:8

“Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God”. Now our speech and character can be corrupt. Jesus says (Matt 15:17-18) “Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart, and these defile them.”

We are broken. Our original character, our spirit, God’s spirit in us, has been lost. In that sense we have “surely died” (Gen 2:17, remembering the notion that a body that has lost its spirit/breath is dead). We are desperately trying to get it back, to return to our true selves, and just as desperately refusing it. The story of the Bible is the story of God reaching out to us to invite us to return, to be healed back to our original character. Healed? Practically raised from the dead, resurrected. That bad. We live in death, awaiting our resurrection.

So before sin/death there was original health/life. With this vision of original, whole, healthy humanity as incarnating God’s character, you have to ask *what is this character of God like?* What is it like, that we should want to return to it? Why should we talk of human character as being broken/dead, needing to be healed/saved/reborn/resurrected, and what does biblical language about the character of God add to our understanding of what we really are if and when we’re restored? The next chapter turns to scripture to describe the character of God.

Note: What do I mean by God, and is this about creation versus evolution?

This is a new language, and this is the first chapter. Please don’t think you know what I mean by God. In chapter 2 I’ll talk a lot about the character of God, so for the moment let’s leave it at that—when I talk about God, expect me to talk about qualities of character. Of course there’s much more to be said, but I’ve got to start somewhere.

You ask: what then do I mean when I quote the Bible saying God “formed” Adam from clay? In response, I ask you to consider the intent of the passage.

If I say “I saw a really bright rainbow just after the sun came up this morning” you don’t immediately conclude that I am denying the rotation of the earth. Of course the earth turns daily, and this rotation of the earth is what causes the illusion of the sun “coming” up, but that wasn’t what I was talking about. I was not claiming that the sun moved. Such an immature literal reading of my statement ignores my intent.

If someone describing a romantic stroll writes “The sidewalk, pale in the moonlight, snaked down from the front door through the rose garden to the pond” we don’t object that “sidewalk” means a *walk* along the *side* of a street, and so can’t possibly go down through the middle of a garden. Such an interpretation would abuse the language of the writer, because it ignores the intent of the writer. On the other hand, depending on how the stroll turned out, perhaps noticing the use of the word “snake” might be perceptive. It all depends on the intent.

Ruach’s framework for interpreting the creation account in Genesis is that its *intent* is to talk about the

relationship between humanity and the character, the ruach, of God. In this light, anyone who objects to the Bible describing God forming Adam directly from dirt because it is a ridiculous scientific claim, or anyone who uses this passage to assert a scientific and historical claim about what happened one day, is using an interpretation that ignores the intent of the passage.

If your understanding of the intent of Genesis is different, you may come to a different conclusion. Please know that I need your perspective, just as I think you need mine. These aren't just nice words—they're actually more like fighting words—and if you'll hang with me for a chapter or so you'll see that they are core to my understanding of the gospel.

You say, OK, but what is the relationship between character and clay, between spirit and matter, that spirit can “form” matter? That's an excellent question that I voice an opinion on, but not in this book. This book is about how the spirit of God forms the way we treat each other—society.

Chapter 2

God's spirit is confrontational communion

The previous chapter introduced a new interpretive language called Ruach, which is a Hebrew word that ties together wind, breath, and spirit, and thereby life, motivating character and speech. Humanity originally breathed with, incarnated the ruach of God. But we are lost, estranged from our original spirit. We have become less than fully human. We are trying to return to our true selves.

With this vision of whole, healthy humanity as incarnating God's character, we'd better ask *what is this character of God like?* What does God language add to our understanding of what we really are when restored, healed, to being fully human? Do we really want such healing? I will start by telling stories from scripture to induce in you a sense of what I mean, in Ruach, by the character of God.

Health is life together in tension.

There's a story in Genesis 27-33 where twice in one day, Jacob finds God in struggling with an enemy. Early in the story Jacob's blind father, Isaac, wants to give his blessing of inheritance to his firstborn son Esau. Jacob wants that blessing, so he dresses up like Esau. Father Isaac is blind but senses something's wrong, and asks him point blank "who are you?" Jacob says "I am Esau", and gets the blessing.

Jacob flees Canaan to get away from the wrath of his brother, years pass, he gets married, becomes rich in sheep and goats and servants and children, and we pick up the story when he's on his way back to Canaan to face the music, to face those he has wronged, his father and his brother. Jacob must have had powerful motives to do this, because on the border of Canaan Jacob learns that Esau is headed this way with 400 men. Jacob is terrified, but does not flee.

That night Jacob meets a man/angel/messenger in the dark. He wrestles with him until daybreak. Jacob is hurt, but he won't let go. Jacob is still looking for a blessing from a Father figure. He says, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." And he is asked, again, "What is your name?" Only this time he says the truth, "Jacob".

Jacob gets his blessing, and a new name, Israel, meaning he had "struggled with God and with men," and was empowered. Jacob marvels "I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." Later that day, he bows to the ground seven times before Esau, who accepts Jacob's gifts of goats, cattle, camels, and donkeys. It's a middle-eastern blood money thing—for the victim to accept blood money takes the onus off the perpetrator, while it doesn't undo the irreparable past. It's forgiveness. Jacob says to Esau "To see your face is like seeing the face of God."

Twice in one day, Jacob finds God in meeting and struggling honestly with an enemy.

Health is life together in tension.

Jesus said (Matthew 5:44-45)

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

Jesus would have us give blessings to evil people? Jesus was reproached for eating with offensive people (Luke 15:1-2). He accepted the unclean touch, or the ill repute of eating with, tax collecting collaborators with the Roman occupation (Matt 9:9-13), prostitutes (Luke 7:36-50), Samaritans (John 4:40), and pagan Canaanites.(Matt 15:21-28).

It was not because he agreed with them.

Eating together is the heart of community. And look what Jesus did with it: he publicly accepted their hospitality or extended his own (Mark 7:31-8:10 has Jesus feeding 4000 people in a Gentile region, the Decapolis), even though they were considered rank enemies of him, a Jewish teacher. He rejected the limits of community implied by common ancestry (by reaching out to non-descendants of Israel), culture (hellenized Romans and Canaanites) or religion (Samaritans, Pagans). Jesus told his disciples to accept the hospitality of anyone who would put them up and give them a hearing (Matt 10:14).

But having thus accepted community with them, Jesus voiced his disagreement with them loud and clear. Jesus was hospitable and confrontational at the same time. He knew how to wholly accept those who offended him, forgiving their offences, while risking offending them by disagreeing.

When (in Mark 2:16-17) some Pharisees asked why he ate with sinners, he replied that he'd come to call sinners to repentance—like who else should he eat with? To us it seems a non sequitur. To Jesus, it was the spirit of God.

What does acceptance mean, if it doesn't mean agreeing with? Think of a mother who would die for her child even when the child is being a royal pain in the neck. It means the thought of abandoning the child wouldn't cross the mother's mind. It means she has a bond, a communion, a commitment that cannot be broken. Within that communion there can be disagreement, and it does not lessen the commitment. Jesus accepts us as we are, unchanged, unrepentant. "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

An example is in Luke 7:36-50

36 When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. 37 A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. 38 As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

39 When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner."

40 Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you."
"Tell me, teacher," he said.

41 "Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

43 Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.”

“You have judged correctly,” Jesus said.

44 Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45 You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. 46 You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. 47 Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”

48 Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”

49 The other guests began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?”

50 Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Both Simon and the woman are forgiven. Jesus accepts Simon’s food, he accepts the woman’s touch, he accepts them in his community. Simon has shown little need to honor Jesus, he seems unaware of any way in which he offends Jesus or God, he is not surprised that Jesus has accepted to be in community with him. But the woman, like Jacob, has a past, she has sinned. Her past labels her—perhaps she knows better now but she can’t get away from it, she is ostracised. But despite her offense Jesus has accepted her. She is overcome with thankfulness. As a spiritual leader, in the hearing of all, Jesus proclaims her sins forgiven—announces that, as she is acceptable to him, she should be acceptable to her community.

Jesus recommends accepting your enemy in imitation of God who through the centuries has reached out to re-establish a life together with Israel, even when they have deeply offended. Since God planted the tree of the knowledge (the experience) of good and evil, and gave us the freedom to choose either, God has wanted to restore relationship even with those who have chosen evil. The commitment shown by Jesus is not that of a *dominating* mother—he gives us total freedom to offend him.

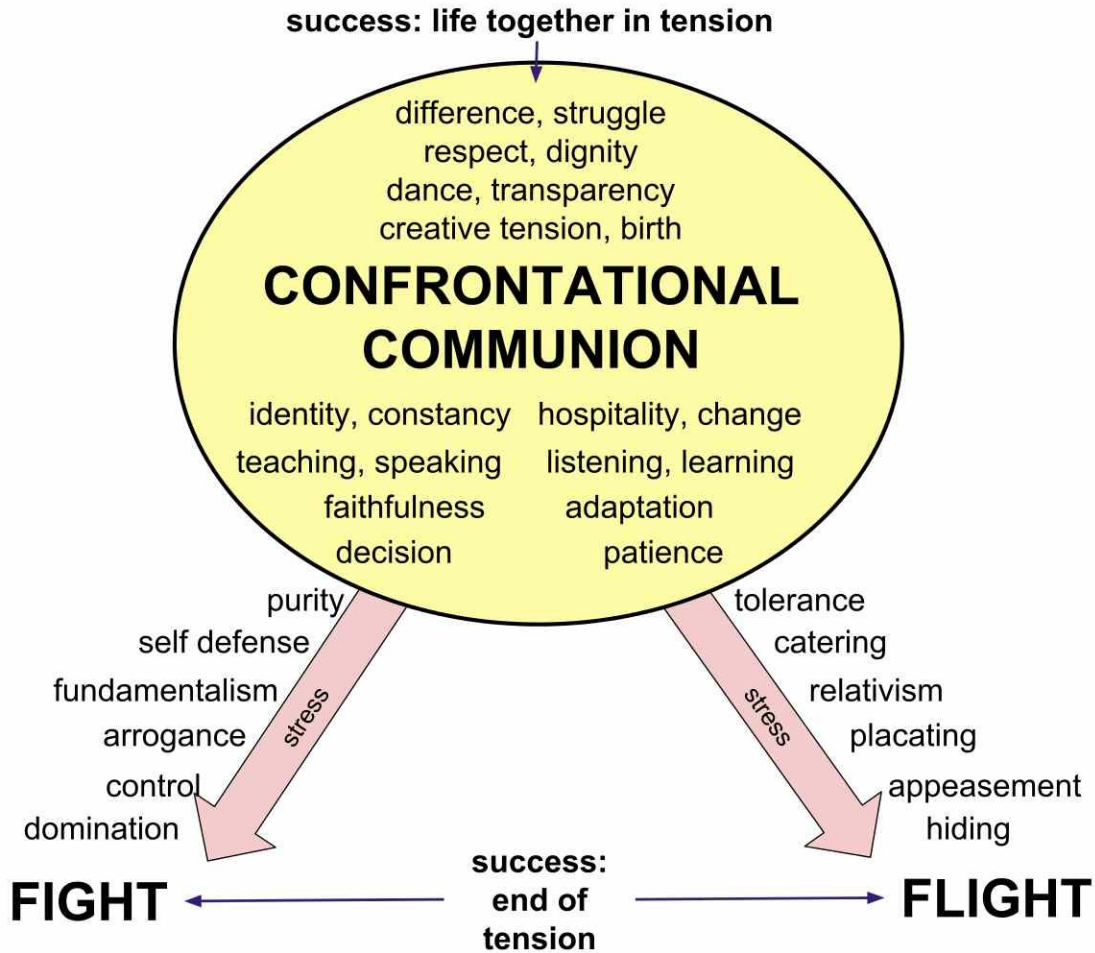
Disagreement is offensive. We humans disagree with each other. Jesus recommends constant hospitality to each other, because we are constantly offensive to each other. Reconciliation is a continuous effort, because offense is an ongoing affair.

And this is good. None of us knows the whole truth perfectly. We finite humans need disagreement, we need each other to call each other to account. Disagreement can be productive when we eat together, when it is done in the safety of a commitment to a shared life, within a commitment to a community at least as strong as marriage vows: through thick and thin, sickness and health, until death.

Health is life together in tension.

Our experience of God’s merciful and gracious and demanding way of relating to us can affect how we relate to our neighbor. Grant to those who have offended you the generosity that you experience in God’s relationship to you (Matt 18:21-35). Ask your neighbor for what you need (“Friend, lend me three loaves of bread,” Luke 11:5), just as you can ask God for what you need (“Give us this day our daily bread,” Matt 6:11). The point is that in a relationship where we struggle with each other we can change each other. Without staying in relationship we can only fight or flee. Adam and Eve’s sin wasn’t irrevocable until they broke off the relationship and hid. They fled from the tension of the relationship. They couldn’t face themselves, or God. They didn’t ask for forgiveness.

Health is life together in tension.



The two sides of the figure represent different responses to offense or conflict or trauma. Healthy, secure social responses are in the circle near the top of the figure, labelled “Confrontational Communion”. The bottom corners, labeled Fight on the left and Flight on the right, entail the death of relationship. Health is at the top, death and estrangement at the bottom.

The left side: A person near the top of the left side, healthy and secure, has a strong identity. They are concerned with keeping and teaching what has been learned, with being faithful to the tradition that has been passed down to them, and with discerning what is fair, what is good behavior and what is bad. Under stress of conflict, such a person can descend the left side, being tempted to reject those who are offensive, to preserve the purity of their community of identity. Under even more stress some become increasingly rigid, using their belief in the correctness of their beliefs to justify their control of the situation, by force if necessary. Some people will dominate, oppress, even kill, in the name of their beliefs.

The right side: A person near the top of the right side, healthy and secure, is very hospitable. When presented with another language or point of view, they are quick to learn, quick to synthesize that

novelty and their past understanding into something new. They reach out to try to build bridges between opposing sides. Under stress of conflict, such a person can descend the right side, being tempted to cater to their opponent, to placate an oppressive character. When really pushed, some are cowed, they hide, exercise some other form of deception, or flee.

(Psychologists speak of a third response, freeze, which they differentiate from active flight. They must forgive me here for clumping freeze with flight—I'm really interested in the top of the figure, not the bottom.)

The success of either fight or flight is the end of tension. The enemy is dead, or dominated, or placated, or avoided. End of communication, death of relationship and community, no more tension.

Confrontational Communion, the healthy top corner, represents a third option. The success of such communion is life together in tension, life in community despite our differences. Someone who wants to commune refuses to descend towards either fight or flight. They strive to stay in the top corner, both asserting their identity and extending hospitality. Such communion thrives on voicing your identity, on listening, transparency, respect, assertiveness and hospitality. It weakens with any attempt to coerce, dominate, placate or deceive.

Confrontational communion implies renouncing both control (bottom left) and appeasement (bottom right). This can be excruciatingly uncomfortable as we explore and face our real and hard differences without either of us being in control of the situation. Confrontational communion means struggling together, not letting each other go, and not walking out of our commitment to keep struggling with each other until we achieve a blessing. Our differences have no value if we sweep them under the rug.

To confront means truly facing each other, front to front. We are offenders, trespassers on each others turf. Deuteronomy 26 relates the following command to the people of Israel: "Then you shall declare before the LORD your God: 'My father was a wandering Aramean...'" They were to remember that they were once nomads, trespassers on the homelands of the settled peoples. No wonder they praised hospitality as a virtue—they were dependent on the hospitality of others. It is hard for us to face, to admit, to look clearly at our own needs and limitations. It is even harder for us to face each other in all our particularity. The description of the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25:18-22) puts the mercy seat, the abode of God, between the faces of the Cherubim mounted on either side. God's abode is between our struggling faces.

To commune means to listen respectfully, even eagerly to the other's expression of their identity. What we bring to confrontational communion is our identity. We owe it to the other to be ourselves, in all our difference, because otherwise there's no point, no value to the relationship. Confrontational communion is the name of our embarrassing life together, embarrassing because we offer ourselves and, in looking at what we have to offer through the eyes of someone really different, we sometimes feel shabby.

We need to be very hospitable to each other, so that we can bear what may be a very difficult labor while something new is born.

Confrontational communion is a mouthful. Sometimes I say "healthy communion", or just "communion". The difficulty with using just the word "communion" is that it's too nice, it doesn't capture that this is life together *in tension*, face to face, and readers might forget that. I dislike

acronyms, so often I abbreviate the two words into “con-union”. A union of trustworthy opponents. I’ve considered many other labels for the circled top part of the figure, as follows.

Love: Love is too peaceful, in that it doesn’t immediately evoke the struggle of our different identities, our daring to be what we are even when we know it is offensive to the other. It doesn’t capture the liberty and drive to put my own identity forward, nor the tension between constancy and change. All the world’s a stage—*life together in tension* is that stage, dance on it. It doesn’t capture the difficulty of facing my own brokenness, nor of calling each other to account over what is right and wrong. That’s what we’re struggling about, our different notions of what is good, and the word “love” as commonly used doesn’t evoke that struggle.

F:* Fight and flight are visceral reactions deeply wired into us. The top corner of my figure has an equally visceral four-letter anglo-saxon fricative descriptor. It captures well the value, the complementarity, of difference—two that are different can make a baby, can make something new happen that would be impossible for either one of them alone. Often our enemies can do things we can’t, and vice versa. It captures well that we confront each other vulnerably. But it does not capture the labor of birthing that often characterizes con-union. I point this descriptor out mainly to reassure those who fear that con-union is just a nice abstraction. Wooing someone of the opposite... persuasion... into con-union is as primal and deep a reaction to difference as either fight or flight. But it is certainly more difficult, in that it takes two to tango. If the other chooses fight or flight, what do we do? We don’t have to retreat to fight or flight ourselves, we can persist in calling the other to con-une, but it takes more of a skill set. Primary in this skill set is the faith that the enemy is not a subhuman monster. They too are made in the image of God, and are capable of hosting God’s spirit. They have the potential to be a trustworthy opponent. It is sometimes faith despite bitter evidence, but all humans except the most disabled have that potential. Our original character, says Genesis, is God’s.

Justice: Renouncing both control (fight) and self-effacement (flight) is a foundation of con-union, so “justice” is a good descriptor. Justice isn’t only retribution for past wrongs, justice is being able to prevent being wronged or dominated in future, the practical confidence that negotiation will produce positive results. Both parties’ commitment to renounce control provides safety for negotiation. But “justice” does not evoke our commitment to stay together in appreciation of our complementarity.

Marriage: Marriage kind of says it all. Commitment, the fecundity of a relationship across difference, the hard work of both being hospitable to the other, loving them for what they are in their difference, and at the same time not holding back on what you are. The friction and conflict. The slog, brightened by flashes of wonder at the insight brought by the other that we’d never ever have thought of alone. The birthing of something that is neither of us. The main problem with the term is that it’s usually between two people who chose each other because of their compatibility, whereas con-union is towards all, including offenders.

The Holy Spirit: Confrontational communion is my best attempt to describe God’s spirit, God’s character. We give up on control, imitating God who gives us the freedom to sin. We give up on walking away, imitating God who regardless of offense attempts relationship with Israel again and again. Blazed across the entire Bible is this: God wants a covenantal relationship, a marriage, with God’s offenders. We both assert ourselves and forgive offenses in imitation of God. And while we in our defensive postures are incapable of this imitation, the grace of God’s spirit poured out in us gives us the power to be children of God (John 1:12). The desire to con-une is a major trait of the spirit of God, the nature and character of God revealed in the Bible. Con-union is God’s ruach, the very engine

of life.

Con-union is a commitment to express my particular identity, yet be hospitable, open, vulnerable to you, even if that is a struggle, even if you are my enemy. We hold ourselves open to that spirit that dares to con-une and therein find and make justice.

Health is confrontational communion. Life together in tension. Wholeness, shalom, life animated by the spirit of God.

Confrontation within covenanted communion (abbreviated as “con-union”) is the foundational concept of Ruach, the interpretive framework developed in this book. Ruach sees God’s ruach as con-union.

The definition of con-union isn’t finished in this chapter—I characterize it further in the last four chapters, in particular speaking of the cross, the potentially bitter yet transforming cost of breathing God’s ruach, and of its potential for healing the world from both past and future injustice. Suffice it for now to warn that in a violent situation we cannot really give up both fight and flight without grave risk.

The next chapter tells the story of my own healing by the power of confrontational communion.

Chapter 3

How confrontational communion healed me

Prior chapters described humanity as originally animated by the spirit of God—confrontational communion. But our spirit has been lost, and we are the living dead. This chapter is a story of the restoring, healing power of confrontational communion.

I am empathetic, quick to listen and learn. But I also have a tendency to cater. I am a conflict avoider. There are lots of possible causes: some massive trauma and alcoholism in prior generations of my family, being the younger brother in a classic sibling rivalry, my Canadian family culture, my genes. Whatever, my usual weakness is to be cowardly. Perhaps yours is to be domineering. It doesn't matter where you situate your habitual self on my “Confrontational Communion” diagram of chapter 2, we are all called to disavow trying to control or placate. We are all called to stoutly present who we are and the way we see things and what we want, and to be equally steadfast in empathy and listening and learning. To stay in the circle of confrontation and community is not easy.

But to live outside the circle is living death.

For most of my adult life I felt that I wasn't existing, that perhaps I would never get to “be”. There was a repressed part of me that wanted to exist, that wasn't being allowed to. I felt that I was always deferring life, putting it off, not exploring my real self that I lacked the courage to be.

I used to think of the ideal relationship, whether between spouses or nations, as a relationship without conflict. Now I know that justice is impossible without conflict. In a just relationship, neither party is dancing around the other, trying to be the perfect partner else the whole thing blows up. A relationship where one side is catering to the other, because they believe that cater they must else misery breaks loose, can give the appearance of a just relationship because there is no conflict. One side has internalized the load of keeping the peace by catering to the other.

If a relationship is utterly peaceful, someone is oppressed.

Given that we are fallible, and finite, and have needs, and see the world differently, we will inevitably step on each other's toes. We are offenders, we are trespassers. A relationship that is too brittle to support a lot of working-out-of-offenses cannot be just.

But I didn't know that. I didn't know how to have a relationship except by catering. I took it to be a virtue. I was a nice guy.

Theologically, some Christians are prone to this, or at least have few defenses. We take the gospel to be sacrificial love—which *is* a virtue. Indeed it is the only way out of a classic cycle of retributive violence, because each side takes itself as being the oppressed. Each side perceives the history differently, and sees themselves as the victims of the events. So each side must forgive. I affirm this theology, if it is not the whole story. Permanent sacrifice lacks the vision of the ultimate goal—a just relationship.

Kathryn

I expressly married Kathryn because she was someone who could fight fair, who didn't make their view a turf to be defended at all costs, someone that evidence and argument could actually sway. I did not realize I was trying to escape my catering. I posed it in terms of what was needed in my partner, unaware that there was any problem on my side.

It was my sense of good, my conscience, my sense of lawful behavior that was hijacked. It was being a good boy, sacrificing myself to the other person, my virtue covering up and justifying my cowardice, that was my Egypt.

I honestly had no idea that my sacrificial virtue covered cowardice, nor that that lay at the root of my feelings of non-existence. When a deep part of a person is blocked, so deep that they fear they'll never truly exist, things can get ugly. They can't address the issue—if it is truly blocked, the conditioning is deep, so they can't afford to go there, their mind shies away from that place. So it crops up somewhere else. Unconsciously they turn to alcohol or drugs or sex or fame or wealth, to something external they imagine will be their messiah, a Moses to bring them to a promised land of being. I'll spare you the details of my own difficulties—suffice it to say that one day I realized that dear, nice, competent, successful me, was not healthy, and *I didn't know why*.

Kathryn didn't need my commitment to sacrifice my wants for hers. That thought was never in Kathryn's mind. What Kathryn wanted was commitment to work things out, to live life in tension together. Kathryn was blindsided—how was she to know I was catering? It's not like I never presented and negotiated any of my wants—just too late, and too little, and too few. And it wasn't just her. My first reaction to conflict with anyone was, still is, to defer.

I could not take the risk of being perceived as an enemy, and it truncated my life. I feared to offend, and it was killing me.

Healing did not come when all this slowly dawned on me, or from discovering or making up a plausible story that explained how it happened that I was unhealthy. Being aware of my brokenness, having a theory about why it happened, being aware that I was a conflict avoider, did not reduce my feeling that something was blocked and that I wasn't going to get to exist.

What healed me from this living death was the actual experience of confrontational communion. That is, my virtue of a sacrificial relationship had to go, as did the cowardice underneath. I catered to everyone, and I had expected Kathryn to cater to me. I had to take the responsibility and risk of voicing myself. When I disciplined myself to express what I thought and wanted, opposing what she wanted, I found we could negotiate something, we could figure out what was really needed, we could muddle through, our relationship could take the confrontation. I'm ashamed at how obvious all this sounds, how feeble, truncated, and infantile. In any case, experiencing the rewards of a negotiated life together, it slowly dawned on me that I was feeling something different, I felt that I was being! I could exist, my voice was heard! Duh.

The hardest thing I do is to be me, because it means voicing myself while facing other people without any attempt to control them or hide from them, knowing sometimes that they don't like it. The experience is exhilarating.

I began to feel that I was alive, all of me. This didn't happen overnight. I took years, and there's a learning curve to doing confrontation well. My marriage was the place where I learned to be. My marriage was where I first experienced life together in tension, confrontational communion, the spirit of God, and that's what healed me.

Allen

My wife Kathryn's older brother Allen was my all-time best friend and my business partner at Rosetta Stone, which we founded together. He was the entrepreneurial risk-taker, I was the techie engineer. We were very different, we often disagreed. It was usually very productive.

Together Allen and I were much better than either one of us alone. It's not just that sometimes he was right, and sometimes I was right, and we were able to sort out which was which. That would already be brilliant, but something even better happened. Often in the conflict of our differences something emerged that neither one of us would have thought of alone. I'm not talking about taking an average, or making a compromise. I'm saying that negotiating the struggle created something new which neither of us could have come up with by ourselves.

I'll tell a boat story that illustrates this. Allen saw a classified ad in the Washington Post for a Chinese junk built in Hong Kong, shipped to the US years ago for someone in the foreign service, and left dry for six years up on jacks in a marina in the armpit of an interstate bridge over the Anacostia River in south Washington, DC. Named "The Lucky Dragon," the junk was painted bright red with gold trim and carved teak on the aft deck. I could stand upright with 4 inches to spare in the cabin. The junk had two masts, bright red lug sails, and thick teak planks. But you could put your hand between the planks of the hull, they were so dried out. And there was major rot damage in the heavy keel and lower ribs. \$600 bucks.

Neither of us had much money at that point. As the engineer (Allen couldn't see a straight line to save his life) I looked it over and told him it would cost a ton of money to turn it into a boat. I didn't want it, because it wasn't a boat and couldn't be made into one for anything we could afford.

Allen bought it anyway. He asked how could we make it float for no money? I said maybe we could make some kind of huge flotation collar around it, a big dumb raft that would hold the thing up. He said no, it had to look like a boat.

Here's what we, together, eventually dreamed up, even though it offended my aesthetics horribly—engineers hate inelegance. We put floor joists at belly level across the inside of the cabin. We screwed plywood down to those joists, and filled the huge space underneath with blocks of Styrofoam scrounged for free from a cement works—they had used them for casting cement manholes. We stacked a flatbed trailer with them, and nearly burned the transmission out of my station wagon pulling that trailer. It didn't weigh anything, but the terrific air resistance of that ten foot stack of Styrofoam at interstate speeds overheated the transmission. Anyway, several trips later, a big crane put the junk in the water, and it floated perfectly on its lines—I'll take credit for that. Looked like a boat. Behaved like a boat. But it was a raft.

We'd put our kids in sleeping bags wall to wall in that cabin which was now just three feet high, but fine for a kid. In several trips, we sailed that thing—I could tell many more stories—down the Potomac

to the Chesapeake and down the Chesapeake to park it behind Gwynns Island, near the bridge to the island.

Allen was way too cheap to rent a slip in a marina, so we sank a couple of Chevy engine blocks chained together to make a mooring, and left the boat there. We enjoyed it for years, sailing on long weekends. Big yachts would go by with video cameras humming, because with all the towels and laundry and kids hung out to dry, we looked like refugees. Had a pile of fun.

The locals never could figure it out. All wooden boats leak a bit. How could this ancient and decrepit wooden boat, unfiberglassed, stay out there at a mooring untended sometimes for months on end, no evidence of a bilge pump peeing on occasion, and no power connection for a bilge pump anyhow? If it didn't leak, it should at least fill with rainwater, but it stayed dry.

Negotiating the struggle created something new which was not in either one of us alone.

I've told the stories of my healing relationships to Kathryn and Allen as microcosms of the church described in the next chapter, where we find Paul describing the church in the same way that Genesis described Adam. We get our health back. We get our life back. We get our character, our spirit, God's ruach, back. It's the story of our healing, our resurrection.

Chapter 4

The Church + God's spirit is the living, breathing Messiah

Prior chapters began to describe and use Ruach, a new perspective on the Bible. Adam, representative of humanity, is originally animated by the spirit of God. But our spirit has been lost, we live in death. God is inviting us back, to heal us, resurrect us. God's spirit/character is the desire for life together in tension, called confrontational communion or con-union.

Heads up, the Ruach vision of the New Testament is a bit different. I certainly don't speak for all Anabaptists or Mennonites, but the Ruach vision derives from my Mennonite tradition, where a great weight in our decisions is given to the community—the church. Enjoy, for even if you don't agree with it I hope your own vision will be made clearer and your own commitment deepened.

Let's start with Christology. "Christ" of course is the Greek translation of the Hebrew "Messiah", meaning "anointed". It is not Jesus' last name, it is the role of deliverer king that I'll talk more about in the last two chapters. I'll assume for now that you are roughly familiar with the promise that the anointed deliverer king, the Messiah, will come to establish peace and justice on this earth. The term "Christians" when it was first used evoked something like "Messiah-ites". Why were they called "Messiah-ites", "Christ-ians"?

Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 12:12-13:

So it is with Christ [Messiah]. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

and verse 27

Now you [plural] are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

The body is us, the church, described further below. The spirit animating that body is God's spirit, as revealed in Jesus. In first century usage, a spirit is what animates a body—without breath (the same word as spirit, in both Greek "pneuma" and Hebrew "ruach") a body is dead. It takes both body and spirit to make a living person. But what living person are we talking about here?

The body of Christ, with the spirit of Christ, is the Christ.

That's Paul's equation. The body of Christ, with the spirit of Christ. What else is that, than the Christ? Ruach reads the New Testament as making the claim—offensive and ridiculous to many, then and now—that Jesus is the Messiah [Christ] and that the church animated by the Holy Spirit is the Messiah.

Of course we often take this passage as describing how the church values the variety of gifts that different persons bring to it, and rightly so. But we mustn't miss the underlying presumption, that the community that is the abode of the spirit of God is the Christ/Messiah, especially in the light of many similar passages cited in the long Note at the end of this chapter.

The word “church” can be used to mean a building, or an organization, or a community of people. It is used to translate the Greek word “ekklesia” meaning synagogue or assembly. But not just any assembly. My meaning is that of a community that has lost its mind and gained another. Or rather, its spirit. This is a return to the logic of Genesis 2 that has Adam being made of clay plus God’s spirit.

clay body + God’s ruach = humanity at creation
assembly + God’s ruach = Christ

The body is us, the spirit is God’s. That’s incarnation, and is the Christ, the Messiah.

Christ/Messiah is a role, it is Jesus' mantle that is taken by the church incarnating God’s spirit. Paul isn’t implying that Jesus is dead, rather that the body born of Mary is not physically here now, and the church is, and they have the same spirit. Jesus says so, in his prayer for his disciples in John 17:11-12

I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your *name*, the *name* you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that *name* you gave me. [italics mine]

Here the Greek word *onoma*, translated “name”, means the particular essence of a person, that which distinguishes them, their nature, their character, their spirit. You might try reading the passage again, substituting nature, character, or spirit for “name”.

What do I mean by “Jesus is the Messiah *and* the church incarnating God’s spirit is the Messiah”? In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul is clearly referring to Jesus (not the church), and to past events (not the present), when he says “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve.” Yet he is equally clear about what it means to be “in Christ.” Nowadays people tend to think that being “in Christ” means to believe in certain propositions about Jesus (that he was divine, that he died for our sins, etc.). I’ll deal with this notion of belief shortly, but right now I want to say that I take “in Christ” more literally than that—I take Paul to mean we are a part of the Messiah. In verse 45 Paul continues by comparing Jesus to Adam:

So it is written: “The first man Adam became a living being” ; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit.

Adam (the Hebrew word for humanity) is the Jewish model/understanding of what it meant to be a human originally, before our spirit was lost and we became the living dead. The last Adam, Jesus, is taken to be the life-giving restorer of that spirit, resurrecting us from our death into newness of life. Calling Jesus, as Messiah, a “second Adam” means that we take Messiahship as our model of full humanity, the fulfillment of our species. We only wholly exist when we are “in Christ,” when we are a part of the Messiah, when we again incarnate the spirit of God.

Jesus is our vision, the story we tell ourselves about ourselves, our understanding of what we truly are. We participate in the death, the burial and the resurrection of the Christ. Paul says (Romans 6:3-4) NRSV

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

There's an interesting conversation between Jesus and Peter in John 13:36. Simon Peter asked him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus replied, "Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later." And we do. Jesus famously said (Luke 9:23) "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." I'll speak much more of the cross in a later chapter.

So Christology is Ecclesiology: a community graced by God's spirit is the Messiah/Christ. The scandalous and stupendous claim is that this church incarnating God's spirit, living bodily on earth today, is the Messiah, and is humanity resurrected from the dead, having regained the spirit lost in Eden.

I'm excited. It means that the Messiah is loose in the world, this world. It means the gospel isn't just about the past and the hereafter. There is a *breathing* Messiah, now.

I'm going to use the term "Church+" (pronounced "church plus") as a short form to refer to any community animated by God's spirit. The Church+ is the church (the body of Christ) incarnating the Holy Spirit. It is the breathing Messiah, the living Christ here and now.

The Greek verb *sózó* is sometimes translated "heal" and sometimes "save", for example in Matthew 9:22 "Daughter, be of good comfort; your faith has *healed* you. And the woman was *healed* from that hour," and in John 3:17: "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be *saved*." It's all *sózó*. Maybe this breathing Messiah, the Church+, can save/heal this world, can establish justice, security, health, shalom, here, in living time. I pick up this theme in the last two chapters.

The gospels were written well after Paul's letters that taught about the body of Christ. Writing into this established context, when the gospel writers talk about Jesus, they are also often talking about the Church+. We narrate Jesus' life as our story about our true selves. For example, in John 2:19-21

"All right," Jesus replied. "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

"What!" they exclaimed. "It has taken forty-six years to build this Temple, and you can rebuild it in three days?" But when Jesus said "this temple," he meant his own body.

John indicates that Jesus is talking about the body of the Christ, the new temple, the community that is the abode of the spirit of God on earth, the combination being the Church+, the breathing Messiah working to heal this world.

I enjoy reading the gospel stories about Jesus as commentary about the Church+. Ruach reads the gospel writers under the presumption that they wrote to describe the Church+, her trials, her reactions, and her agenda as Messiah.

What is this spirit like, this breath of God that was first breathed into Adam's nostrils? Baptism by immersion symbolizes death and rebirth—we're plunged under water, can't breathe, and are raised to take in a new breath, a new spirit. We can try to give a logical definition of what it means to have lost our mundane motivation, and in its stead been animated by the spirit of God, but it is far richer to narrate a particular human life, that of Jesus, as a weighty and nuanced trove of meaning. That is one intent of the gospel writers—to talk about the church graced with God's spirit by talking about Jesus and the spirit that graced him. Short forms like "God is Love" are but thumbnail sketches—Christians

take the spirit inhabiting Jesus as the fuller picture. The Church+ is a community living in confrontational communion.

The gospel passion narratives give meaning to the practices (the Last Supper), the temptations (put up the sword, Matt 26:52), the betrayals and deaths suffered by the church under vicious persecution, and their hope that there would soon be a tipping point when this breathing Messiah would heal the whole world into the kingdom of God.

Wait. In the New Testament people pray to Jesus Christ or to God in the name of Jesus, but never address prayers to the church.

I do take sharing time as prayer. And yes, I think that the New Testament often uses “Christ Jesus” (think “Messiah Jesus”) to refer to the church as abode of God, even in prayer. I take it they used “Christ Jesus” or “Jesus Christ” to mean the Messiah having the healer nature shown by Jesus, as opposed to, say, a “Christ David”, which would be a messiah having the soldier nature of David. But they referred to their community as the body of this Messiah: the spirit of God shown in Jesus animates the body of Christ. This combination, this incarnation, this Christ after the nature of Jesus, this “Christ Jesus” to which we pray, is what I’ve called the Church+, and is what Paul implies is the Christ.

Note that we as individuals graced with God’s spirit, are *not* Messiahs. The Church+ is always a community/assembly graced by God’s spirit. The received model for the assembly was the synagogue, which requires a quorum of ten. One person can’t do it, one person can’t be it.

The reason is because you can’t have a relationship alone. You can’t commune alone. The reason the Church+ has to be a group is that it is a confrontational communion, animated by God’s spirit desiring life together in tension.

The Church+ is the place of confrontational communion, where we learn to live in healthy relationship, where we enjoy the freedom of being who we are in our differences, and where the hospitality we meet gives us the confidence, the security, to negotiate the tensions. The way this Messiah heals the broken, warring relationships of this world is by bringing people into this Messiah’s body of communion.

We enjoy our home, our religion, our own institutional church community with its particular understanding and expression of the Bible, where we can teach our mother tongue to our children, and serve the wounded and oppressed, and it is good. But following Jesus, part of the spiritual DNA of our home is to reach out and make covenanted community also with the alien, whether they are a family member, or an international enemy, or a neighbor of a different religion. In this second larger community we should learn the alien’s spiritual tongue, their stories and perspective, and teach them ours, and struggle with our differences. In doing that, we meet the living God, by God’s grace we form the body of the Messiah, and the healing work of the Messiah is done in us.

Consider the last two verses of our beloved Psalm 23:

Thou preparest a table before me
(hospitality: we’re going to eat!)
(but where?) in the presence of my enemies.
Thou anointest (christens, messias) my head with oil.
(we are marked as Messiah)
My cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy
(justice, wholeness, health)
shall follow me
all the days of my life;
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord,
(the temple, the abode of God, the incarnation)
forever.

Our enemies keep us honest

There's one implication of the Church+ as Messiah that I should warn you about. It means that divine revelation hasn't stopped. It means the Bible has told us it is not the *last* Word. If God's spirit has been poured out on God's people, if God abides with us, then God hasn't finished revealing God. It is unbiblical to think that divine revelation has stopped. John 14:26 "But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things..."

Some time after Jesus was no longer physically present, Peter had a dream where he was told by God to eat animals that were unclean by Jewish law (Acts 10). That dream abrogated Peter's scriptures—the Old Testament.

We know our capacity to keep selfish motives hidden even from ourselves. If the Church+ has the authority to abrogate scripture, what keeps us from deciding anything we want, from sliding down the slippery slope of self-deception? This is a serious issue, it is the reason why many insist we need an absolute Truth, a written unchanging standard which will humble our equivocating ways. But in the Church+, there is something else, or rather someone else, who humbles us and keeps us from self-deception about God's continuing revelation.

It is our opponents who keep us humble. We can't have the Church+ without them. We can't have the Church+ without confrontational communion. Our opponents see through our self-deceptions. Our opponents won't let us get away with it. We need them to keep us from sliding down that slope. Divine revelation, God's face, emerges through our struggles with our opponents.

Must we seek out opponents? The answer I've just provided is that we need them to keep us honest. But did Jesus do it? Did the New Testament church do it? How do we turn bloodthirsty enemies into trustworthy opponents? The next few chapters deal with these questions. Many of us have been traumatized by violence and chaos, so we experience change as painful, and we are skeptical about the results of communing with people having different faiths where there is no control over the end results. Is there scriptural justification for taking the risk of communing with those who disagree with us, when it is painful for us to do so, and when we're unsure whether in the struggle the baby will be thrown out with the bathwater? The next chapter argues that Jesus communed with people of other faiths.

Note: The New Testament definition of the Church

The following quote is from the *Introductory Study Guide: Understanding Ministry* by Dennis McCallum and Gary DeLashmutt, gratefully used with permission from Xenos Christian Fellowship. Note that baptism by the Holy Spirit is not the same thing as baptism by water to join a community. This will be important later when we consider whether persons unbaptized by water might embody the Holy Spirit.

Definition: The Universal Church derives its definition from the baptizing ministry of the Holy Spirit. The key verse on this is 1 Cor. 12:13, "by one Spirit we are all baptized into one body." We see from this passage that the church is like the physical manifestation of Christ, i.e., his body.

Other passages which use the same imagery are Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:11,18,27. The point in all of these passages seems to be that anyone who has experienced this baptism is automatically a member of the body of Christ.

Words used for the church in the New Testament:

Church

The word translated "church" in the Bible is *ekklesia*. This word is the Greek words *kaleo* (to call), with the prefix *ek* (out). Thus, the word means "the called out ones." However, the English word "church" does not come from *ekklesia* but from the word *kuriakon*, which means "dedicated to the Lord." This word was commonly used to refer to a holy place or temple. By the time of Jerome's translation of the New Testament from Greek to Latin, it was customary to use a derivative of *kuriakon* to translate *ekklesia*. Therefore, the word church is a poor translation of the word *ekklesia* since it implies a sacred building, or temple. A more accurate translation would be "assembly" because the term *ekklesia* was used to refer to a group of people who had been called out to a meeting. It was also used as a synonym for the word *synagogue*, which also means to "come together," i.e. a gathering.

Body of Christ

Since believers have been united with Christ through spiritual baptism, they are sometimes corporately referred to as the body of Christ. (Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:11,13,18,27; Col. 1:18; Eph. 5:30) The idea seems to be that the group of Christians in the world constitute the physical representation of Christ on earth. It is also a metaphor which demonstrates the interdependence of members in the church, while at the same time demonstrating their diversity from one another. (Rom. 12:4; 1 Cor. 12:14-17)

The Temple of God

(1 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 2:21,22; 1 Pet. 2:5).

The Jerusalem From Above or The Heavenly Jerusalem

(Gal. 4:26; Heb. 12:22). Both of these terms (as well as "temple") illustrate how the Old Testament notions of outward sanctuary have been replaced with the literal dwelling of God in his people.

Bride of Christ or Christ's Betrothed

(Eph. 5:25-32; 2 Cor. 11:2). These titles refer to the love and loyalty existing between Christ and believers.

Chapter 5

Jesus commended Pagans incarnating God's spirit

Previous chapters began using Ruach, an interpretive framework of the Bible, which views the Church+ —a community open to God's spirit—as the living Messiah. The gospels narrate the life of Jesus to give a full picture of life open to God's spirit. God's spirit is described as a desire for *con-union*: a struggle over our different identities within a commitment to hospitality. The Church+ is a community for healing our relationships that are stressed over our profound differences, a place for *living together in tension*.

But what if the differences are a matter of deep religious beliefs? Are these so negotiable?

Matthew 12:24-33, NLT:

But when the Pharisees heard about the miracle, they said, "No wonder he can cast out demons. He gets his power from Satan, the prince of demons."

Jesus knew their thoughts and replied . . . ". . . every sin and blasphemy can be forgiven—except blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which will never be forgiven. Anyone who speaks against the Son of Man can be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven, either in this world or in the world to come.

"A tree is identified by its fruit. If a tree is good, its fruit will be good. If a tree is bad, its fruit will be bad . . ."

The Pharisees mistook the spirit animating Jesus, and called it evil. Jesus calls their error unforgivable. As followers of Jesus, we mistake the Holy Spirit at our peril.

Here's the rub: I have seen the spirit of God animating the saintly lives of some unvarnished Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and Atheists. I'm not alone, many of you reading this must truthfully confess to the same perception.

That list isn't complete, it's just that I don't know many people of other religions. Many of these good people do not acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah, some don't even believe in God, but apparently Jesus didn't care so much about what you think as about what you do, and by implication (a previous post describes how Jesus' life is used to describe the Church+), neither does the Church+. "A tree is identified by its fruit." Fruit we can taste. We aren't very competent in complicated matters, but even a child can taste and evaluate fruit. Equally, we can taste the difference between good and evil. We have famously (Genesis 2,3) tasted the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. We are competent to detect goodness, we are competent to detect the spirit of God, and when we do, we dare not call this spirit anything than what it is: God's.

I think Jesus and Peter and Paul and the gospel writers and the early church included such people in their understanding of the Church+. As we will later see in detail, the presence of God's spirit was the undeniable evidence of who was included in the Church+. Jesus rounds out Matthew 12 with

“Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother!”

Anyone who does the will of the Father.

Anyone who is animated by the spirit of God.

Regardless of beliefs? Did Jesus ever commend the faith of people who did not share his own? Jesus and his “kingdom of heaven” were resolutely Jewish (Matt 5:17-20). Yet he commended the faith of a Samaritan leper (Luke 17:11-19), the faith of a Roman Centurion (Matt 8:5-13), and the faith of a Canaanite mother who successfully opposed him (Matt 15:21-28, Mark 7:24-30). He created a parable in which he praises the actions of a good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Jesus was nearly thrown off a cliff for commending the faith of Naaman the Syrian, and the faith of a Canaanite widow in the region of Sidon who hosted the prophet Elias (Luke 4:16-30). The stories of Naaman (II Kings 5) and the Canaanite widow (I Kings 17) were written centuries before Jesus’ birth.

Jesus wanted to reform and fulfill Israel, but never leave it. However, as a Jew, his vision was of a broader con-union, a con-union that didn’t depend on uniformity of culture, or ethnicity, or even what we call belief. About that Roman Centurion, Jesus says (Matthew 8:10-11 NASV):

Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel. I say to you that many will come from east and west, and recline *at the table* with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven

Note the hospitality theme. What is the basis for those from east and west to be accepted at the table? The next chapter takes up this question, and argues that the answer is not a common set of beliefs. But for the moment, consider whether all these people were commended by Jesus for

1. their conversion to Judaism,
2. their faith in him, Jesus,
3. their faith within their alien religion,
4. while maintaining their alien religion, their act of faith in reaching out across a religious divide.

The first case is dubious. The good Samaritan was no convert. That the good Samaritan was *not* a Jew is a feature of the story. The Samaritan leper did not convert—Jesus called him a Samaritan after his healing. The Canaanite mother did not convert, I discuss her case below.

The second case is dubious. Put it this way: if Naaman and the Canaanite widow were following Jesus, they didn’t know it, and they didn’t learn it from Jesus’ life.

Either case 3 or 4 would imply that he commended the faith of people having very different belief systems than his. In every instance, he commends engaging positively across deep rifts.

So there’s a fifth case. Perhaps Jesus tasted, recognized, and commended in them a commitment to the desire to con-une, the spirit of God.

The Canaanite mother of Matthew 15 and Mark 7 in particular struggled with Jesus. She persisted in trying to commune, in wanting to eat at his table, even when he opposed her. Her spirit was confrontational communion. In both Matthew and Mark her story is told between the feeding of the

five thousand and the feeding of the four thousand. Matthew 15:21-28

Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.” Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.” He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” The woman came and knelt before him. “Lord, help me!” she said. He replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” “Yes it is, Lord,” she said. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” Then Jesus said to her, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed at that moment.

Just who won this exchange? Imagine the scene for a moment. The woman approaches the house where Jesus and the disciples are eating, crying her demands through the bead curtain strung across the door to keep the flies out. She wants to know if this son of David will have mercy on a pagan, she wants to know if this messiah is for all, or just for some. It’s a question of hospitality—will he extend hospitality to her, a pagan? The disciples tumble out of the house, brushing crumbs from their fronts, trying to shoo her away, for it wouldn’t do to eat with a pagan Canaanite present. She won’t leave. Some disciples come back to Jesus, urging him to “send her away”—the verb they use is used for “divorce”, they’re asking for separation. He does not speak to her. But to them he replies “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”

The woman does not give up. Like Jacob, she’s going to hang on until she gets a blessing. She comes in anyway, kneels before Jesus, and asks for help. Note the hospitality theme—the issue is posed in terms of eating, of whether they are in the same community or not. He says “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” He calls her a dog, an epithet sometimes used among Jews of that time to denote pagans. In much of the eastern world, there are few worse insults—dogs are scavengers that were tolerated because they clean up human excrement. He softens it a bit—instead of the standard word for dog, “kuón”, he uses the word “kunarion” which is more like “doggy”—some Romanized families kept pets. The woman, noticing the dogs slinking about scavenging the crumbs after the meal, directly contradicts him. To his “It is not right” she replies “Yes it is, Lord.” Talk about turning the other cheek: *she respectfully asks that he be as hospitable to her as he is to the dogs.*

He high fives her. He affirms her faith. He sends her back to her healed daughter.

And then he goes and extends hospitality to four thousand in a Gentile territory.

Afterwards, Jesus pushes his disciples to focus on the number of baskets of leftovers collected from these meals. Mark 8:18-21

...don’t you remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?”

“Twelve,” they replied.

“And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?”

They answered, “Seven.”

He said to them, “Do you still not understand?”

Two different words for “basketfuls” are used here in the Greek. The first word, used for for the five thousand, implies twelve small hand-baskets. The second word, used for the four thousand, implies seven full-sized baskets.

In that culture numbers had meanings, and Jesus prods them to think about the twelve and the seven. For the feeding in Jewish territory, there were twelve small baskets of leftovers—a standard allusion to all twelve tribes. For the feeding in Gentile territory, there were seven big baskets of leftovers. Seven was the number of completeness, of all, of inclusion. Seven is greater than twelve.

But wait, it’s called the believer’s church, aren’t these people being commended for their belief in God? Those pagan Gentiles, were they not being converted from idolatry to belief in the God of Israel? And those Jews, weren’t they being converted away from their legalism? Don’t we have to believe the right things?

The next chapter talks about belief.

Chapter 6

Propositional belief does not save us, committing to God's spirit does

Previous chapters introduced a new biblical interpretation language called Ruach. Ruach describes the Church+ as the Messiah: the community being the body, and the spirit being God's. The life of Jesus is our detailed picture of what it means to be graced by God's spirit, God's character, God's nature. A major trait of God's spirit is God's desire to commune: rejecting control or appeasement, desiring instead to voice our different identities in hospitality, and to struggle together over the differences. The Church+, the Messiah, is a community because it is a healing school of relationships, a place of life together in tension over our differences, which I've called *con-union*.

But don't we have to believe the right things?

He recalled how one middle-aged woman in his church who was suffering from heart disease asked him anxiously: "How am I going to believe for salvation when I can't believe enough to heal?"

(Jerry Dewitt as quoted by Robert F. Worth in the New York Times, Aug 22 2012.)

I fear that woman's been sold a bill of goods. I fear she's been taught that if you believe that certain things are true, something magic will happen, you will be healed, you will be saved, and it depends on the strength and absoluteness of your belief in the right set of truths.

In our day, a religion is usually understood as a belief structure. Mine is not. I am not a Christian because I believe, in our usual sense of the word "belief." I believe our current notion of belief is corrupt—there is a higher standard.

Wait. The huge majority of respected spokespersons of religion, and of religious institutions, define themselves in terms of their beliefs. They seem to make a virtue out of believing things for which we don't have the level of supporting evidence that we normally require. Such belief is a difficult mental gymnastic. There are many creeds that they recite, and they seem to insist on the saving properties of correct belief: that if you believe the right things are true, you go to heaven, otherwise you go to eternal punishment, it's the belief in the truth of the right set of things that makes the difference.

Whereas to me, that is idolatry. We should purge our Sunday school materials of all such notions.

Wait some more! We're called a believer's church. "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name" (John 1:12), and "that whosoever believeth in him should not perish" (John 3:16) "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth" (Romans 1:16, all KJV), there are dozens of such scriptures, how can you possibly say there's something wrong with belief?

Because we misunderstand what the word meant to the New Testament believers.

The words translated in the NT as “believe” or “belief” (Greek *pisteuó*, *pistis*) are poorly represented by our words. In modern time our usage has changed, for the worse. I want to tease apart two concepts here that we’ve got snarled together tightly. I’ll label the bad one, the commonly understood one, “propositional belief”, and the good one “commitment belief”.

In logic, a proposition is a truth claim. For example, “Mexico is bigger than Cuba.” I believe a million propositions (“The Moon orbits the Earth”, “Fewer people died during World War I than during World War II”, and on and on). There’s nothing wrong with propositional belief, except when it’s taken as the foundation of religion.

There are non-creedal Christian traditions that don’t depend so much on propositional beliefs. Disclosure: I’m an Anabaptist, and historically Anabaptists have not emphasized permanent creeds.

For me, the Bible, and the Church+, is all about our encounters with enemies, aliens, strangers, friends, siblings, lovers, parents, children and other dangerous people—the first Bible murder is between brothers. The Bible is not about physics or chemistry or cosmology or medicine. Rather, the Bible is about how to form healthy human relationships, about how to make healthy communities, even about how we should relate to the land and animals and plants. If we heed it, we will live long in the land, otherwise, we’ll go extinct. It is our motivating relationships that need to be healed.

Heed it. Is that salvation by works? No, it’s commitment. It’s trust.

Our language is so colored by our modern notion of propositional belief that it’s hard for us to hear the Bible right. When I hear a verse with “believe” in it, I sometimes substitute the words “commit” or “entrust myself”, or even “bet”, and it moves me in the right direction. For example let’s pick up Romans 1:16 again. Think of reading it as “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of the Messiah: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that commits to it.” Hear the difference? It’s not in our mind, it’s in our character. It’s not a mental gymnastic, it’s a way of life. It takes commitment to be open to the spirit of God. From the usual human perspective it seems practically suicidal. Face my enemy, hang on to them like Jacob did, ask them to bless me, and not let go until they do. Right.

I must entrust myself to that spirit. I bet on that spirit—if it fails me, I’m toast. That’s “commitment belief.”

Commitment to what, an ideology? No, a spirit.

When I talk spirit I’m not talking ghosts, nor unreal abstractions. As discussed earlier, a spirit is a motivating relationship. If I am dis-spirited, I can’t get up in the morning—no motivation. We say someone has a bad spirit when their motivating relationship to something is dysfunctional or unhealthy. I’ve described the spirit of God as the desire to extend community even to offenders, as a confrontational communion.

Jesus recommends loving our enemy because it is God’s character to desire community with everyone, even those who are offensive or violent (Matthew 5: 43-48). To want to commune with offensive people seems beyond human logic. It takes *commitment* belief, a *leap* of faith, a *trust* in God, to open myself to God’s spirit that keeps trying to live together in tension, because it is such a shock to my normal defensive human posture, which retreats towards fight or flight at the least conflict.

In confrontation with an enemy, I risk my life trying to be open to the spirit of God—the desire to live together in tension with that enemy—rather than try to dominate/control/eliminate them, or to placate/appease/flee them. That’s real belief, that has the power to heal and save. It’s not about mental affirmation of a bunch of propositions, it is about entrusting my security to being open to God’s character, about risky commitment to a spirit—a way of relating to people.

Life is not about winning. It’s about being in healthy relationships.

And yes, my assertion “commitment belief is better than propositional belief” is a propositional belief. But it's a meta-belief that actually values our different propositional beliefs. God’s spirit desires to commune and confront—to live together in tension. Being open to that spirit, we give priority to hanging in there, negotiating, messily muddling through together, each in our different particular propositional beliefs, in our different spiritual languages and traditions that frame our perspectives. We can contribute to each other. Each of us can see some things that the others cannot. The goal isn't uniformity of propositional beliefs—any more than the goal of learning a new language is to make a blend with one’s mother tongue. We *need* each other, we need each other’s different points of view.

Wait still: You seem to imply that Buddhists can do this too. Aren’t we supposed to believe on His name, on the name of Jesus?

I agree with a standard evangelical understanding expressed by Eugene Harder at New Hope for Living:

What does it mean to believe in the name of Jesus? To the Jews the expression believe in His name means that we believe in the nature of the person that name represents.

The psalmist says: "Those who know your name put their trust in You." (Psalm 9:10) He does not mean that those who know that God is called Jehovah. He means that those who know God's character, God's nature, will be ready and willing to trust him for everything. Therefore to trust in the name of Jesus means to put our trust in what he is. (<http://newhopeforliving.com/old/99-11-14.htm> retrieved June 2013)

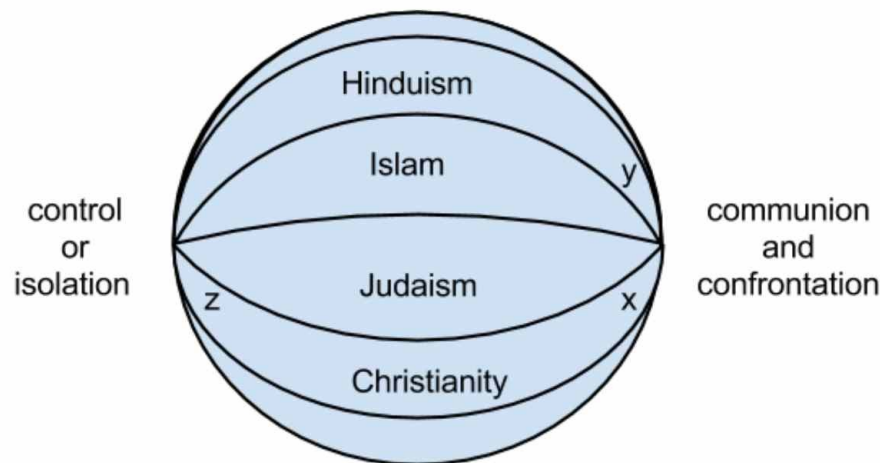
An example is in John 17:6, where Jesus, speaking of the Father, says (King James Version) “I have *manifested thy name* unto the men which thou gavest me...” The NIV translates that verse as “I have *revealed you* to those whom you gave me...” (italics mine). Both translations are justified, because though the literal Greek is “I have revealed your name”, in Greek usage this means I have revealed you, your nature.

To believe in the name of Jesus is to put our trust in, to commit to, to risk all on the nature of Jesus: to trust in God’s character/nature/spirit revealed in Jesus, even when that way of relating to people (which I’ve called con-union) seems beyond human logic. Jesus is our model of a fulfilled humanity. We reach our full humanity only when we host the spirit of God.

When it is written (Phil 2:10), “at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow” we’re not interested in the sound of the word “Jesus”. After all, his momma called him something like Eashoa—“Jesus” is a translation into Greek. We read it “at the nature of Jesus every knee shall bow.” What we mean is that all will commit to the nature, the character of this Messiah, this way of relating to people that demonstrates God’s spirit, the desire to con-une.

This has nothing to do with whether the world is under 7000 years old. It has everything to do with what happens when we are threatened, or when we offend someone, or when we are criticised by someone who sees the world through a different lens than we do. The question is, in such circumstances, do we put our trust in our human defensive logic and retreat towards either coercive control or collaborating appeasement, or do we trust in the spirit of God, and risk living together in tension? That's belief.

One day in Nepal after an animated discussion with a Hindu friend, I realized I felt spiritually closer to him than I did to some Christians. Imagine that each segment of an orange represents one of the world's religions.



I found myself x closer to my friend y, both at one pole of the orange, than to some Christians I knew z at the other pole.

A few years later I was speaking to a Muslim friend, a Pashtun from Peshawar, Pakistan. He was visiting my home, and I trotted out my “orange” metaphor a little nervously, wondering how he’d take it. To my remark that people near my pole of the orange resembled each other, he replied “Yes, and people at the other pole resemble each other too.” We instinctively recognized that those open to community with people of other faiths are different from those who are closed. Which pole you are near depends on how you answer “Does your religion call you into confrontational communion, or serve to keep you out of it?” Does your religion call you to reach out and establish community with others whose identity challenges yours, to enter the fray with them, or does your religion create a bastion around yourself, a wall behind which you don’t have to listen to alien tongues? Does your religion serve to keep you in ideological control (rejecting other languages) and ideological isolation (hiding from other languages), or does it challenge you to live together in vulnerable tension with those who speak other spiritual languages?

The idolatry of propositional belief in a fixed, written truth turns religion into an ideology. It robs religion of the dynamic of the struggle of con-union, a truth that is a way and a life. It denies that God’s spirit is among us.

I learned this spirit from Jesus, but perhaps some might learn it from a different tradition. Desmond Tutu writes in *God is Not a Christian*¹ that no religion owns God. By the same logic, perhaps Christianity doesn't own the incarnation of God's spirit on earth, the Messiah, the Church+, either.

So now you're going to say that the New Testament church included people of different faiths?

Yes, in the next chapter.

Notes:

1. Desmond Tutu, *God is Not a Christian: And Other Provocations*, HarperCollins, 2011.

Chapter 7

The early Church included different religions

Previous chapters have argued that Christianity uses the life of Jesus as a full picture of a life open to the spirit of God, who desires to con-une, to live together in tension. I asked whether it is possible someone could learn how to confront within communion from another source, another tradition, and showed Jesus commending con-union in people from other faiths. Desmond Tutu writes in *God is Not a Christian*¹ that no religion owns God. By the same logic, perhaps Christianity doesn't own the incarnation of God's spirit on earth, the Church+, the Messiah, either.

The average church nowadays is one where everybody believes exactly the same thing. About Jesus, biology, politics, sexuality, you name it. We drive across town to find a church where people are like us.

Christianity has forgotten the big news of the first century—that the Church+ was a con-union of people of different religions, different opinions, different classes and different politics.

The issues that caused the most strife in the first century were the traumas caused by the rifts between rich and poor, between slaves and free, between men and women, between Jew and Greek, and Paul says all of these people are in the Church+, trying to live together. For example, Galatians 3:28:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Does this mean we're all one once we have a common religion, Christianity? Or the opposite, that recognizing the Holy Spirit outpoured in people who are of a different religion, we can be one even though we continue in our different religions? In that day, the difference and bitterness between Jew and Greek was at least as great and difficult as, say, the divide between Muslim and Christian today.

What did they have in common? They had a belief in, a faith in, or as I have described, a commitment to communing—the way of life animated by the spirit of God, as portrayed in and by Jesus. God's spirit dares not to control us, and not to walk away from us, despite our offenses. God keeps God's identity, God's difference from us, and yet is hospitable to us. Our trust is in that spirit, our commitment is to be open to that spirit.

Both Greek and Jew kept their identity as Greek or Jew. They changed some of their practices, the minimum so that they could tolerate communion, and struggled in community together. Sharing one spirit, they formed one body, even though the Greeks continued most (not all) of their practices, while the Jews like Paul followed most (not all) of their practices. Let's examine the details.

There was great diversity in the strands of Judaism in the first century. So one can't make statements like "The Jews thought..." because there'd be many exceptions. However many Jews couldn't bring themselves to eat with Greeks—there was no way to be sure of not becoming "unclean". There was Jewish law which forbade association with Greeks (Acts 10:28). The purity laws were a big barrier to

many, including Peter. Acts 10 tells a story that starts with Cornelius, a well-off Roman Centurion, who is told in a vision to send for help, help in the form of a man staying at the house of Simon the tanner, which was a filthy trade of the lowest social class. Meanwhile, at that house, Peter has a vision (Acts 10: 11-17):

He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.”

“Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.”

The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven. While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon’s house was and stopped at the gate.

Summed up: some Jews had to change some of their practices to make communion possible.

Likewise, monotheism and scorn for idols were well within the diversity of the various Greek cults and philosophies of the time², though many Greeks used language laced with many gods (1 Cor 8). What practices did a monotheistic Greek need to change to commune with Jews? Acts 15 records an interesting and difficult negotiation with the Jewish church members, resulting in the following letter circulated to the ekklesiai (Acts 15:28-29):

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.

Farewell.

That’s it. Where’s the renunciation of Stoic or Mithraic thought, the list of correct beliefs, the ideology? The Greeks avoided certain *practices* related to food, and from sexual immorality (prostitution), and the Jews changed their *practices* relative to what is “unclean”. They negotiated a settlement of practice to make con-union between Jews and Greeks tolerable. Greeks could still eat their pork, but maybe it wasn’t a good idea to bring it to the common meal at the synagogue. Perhaps limiting their common meals to bread and wine, and the occasional fish, was a compromise that worked—these homely issues were and are hard to resolve.

Sorting out ideology was entrusted to the process of life together in the Holy Spirit—con-union. The question was always the recognition of God’s spirit, the spirit that wants and dares to con-une with all. In Acts 11:1-18, the wholly Jewish ekklesia in Jerusalem accepts Greeks when Peter reports that the Greeks at Cornelius’ house received the Holy Spirit, praising God in alien tongues (Acts 10:46).

Reaching across language and cultural frontiers was the hallmark of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost when the Church+ was born (Acts 2), and continued to be the signature event by which God’s acceptance into the Church+ was indicated and accepted.

The Samaritans were accepted by the Jewish ekklesia (Acts 8:14-17) because Samaritans who accepted the touch of Peter and John, representing the Jewish ekklesia reaching out to them, evinced the Holy

Spirit. It was mutual acceptance of con-union across a very bitter, centuries-old religious and ethnic rift.

The Jews didn't become Greeks, and the Greeks didn't become Jews (1 Cor 7:17-20). They had a unifying ground: the spirit who wants and dares to con-une with all, even the unclean, even the sinners, even enemies. They shared a commitment to con-une that they had learned from Jesus and the heart of God, but they held a variety of different propositional beliefs.

That they all kept so much of their philosophical and religious baggage, yet formed a committed community and ate together, was astounding, unheard of, incredible and scandalous.

It still is.

It didn't last but a few generations. Trauma, our human desire to control/dominate or placate/flee at the cost of the death of the community, tore it apart. John Howard Yoder describes the separation of Christianity and Judaism as the schism that didn't have to be³. Christianity became a creedal religion, and then fractured into scores of pieces separated by beliefs.

But it did last. A few faithful from the Abrahamic monotheisms (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) throughout history since then have continued to con-une with each other—it never died out. The next chapter considers the case of even Polytheists and Atheists.

Notes:

1. Desmond Tutu, *God is Not a Christian: And Other Provocations*, HarperCollins, 2011.
2. *One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire*, edited by Stephen Mitchell and Peter Van Nuffelen, University Press Cambridge 2010
3. John Howard Yoder, *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, edited by Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs, Wm. B. Eerdmans 2003

Chapter 8

Polytheists and Atheists in the Church+

Describing Ruach, an interpretive framework of the Bible, previous chapters have presented the Church+ as the Messiah, a community of people open to the spirit of God. Christianity uses the life of Jesus as a full picture of a life open to the spirit of God, which I have argued includes a great desire to con-une, i.e. to hospitably struggle over our different identities. I asked whether is it possible someone could learn con-union from another source, another tradition, and showed Jesus commending people from other faiths who con-uned. The New Testament Church+ included people who kept their different religious identities. Here I take up the question whether Polytheists and Atheists can be in the Church+.

We are finite

We are finite, our intelligence is limited, we are confined in place and in time, we only take in a tiny fraction of the information in our environment, and our duration on earth is short. As individuals we see and understand a lot, but it is small relative to what we do not know.

Remember the old story of the blind men feeling an elephant. Each of them knows a lot about the elephant, through real experience. To me it's a snake, to you a tree trunk, to him a warm wall. So what should we blind do?

I could try to kill those who won't acknowledge that the elephant feels like a snake.

I could try to convert my neighbors to my point of view, my truth that the elephant is a snake.

We could avoid each other, separate, divorce.

We could unify around our common denominator, "The elephant is warm and smelly."

We could conclude that it's all just opinions, and so there's nothing real to talk about.

I could try to learn from my neighbor to gain a broader understanding.

The last is more attractive than the others, but it denies the premise of the story—that we are limited. I might be able to learn a bit more from a neighbor but I can never wholly understand the real elephant, not even close. I can do better, I can do worse, but I can not do well. Our goal can't be to understand the whole—it's infinite, we can't.

So what should we blind do? There is another way. We could struggle together.

We may never understand why our perceptions are different. But if we keep struggling together even though our perceptions remain different, this con-union of blind people can comprehend reality in a different way than any one blind person can.

Uniformity, lack of diversity, should make us very uncomfortable, because it means we are alone in our narrow point of view.

In John 8:31-32 Jesus says “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” In the biblical languages, to know is to experience. In con-union we experience a wide set of perceptions, languages and belief systems that frame reality differently, and that experience sets us free.

While hugely useful and good, language shares our human limits and cannot express experience perfectly. Words’ concepts are approximate. Even something as concrete as say, a mountain, expresses no clean logical break between what’s mountain and what’s not—there’s no clear line you can straddle, one foot within the area of the mountain, the other foot outside. Though improvement in our language is possible and always welcome as a real gain, our goal can’t be synthesis of an all-encompassing statement of perfect Truth—human language can’t get there.

My youngest is in China, learning Mandarin. I doubt he’ll come back saying we should all forget about English, Chinese is better. Or that Chinese is superior, the world should adopt it. Or, horrors, that a blend between those languages is what we need. He’ll come back with the ability to look at the world through two profoundly different framing systems, and be the better for it. The goal isn’t to evolve the perfect orthodoxy. The goal is to have a communion that includes those who frame things differently, because we need to hear them, we need to live in that tension. The goal is a polyglot community. We who are finite in our understanding, and always will be, need each other.

Truth is not something that can be perfectly expressed in any human language and written for all time. Truth is experienced (known) by a community of people struggling with their different languages. Together, they have some freedom from the limitations of any particular language.

Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks uses the term “conversation” for con-union. I recommend his book *The Dignity of Difference*¹ wholeheartedly. On page 83 he describes “conversation” as

not mere debate but the disciplined act of communicating (making my views intelligible to someone who does not share them) and listening (entering into the inner world of someone whose views are opposed to my own). Each is a genuine form of respect, of paying attention to the other, of conferring value on his or her opinions even though they are not mine. In a debate one side wins, the other loses, but both are the same as they were before. In a conversation neither side loses and both are changed, because they now know what reality looks like from a different perspective. That is not to say that either gives up its previous convictions. That is not what conversation is about. It does mean, however, that I may now realize that I must make space for another deeply held belief, and if my own case has been compelling, the other side may understand that it too must make space for mine. That is how public morality is constructed in a plural society—not by a single dominant voice, nor by the relegation of moral issues to the private domain of home and local congregation, but by a sustained act of understanding and seeking to be understood across the boundaries of difference.

There are a lot of big real world problems (think “riots” for example) for which nobody can design a good solution, but some people can design much better solutions than other people. Like with the elephant, different people can have different points of view on such a big problem. None of these points of view are very good, but some are better than others. Scott Page gives much evidence² that a

group of experts, those who individually design the best solutions, is NOT the best group to attack the problem. Why? Because they tend to all have the best point of view—not a very good one, but the best one. Better is a group of people who have some experience but have very different points of view on the problem, some of them not the best. Those sub-optimal points of view carry information that is not in the best view. That group does better because the combination of points of view gets at things that the best point of view misses.

Con-union is not tolerance, relativism, or pluralism

Tolerance says we have nothing to fear from each other, that I can accept you. Con-union goes a step farther and says we need each other. My opponents can be trusted to keep me from deceiving myself.

Relativism says there's no such thing as right or wrong, that my good might be your bad, that we have nothing to struggle over. Con-union says we are struggling over something real, and that some opinions are much better than others. Con-union affirms that none of us can accept bad nor dare deny right. Con-union is the place where we assert and struggle over precisely these things.

Religious pluralism often implies the acceptance of all religious paths as equally valid and adequate, that there are multiple ways to the truth. Con-union says they're all limited, and some may well be better than others, yet each carries some information lacking in the others. We need them all in confrontational communion, which is a way, a process, that transcends the propositional truth of any of the ways.

Taken as propositional belief systems, monotheism, polytheism and atheism (there is one God, there are three million Gods, there is no God) are utterly incompatible. But seen as languages, as well-developed traditions, they all have much to say about the human condition, and we can profit by their being at the communion table.

I am not calling for the abolishment of Christianity as we know it—it has become another perfectly good religion (actually several), and I for one won't change my spots, or the religious language I know and love and that has been my mother's milk. My wife and I have raised our children, and are helping them raise theirs, steeped in the understanding of Christianity, and as faithful pew warmers.

There is a role for the institutional church. Not the role of the Church+, the Messiah, God incarnate—you can't institutionalize that. It is not something we can possess, because it represents a renunciation of any attempt to control the situation. It's not something we can contain or engineer. It's all we can do to stay open to God's ruach, to have the courage to face it. To face myself, I must face outward.

But there is a role for the institutional church. To me the function of a Sunday morning worship service is to remind us of what we are. It is one of many disciplines—prayer, meditation, ritual—we can use to remind us that we are never fully human unless we have that door open to the breeze wafting through.

Each of these disciplines, including the institutional church, is human effort, worthwhile human effort. We can engineer/organize/institutionalize our efforts to teach and remind ourselves of what we have learned about life, and to encourage each other. This is good work.

I decried our tendency to attend churches of people who agree with us, to sort ourselves out into groups having uniform beliefs. But that's inevitable to some extent, and it is desirable that we have different

traditions. We need a degree of comfort, we need cohesion of identity and language, we need a place where we can raise our children using the language that we were raised in—nothing else is as authentic. So I affirm different denominations, provided they have a spirit of con-union with others, and provide for regular engagement with others. There's a rhythm, a breathing, to all this: we can't take tension all the time. But we dare not hide our faces from it. As an Anabaptist, I need Southern Baptists, and Catholics, and all the traditions, and I don't want them to change their identities, though I do need them to engage with me. Not every Sunday, but in some disciplined way.

I need all of our different communities to be graced with the spirit of God who wants and dares to commune with anyone. In my language, I need the Church+, the Messiah that is not owned by any religion because everyone in her has renounced both control and appeasement, and is committed to voicing their particular identity, and to hospitality towards others.

So I will commit to con-union with an Atheist, a Hindu, anyone who commits to con-union with me—I don't care how they learned it. We're likely to call this table by different names. I can't expect them to call it the Church+, or communion or con-union or spirit of God—those terms are my language, not theirs. None of us owns this place.

And I don't want them to change their identities either. Our identities and different languages are what we have to bring to the table. I need the perspective from the other side, just as they need mine. We need to work together to practice our con-union.

In fact, the spirit of God would have me risk communing even with an enemy who doesn't reciprocate. Jesus did.

Wait-wait... What about John 14:6?

(King James Version) "I am the way, the truth, and the life, no man cometh unto the Father except by me." As mentioned before, when the New Testament talks about Jesus, in Ruach we look for it to be talking about the Church+ too. The Church+ as Christ/Messiah is the way, a community graced by what I, in my New Testament Christian language, call the Holy Spirit. It incarnates a spirit that dares to commune with all. It doesn't matter how they learned about it, from my tradition or theirs, nor what they call it. It matters if they're open to it and commit to it. I can recognize that spirit no matter what they call it. By its fruits.

In Matthew 18:20 Jesus says (King James Version) "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." As mentioned before, I take "in his name" to mean "in his nature," which we can recognize. The context of this verse is conflict so strong as to require mediation and witnesses. God reveals himself among us when we meet, in conflict, in the nature of Jesus.

Let me be stark and plain: suppose there are some Hindus and Marxists in a corner of India where there isn't a Christian in sight—who make community together in this way that we Christians have learned from Jesus, that is of the spirit of God. I don't know how they learned it—let's suppose that they don't know the Bible, that they're following Jesus' commands, Jesus' way, though they don't know it nor care. Am I saying that they are Christians? No, they're Polytheists and Atheists. But if God is at work among them, healing the world, then are they a part of the body of the Messiah? I think so, though we Christians don't have to answer that. We only have to be faithful followers of Jesus ourselves.

Finally, notice that Jesus puts truth between way and life. The truth is a way and a life, it is not static

but a process, con-union. The truth is not something you can possess, it is something you can join in, like a fight, or a dance.

Conversion:

Should nobody ever convert?!?

In the mid 90's I was teaching in Nepal, and would hang out at a fountain in the center of our village with a Bible in one hand and a Bhagavad Gita, that's a Hindu scripture, in the other, reading from both, talking to people about both. I recall saying to a Hindu friend: "My goal in these conversations is to become a better Christian. I hope you become a better Hindu." We need many Hindus to stay different, to stay with their Hindu viewpoint, while they learn our tongue, and we learn theirs.

But I'm not saying that nobody should convert.

I'm speaking here of conversions to Christianity, and of conversions away from Christianity, and of conversions between two non-Christian traditions. I have seen cases of all of the above where in my judgement the convert was much better off having converted.

To convert is to change your identity, to change the language of stories and concepts that you use to understand and express what life is all about. It is to leave one home, one mother tongue, and take up another.

There are many good reasons to convert. Some people convert because they've had a bad time of it—they're fleeing trauma in their family or culture or tradition. Or they seek freedom from ongoing oppression. This has been especially important for the powerless, for women, for the colonized, and for oppressed minorities. Or they convert because they've seen too much hypocrisy and immoral behavior, or because they see in an alien culture an entree to a wider world, or simply because their particular life finds a stronger expression in the new tradition.

Many converts are ostracised by their families and oppressed by their old community. Converts are often traumatized witnesses to the shortcomings of the tradition they have left. It is especially difficult for them to value or trust people from that tradition. However engagement, often requiring a third party to maintain a sense of safety, can be healing. It is healing for them to find a trustworthy supporter among followers of their old oppressing tradition. It is healing for them to face, in a supportive environment, the wound of their original home, and to make relationships possible again with those who bear the face of their enemy.

Many people don't have a tradition, they don't have any spiritual home at all. Many people are truly lost, wounded, making very bad choices, their lives in tatters. Many Christian pastors are hard at work waking such people to their allegiance to the good, introducing them to a supportive community, to the discipline of following Jesus personally, to the love of the character of God. Many people in the institutional church are eternally grateful for their salvation from a life not worth living. There's a lilt to the step of many a pastor because of the healing they see happening to people in their community as a result of their labors. This is great good work and I do not speak against it.

In most of this book I am talking about what should happen between persons who are established in the strength of their tradition, who are healthy and literate in their tradition, who are not in need of

conversion but are in need of other points of view, and who are ready to teach and learn from persons in other traditions. We need each other. We need to face each other. And the world needs our con-union.

But con-union can have a high price tag. The next chapter deals with the costs.

Notes:

1. Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, Continuum International, revised edition 2003.
2. Scott Page, *The Difference: How the power of diversity creates better groups, firms, schools, and societies*, Princeton University Press, 2007

Chapter 9

The cost is the Cross

Prior chapters have envisioned the Church+ as a community of people committed to the spirit of God incarnated in Jesus, a spirit who desires communion, and dares confrontation, with all. In this vision, called Ruach, the Church+ is the living Messiah whose agenda is to heal the world into con-union—a commitment to both communion and confrontation, to life together in tension. The Church+, all who commit to con-une, is inhabited by some persons having very different religious (or irreligious) identities. We are not united because of our uniform belief, but by our commitment to live in community in our diversity.

This chapter asks about the costs of confrontational communion.

Risk

Con-union is risky. Since you have renounced control of the situation, only the spirit of God within your enemy prevents your enemy from taking advantage. If the situation is violent, it could be dangerous. If you don't retreat into fight or flight, but continue to be both hospitable and confrontational to your enemy, there are risks. People have gotten killed.

The only way I can be committed to con-union is to risk suffering. Otherwise I've not really renounced both control and running away.

We Christians have a name for the potential cost of con-union. But before I discuss the cross, I want to talk about evil, for the way of the cross is a response to evil.

Evil

We humans have a vast capacity for evil. The first human ever born is named Cain, the second is Abel, and Cain murders Abel. Typical. Genesis 4:10-12 (RSV)

And the Lord said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength; you shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth."

Remember that humanity (*adam*) and ground (*adamah*) are tied tightly together in Hebrew. At creation *adam* is formed from the *adamah*, humanity is formed from the ground. Adam's sin cursed the *adamah* (Gen 3:17). Abel's blood cries out to God from the ground, from humanity. Cain was cursed by humanity, driven from humanity, humanity refuses to work with him (the *adamah* shall no longer yield to you its strength) because he has forsaken synergy for selfishness. He couldn't take the tension of life

and simplified things by eliminating his brother. Who will cooperate with someone who has proven untrustworthy? Cain is outcast, a restless wanderer. Interestingly, God says (4:15) that if anyone forms the cycle of violence by killing Cain, the vengeance will be seven times worse. The trail of us wandering offenders has begun.

Cain becomes (4:20-22) the ancestor of “those who live in tents and raise livestock,” and of “all who play stringed instruments and pipes,” and of the teacher of all who work in bronze and iron. Adam and Eve have other children, but the line of Cain mixes with all humanity.

Local Evil: An individual or small group of individuals can do real damage, but unless they are part of a system their number of victims is limited. Individual rapists, bullies, predators—if they don’t have a sustaining institution, ideology or political system, their direct impact is brutal, but local.

I am not minimizing the trauma to survivors of local evil. Rather, I want to say that often the best response to local evil, such as attempted rape or armed robbery, is to call 911, or try to escape or hide, that is, to use fight or flight. While calling 911 isn’t a personal fight, it certainly invokes coercive force on your behalf. The rule of law, which I affirm and discuss in the last chapter, is based on disciplined coercion and control, so it is a constrained form of “fight.” Same thing for the schoolyard bully—call in the teachers, call in greater disciplined force on your behalf. If the system works for you and will protect you from harm, you can use the system. Below I’ll discuss the advisability of other, riskier options, including personally fighting.

Systemic Evil: It bears keeping in mind that the system doesn’t always work for everybody. Systemic, structural evil is rife in this world. Often whole economies are based on monetizing violence. Classic examples include the systemic violent seizure and colonization of land, and slavery. An economy based on slavery makes life easy for some, at huge cost to others. It takes violence of some sort to maintain that economy. There are more modern economic systems which use a disparity of power to make some people work more and consume less so that others can work less and consume more. Example: a mafia shakes you down to collect “protection” money. Second example: the vicious link between globalization and corruption, where governments in weaker countries are corrupted by generating most of their budget not from taxation of their people, but from rich contracts with international corporations to extract natural resources. Such a corrupted government is not financially dependent on the people it supposedly represents, and the rule of law in those countries is used to maintain the “stability” necessary for the extraction. The government uses the legal system of the country to oppress its own people, in other words it co-opts the rule of law, which becomes part of the problem, not the solution.

But systemic evil isn’t always about economics, it can be about domination: who has the reigns of violence. Religion, political ideologies, or cultural values can be used to justify the use of violence by the dominant group against the other. Examples include paternalism, racism, and suppression of political opposition. Violence is used periodically against the oppressed who are demonized as if they were the source of the problem—burn the women at the stake, lynch the blacks, pogrom the Jews, incarcerate the opposition. Here violence is not monetized, but used to maintain a disparity of violence—one group can and does use violence, the other cannot. One group is in control.

The way of the cross is a response to systemic evil.

The way of the Cross

So what happens if confrontational communion breaks down by one party violently asserting control? What happens if there never was a healthy relationship, if you, as a minority people, have for generations been oppressed by the majority? Must the situation fester in either oppression or a cycle of violence? What to do if you live in a cycle of violence, now?

What to do if you find that you, or your people, have had the advantage of oppression, have lived within a system that funnelled benefits to you by exercising a disparity of power?

I'm going to recommend risking the cross to both the oppressor and the oppressed, though the two cases are obviously not the same because of the power difference. The path I'm going to recommend is one that brings both parties, but in particular the oppressor, to the point that they renounce all use of power and accept powerlessness. It is risky for the oppressed, because the oppressor could reverse course and use their power to make the situation worse. It is risky for the oppressor, because in forswearing power they expose themselves wholly to the wrath of the traumatized oppressed. It seems utter foolishness to both parties, until you look at the alternatives.

At this point you should be thinking "What in the world is going to bring the oppressor to do that?!" which is the subject of the next chapter. For the moment, I want to look at the alternatives.

An individual abused person may be able to escape and avoid their abuser indefinitely, and I affirm that choice. There's nothing wrong with flight when it works for us. But sometimes we love our abuser. It is our parent or child or spouse, our church or community or home. The rest of this discussion assumes the hard case: you want the abuse to stop, after which you want a continuing relationship with your former abuser, a healthy relationship.

Avoidance isn't always an option. It is very difficult for an oppressed ethnicity, religious group or minority to avoid their oppressing culture, which has erected a system that controls the oppressed. To live, the oppressed have to forge a viable relationship within which they can productively work to dismantle that system. It will be a long slog, the relationship has to be robust. But first the relationship has to be built.

Past or ongoing trauma:

Yoder and Zehr in *The Little Book of Trauma Healing*¹ give a good introduction to the hard path climbing out of trauma toward (re)establishment of a healthy relationship. I highly recommend this book—by contrast, the discussion here is a brief sketch from a different point of view. Ruach takes Jesus as the image of the Church+, and uses the narrative of Jesus' passion and cross to talk about that hard path to a life together in tension, con-union. We must take up our cross, i.e. risk the cost of the failure of our attempt to forge con-union, and follow Jesus.

Restitution payment, blood money, or a sacrifice paid for by the aggressor, can never restore what the survivor really wants. The survivor wants the past undone.

Imagine for a moment someone whose child has been murdered. They don't want to live in this nightmare of a present, downstream from the aggression. They grieve the loss of their child's life, of

their life with that child that they wanted so much and worked so hard for, and of the whole future of the world that could have existed. The past is unchangeable, and that future is gone, there is no real restitution possible. The only way to restoration of relationship is for the survivor to bear that cost, to live in this present that they do not want, to live on that cross, and from there dare to desire a relationship with their enemy.

Imagine for a moment a people who have been oppressed for generations, with many dead and many traumatized. They grieve the loss of the music, the discoveries, the lives of the people that could have been, the whole world that could have existed. The past is unchangeable, that future is gone, nothing can be done to restore it. The only way to restoration of relationship between the survivors and the aggressors is for the survivors to bear that unredeemable cost, to live in this present that they do not want, to live on that cross, and from there dare to desire a relationship with their enemy.

Often survivors don't want a relationship. They just want to be left alone. That is a natural enough reaction, and for individuals it can work. But for groups such as minorities, historically it has not been viable, because relating to the majority is unavoidable.

People think that the cross is only about forgiveness, but it's not. From the cross Jesus, bearing the Spirit of God, forgave his aggressors: "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). But there's much more to the way of the cross than forgiveness.

In particular, getting to a healthy relationship with the enemy is not something the survivor can do alone, unilaterally. Reconciliation to con-union necessarily takes both parties. To enter con-union, the former aggressor must accept the risk of con-union. The aggressor must repent of their aggression and of their domination, to relinquish all control over a survivor who has hard evidence of their untrustworthiness, who has every reason to hate them, and who will be very slow to trust them again. The aggressor must take up the risk of the cross, risking that the survivor will respond with violence or other forms of damage. Why an aggressor would ever make such an insane move is the subject of the next chapter.

In a longstanding cycle of violence both parties have past trauma to deal with. Both parties see themselves as oppressed. Risking the cross, for both, is the way out of the cycle of violence. That is the timeless character, the nature of God who accepts life on a cross and still wants con-union, the breath of God that animates the new temple, the body of the Messiah.

While it cannot change the past, the cross is the only thing that can heal past trauma between peoples. Though we live a life we did not choose, if we dare con-union with an enemy, and they dare to meet us there too, we can arrive at a livable relationship in tension. The experience of that con-union, in time, can slowly grow our confidence that the trauma won't happen to us again. The experience of con-union can gradually convince our traumatized guts that the world has a place for us.

2 Corinthians 5:18-19:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

"Sins" here are offenses, trespasses, aggressions, abuses, oppressions. Reconciliation only happens between enemies. In the Christ/Messiah/Church+, we can be reconciled to our enemies.

Evil is real, and the cross happens

Sometimes people are evil. Jesus said so, he said that God sends blessings on the just and the unjust, on the good and the evil (Matt 5:45). Who will initiate cooperation with someone who has proven untrustworthy? Who will accept those with the mark of Cain, those who have blood on their hands? God will. That is God's character, and can be ours.

Our commitment to God's spirit who attempts to forge community with all does not mean we think that everybody is nice. It means we risk the cross. Our attempt will not always be successful.

The cross happens. If it never happened, it wouldn't be a risk. To take that risk is the spirit of God with us, poured out in our midst, Emmanuel.

The dark side of the cross

I've been describing the cross occupied by the innocent abused who wish nonetheless to forge a relationship with their enemy. Strangely, the cross can also be seen as the risk taken by a perceived aggressor, or a repentant aggressor, who wants to forge con-union with those they have oppressed.

There is a dark thread running throughout the Bible. Humanity has a grievance with God. In biblical times many believed that if someone was blind, deaf, crippled, sick, poor or oppressed, it was because they or their parents had sinned, had done something to offend God, and that God had responded with the injury. Hard times were understood as a punishment for sin, as a curse.

And the blind, deaf, crippled, sick, poor or oppressed felt the disapproval of their more blessed neighbors. Even today, in contrast to people who have 'normal' lives, some of us who have difficult lives feel cursed. We have a grievance against God. We ask, why me? As oppressed people we ask, what have we done to deserve this? We do not feel blessed, we feel cursed.

This thread starts in Job, one of the earliest books of the Bible, and continues all the way through the Bible to the healing ministry of Jesus.

I don't believe that God has any responsibility for our trauma, but to explain why is not my goal here. I know that many people do, and certainly Jesus knew that many in his day felt cursed by God.

In this dark light, Jesus reaches out to those who are enemies of God, not because they have offended, but because they are offended by God. For them, God is their abuser.

The innocent do not have to sacrifice for their innocence. A sacrifice is made to atone for an offence. A sacrifice is made by the abuser, to restore relationship. The dark side of the cross is that God, as the perceived guilty oppressive party, renounces all power, risks the cross, and stands defenceless before oppressed people disappointed that they had not been delivered from their trauma.

I believe that God stands with the oppressed, paraphrasing Jesus in Matthew 25 that if you have oppressed the least of these my brothers and sisters, you have oppressed me. So the terrible irony here is that God stands defenceless before God's brothers and sisters, the oppressed. And we call for crucifixion.

How far is God willing to go to establish a relationship with those who hate God for what has happened to them? We who feel cursed want God dead, for not saving us, for giving us this fate. From the bleakness of this end comes something, what, hope? Hope that God will not be against us, hope that God has revealed a character that was not what we expected. God is not great because He has paternalistic, oppressing power that we must submit to, but because God accepts total weakness, puts h'self at our disposal, and faces our wrath defenceless.

Jesus is showing the way out for those who find that they are empowered oppressors. The way back to a relationship. The risk of the cross.

Half the story

I've described the cross as a risk, as a necessity for escaping cycles of violence, and as God's risking suffering, and when suffering yet desiring con-union, with us.

But so far I've only told half the story. While the cross is the response of the Church+ to violence committed against her in the past, can this Messiah prevent injustice from happening in the first place? Must we always look back, or can we do something about the future?

If there was nothing more to say about the way of the cross, the only thing the New Testament would have to offer the oppressed of this world would be a cross to climb up on, alone. What hope is there that oppressors will respond with anything but more oppression? Why in the world would an oppressor choose to risk the cross?

If there was nothing more to say about the way of the cross, this Messiah would not be able to bring justice to the oppressed, would not be able to banish violence and establish Shalom on this earth. But this Messiah, the Church+, is armed, though her weapon is strange. The next chapter describes the weapon of the Messiah.

Notes:

1. Carolyn Yoder and Howard Zehr, *The Little Book of Trauma Healing*, Good Books 2005

Chapter 10

Ignition, the weapon of the Church+

Prior chapters have envisioned the Church+ as a community of people committed to the spirit of God incarnated in Jesus, a spirit who desires communion, and dares confrontation, with all. In this vision, called Ruach, the Church+ is the living Messiah whose agenda is to heal the world into con-union—a commitment to both communion and confrontation, to life together in tension. The Church+, all who commit to con-une, is inhabited by some persons having very different religious (or irreligious) identities. We are not united because of our uniform belief, but by our commitment to live in community in our diversity.

This chapter asks whether this Messiah has a weapon.

Ignition

Ruach pays attention to the link between wind and spirit and speech. God's spirit is likened to wind and by extension to all kinds of flows that make inanimate, dead matter move—the river of water flowing from the throne of God (Rev 22:1), the gust of wind at Pentecost, and the flames of fire over the disciples heads. Acts 2:1-4 is a classic Ruach move:

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

I presume the reason this modern translation (NIV) uses the somewhat archaic “other tongues” instead of the more modern and accurate “other languages” is to draw attention to the Greek word-play between languages as “tongues” and the tongues of fire—between the experience of the alien frameworks of the foreign languages and the experience of the spirit of God, con-union.

And what was the usual way to ignite a fire in those days? You borrowed coals from another fire. The following was taken from Yahoo Answers UK/Ireland (retrieved April 10 2013). It was the best response to the question “What does the expression '*to heap coals of fire on his head*' mean?”

It's actually used in the Bible. It means to treat someone who wrongs you with extra kindness, above and beyond the norm and in spite of whatever they have done to you. It usually shocks the person and points out to them that they have done something wrong.

Romans 12:19-21

Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." [Prov. 25:21-22]
Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

This answer, that it “shocks the person and points out to them that they have done something wrong,” is close, but it misses the mark. A better answer is that *heaping coals ignites the tongues of fire*.

The Church+'s weapon is to ignite the spirit of God within our enemy.

What the Messiah does when threatened

When threatened by an enemy, the Church+ ignores the tyrannical part of them, to speak respectfully, reverently to the image of God in them. That enemy is a human, whose nostrils are made to breathe God's spirit. We have a claim on that spirit's sense of justice, we press that claim boldly, trusting, risking that the spirit is there to be invoked. We do not let go. Our advocate is the image of God within them. If this spirit is elicited and not refused, the enemy is healed by their discovery of their true self—to be fully human is to be animated by the spirit of God.

Someone who is fearful or traumatized has great difficulty opening themselves to this spirit—they have a fevered need to control the situation. If at the same time they have more power than we do, they have some confidence in their ability to dominate. Why should they negotiate with us—risk lack of control—when they have the power to control? So we comfort the enemy's fears, yes, the oppressor's fears. They especially fear those they have oppressed, since they deeply feel how offensive they have been, and expect an angry violent response. We show them hospitality, and make them feel safe. We listen to their story, their trauma, and tell it back to them so they know we have heard it well. And we assert our needs, our point of view, our identity. If they begin to see us as trustworthy opponents, people who can be negotiated with in a healthy relationship, they can begin also to take the risk of life together in tension.

Our only salvation is our enemy's salvation.

In short, we deal with them the way we deal with each other, in confrontative communion. The Church+ has no outsiders.

Another word for ignition is inspiration. Ruach says *respiration* is only whole when it is *inspiration* with the spirit of God. Humans are prone to imitation, and in being open to God's spirit ourselves we give our enemy a pattern to imitate, which helps them to take the risk to open themselves to God's spirit. God's spirit in us in-spires, in-spirits, our enemy.

Ignition is the opposite of demonization. We see, in our enemy's face, the face of God. We ignore the rest, not because we do not see it, but because we need to deal with the Godly part of them.

Ignition is an attempt to heal the enemy. The Church+'s tactic is to heal, to raise the dead, by inspiring people to welcome back their original spirit. She is a healer Messiah.

Examples

The successful use of ignition is not new. Martin Luther King Jr. used it very explicitly. A PBS video *Birmingham 1963*¹ has TV news footage of Birmingham police chief Bull Connor's fight against civil rights activists that summer. The images of dignified, peaceful marchers being attacked by police with firehoses and vicious dogs ignited the nation, as people struggled with who they most identified with, which persons carried their spirit, what was their spirit? The video states

He was asking white Americans in a sense to, finally, after hundreds of years, confront this contradiction: they believed in freedom, and yet they denied freedom to African Americans. Which was their true self? In a sense asking white America, "Are you Bull Connor, or are you someone who believes in human rights?" Forcing people to make a choice, in a non-threatening manner.

In the eloquent letter he wrote from a Birmingham Jail, King says

You may well ask: "Why direct action? Why sit ins, marches and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent resister may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word "tension." I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth.

People who parse the world into winners and losers, who believe that having coercive power over one's enemy is the only pragmatic way to bring about justice, cannot understand King. The purpose of his direct action was to get to confrontation at the negotiation table. The force of his direct action was the tension created in the community by their envy at the strength and spirit displayed by the resisters, the recognition that one wanted to be like them, that they were one's true heroes, that one identified with them, that they were displaying one's true spirit. Ignition. That is why King eschewed violence—it stops ignition cold. Non-violence is not enough—people must feel the commitment not to coerce or dominate or placate or hide. Many in the non-violent movement still buy into power politics, and so deprive themselves of being lastingly effective.

King admired the phrase "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Ignition is a calculated evolutionary strategy. Conflict can be temporarily extinguished by killing or fleeing, oppressing or placating now, but the deferred costs to future generations will be greater. To minimize the total cost to all generations, I should bring the whole risk into now, into my lifetime. It may cost me my life, but I may save the lives of many in the future. I should create a healthy relationship with my enemy now or die trying. I should risk being open to a mutual salvation, or else the future costs will be far greater. Over time, the lowest cost and least reversible path to justice and peace is for me to face my enemy, invoke the image of God in them, ask that image for blessing, and not let go, today.

Ignition does not guarantee justice for you individually, now. It is a long-term risky investment.

Faced with aggression we have these three options: fight, flight or ignite. The best response to local evil such as attempted rape or armed robbery usually is to call 911 or hide, that is, to use fight or flight.

While calling 911 isn't a personal fight, it certainly invokes coercive force on your behalf. Ignition may work in such cases, but the risks are very high. One-on-one cases are worst-case scenarios for ignition, though I will consider them below. Where ignition shines is in social change against systemic evil, when leadership of whole communities of people are involved, like the Birmingham protests. Bull Connor lived with a supportive mayor and city council, but the mayor and council represented a wider community and dealt with many issues. Successful leaders have some semblance of empathy—the ability to put yourself in someone else's shoes is a prerequisite to understanding them. Even the relatively unified and very prejudiced leadership of that community felt the impact on their base of the contrast between the demonstrators and the police.

An account from South Sudan brings another example of ignition. In the maelstrom of political, military, economic, ethnic and religious tensions that embroil South Sudan, there has been much violence between the Nuer and the Dinka communities. Ashworth et al. write²

Perhaps the most important, and emotionally powerful, part of the preparation for the Church-led People to People Peace Process was the exchange visits in which five chiefs and a women's representative from each community, accompanied by Church leaders, visited the other community. Traditional rituals were performed. There was great fear, but also great courage, joy, hospitality and reciprocity. At one point, chiefs from one community offered to act as hostages to guarantee the safety of the others; the offer strengthened the resolve of the others and was graciously declined. "Ancestors took risks for peace, and so must we, being a chief means being ready to lead, even to die... so let us go in pursuit of peace, this is required of us'... The commitment, and the words and deeds of honour among the chiefs spread rapidly throughout all the communities" (NSCC, 2002, p 55)[³]. Seeing the opposing chiefs in their own territory, people were now convinced that a real peace process was under way.

During the People to People conference in Wunlit, there was a great deal of talk about returning cattle which had been taken and women and children who had been abducted. A Dinka chief left the meeting and returned with two young boys. He admitted that they had been abducted, and asked if any Nuer present knew them; if so, he was ready to return them immediately. A Nuer chief recognised them as his sons, and immediately burst into tears. "I am not crying because my sons are being returned to me. I am crying because I have killed Dinka children!"

Even for persons whose actions had been monstrous, the "commitment, and the words and deeds of honor" were contagious. From the depths of despair, each side was able to reject seeing only the demonic in the other side, despite atrocities. Each side was able to inspire the other to greater heights of courage, and leadership was able to inspire those who followed them.

What if they ignore you?

The classic frustration of the oppressed is that their protests are ignored by the powerful. The tired dynamic is that the oppressed then turn to violence, to sabotage, to terror, to try to force the powerful to the negotiation table.

But an oppressor cannot ignore the oppressed—they've got to be doing something to maintain the

oppression. And that's our opportunity. Ignition hinges on having faith that one's enemy has some image or representative of God in them, and taking the risk of speaking to that persona in the enemy, struggling with them using the respectful terms and attitude that one would use to struggle with God in prayer. Providing respect, honor and dignity—theirs—can bring a dominating enemy to the point of risking that you too have a good side worth negotiating with.

Often oppression is systemic. That is, there are laws, treaties, regulations, tax incentives, and bureaucratic processes that make the system a web difficult to pick up at any strategic place. But there are people who implement the web—the police, the regulators, the legislators, the lawyers, the bureaucrats, the soldiers. And there are people in the chain of command above them. Being human, all these people are vulnerable to ignition.

Systemic oppression often has cultural support. There will be a language in place that rationalizes and justifies the system. There will be voices—preachers, politicians, songwriters—who champion that language. They have blinded themselves to the injustice, they've blocked it out, it's too painful to look at. And they can't face the ostracism dealt to those who would tear the social fabric so deeply by drawing attention to it. But they too are human.

Hannah Arendt wrote⁴ that most evil is banal, that even Adolf Eichmann, the chief of operations of the Nazi program to exterminate Jews, was not an inhuman monster but a horrifyingly normal human. From the point of view of Ruach, it is a corollary that even Eichmann could have been vulnerable to the hospitality and respect of ignition. The oppressed can attack structure by seeking out the humans who implement that structure, and challenging them with ignition.

Ignition is the answer to the question “How do you turn a bloodthirsty enemy, or a thoughtless one, into a trustworthy opponent?” We do not beg for mercy. We do not cooperate. Don't think that a display of cooperation will incite the other to cooperate. We don't pay money. We're not appealing to their base instincts. We're greeting their highest and true self.

We offer hospitality and respect and opposition. Our approach is not tinged with any withdrawal of our requests. We will not accept less than a healthy peer relationship. But our approach must not be tainted with any shred of disrespect.

This is a bit tongue-in-cheek, but consider trespassing as a virtue. Call a “trespasser” someone who
at need, will invade what the powerful consider their property, and

conducts themselves respectfully and with hospitality, given that they know they are stepping on someone else's turf and toes.

A nomad, driving their flocks across your land. A stranger in a strange land. A wandering Aramean.

All names have limits, and the name "trespasser" is limited in that it doesn't convey how much respect is involved. It's no good just to tell people to be conflictive, to voice their point of view boldly. There are many abrasive people who don't need to hear that. The difference is in respect. If I'm going to define trespassing as a virtue, I need respect to be a foundation of trespassing. If respect for others' dignity doesn't shine from every facet of someone's character and communication, they do not have the virtue of trespass.

The trespasser treats the person they're trespassing against the same way they would welcome God.

God comes to Abraham as a trespasser—Abraham would rather the Lord not destroy his nephew's city, the Lord does anyway (Genesis 18-19). Jacob comes to Esau as a trespasser (Genesis 27-33, see chapter 2). The Canaanite mother trespasses against Jesus (Matthew 15:21-28, see chapter 5).

Prayer, a struggle with God, is my model for how to succeed as a trespasser, for how to be hospitable to a trespasser, and for how two trespassers treat each other.

The Trespassers' Prayer

Strangers, we honor you as we would our fathers and our mothers,
though we don't understand where you're coming from.

Your character is that which we most honor,
your reputation that which we will most defend.

Make yourself at home here among us.

Now we need you to do so-and-so

<name whatever you need—even you expect it to anger them>.

Forgive us this offense as we forgive yours.

Don't be angry with us, we can work this out,

For this, the only place we have, is yours,

the power and the glory,

for ever and ever,

Amen.

Most of you have already guessed, but my inspiration for this prayer is the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13). It's an invitation to con-union. We in the Church+, like nomads in the wilderness, constantly trespass on each other, and we live by asking.

The following is from a sort of handbook of ignition at theWayOfTheHealer.org, a web site I created to explore ignition in secular language.

If someone has steeled themselves to attack you, it is often in response to some trauma, or to some problem they see no other way of solving. Find out what trauma they've suffered or what problems they face. Ask them. Listen carefully, and feed back their story to them in your own words, so that they know you have heard them, and they hear you making their point clearly. Listening can take a lot of time. Invest in listening to a potential enemy before a conflict heats up. Even when damage is ongoing, risk some damage to yourself in order to make sure your enemy has caught the idea of how to listen well—because you're about to ask them to listen to you.

Invoke the trustworthy opponent in your enemy

You need a trustworthy negotiating opponent, so speak respectfully, even reverently to your enemy. You can't trust your enemy (yet), but you must take some risk that your enemy has a trustworthy persona somewhere inside them. All viable humans do. That persona is your best friend since it can ambush your enemy from within. Whenever you speak, speak to that part of your enemy—as their core identity, since that is what you wish them to be. So speak to your enemy as if they were that persona, wholly. Speak respectfully, humbly, even reverently to them.

You have to get them to identify with it. It goes without saying that you must speak from within your own trustworthy self. This makes you both vulnerable.

If you start from a belief that your enemy cannot be a trustworthy opponent, then you believe they are sub-human, and they will sense your belief, and the relationship will polarize into a normal conflict. Risking that they are as fully human as you are is key, it is the hardest part of being a healer.

Ask for justice

Ask the trustworthy opponent for whatever you need to survive. Not the whole solution to the problem, just what you need to survive for now. Once you find that they are listening to you, and that they are treating you as a trustworthy opponent, and that they have given you breathing room, you can go on to the next steps, else you've got to repeat the steps up to this point. Be patient and insistent, and don't let go.

Do not beg your enemy for mercy. Do not speak to whatever insecure persona is running the enemy's life right now. Speak to the persona in them that is fully human, that has a sense of justice. To it you have no need to beg. You have a claim on its sense of justice, press that claim boldly.

You're not likely to get what you initially wanted. Ignition is not a way to victory. It is a way to a shared, negotiated, healthy, confrontational community.

One attraction of a violent response to violence is that we really hate to be losers. We will spite ourselves not to be losers. Game theorists have studied⁵ people playing simple games involving real money. For example, consider a simple game between two players, played for 30 rounds. In each round of the game each player has to choose between two simple actions A or B.

Choice A can create wealth. For example, if you choose A and the other player also chooses A, you both gain a dollar. If you choose A and the other guy chooses B, he gains two dollars and you lose two dollars. Relative to him, you either tie or lose. In the first case wealth is created, in the second case it's a wash—he gets what you lose.

Choice B can destroy wealth. If you choose B and the other player also chooses B, you both lose a dollar. If you choose B and the other guy chooses A, you gain two dollars and he loses two dollars. Relative to him, you either tie or win. In the first case, wealth is destroyed, in the second case it's a wash.

The only action a player can do on each round is their choice of A or B. The game is set up so that the only information a player receives is how much money they're making or losing on each round, and there's no way for the players to communicate to each other, to punish or inspire each other to make different choices.

So what do people invariably do over the long haul: choose to create wealth but risk coming out second best, or to destroy wealth but never be second best? Be second in a rich world, or first in a poor world? You guessed it, even though the poorest in a rich world might be richer than the richest in a poor world. We will spite ourselves in order not to be the losers.

Ignition is not a way to come out on top. It's a way to find a mutually productive life together. It creates the possibility for health and wealth. It does not give up on justice—you don't let go until the situation is fair. But it comes at it from below, not from above. You are not in control.

Fight, Flight or Ignite: Nightmare Scenarios

The cynic says “Let's get practical here, do you really think that power can just be wished away?”

We often pose ourselves scenarios which seem impossible to solve by ignition. An example: “If you're awakened in the middle of the night by someone with a Kalashnikov who has come into your house to rape and kill, do you really think that trying to ignite the spirit of God in him is going to work?” Or “suppose someone wants to kill your grandmother” or any of a whole class of nightmare scenarios that question our ability to react effectively to a simple violent situation with anything less than violence.

Another class of nightmare scenarios involves massive structural evil. The trail of tears, slavery, the holocaust, human trafficking, Darfur, trying to challenge a tyrannical regime from below. An example: “You've just jumped down from your boxcar at Birkenau. Do you really think you can talk your way out of that? Do you somehow think those Jews didn't try to evoke mercy in the guards, or that none of them were as sophisticated or spiritual as you? Never again.”

As I said above, the most reliable defense for local evil such as the Kalashnikov scenario is to hide or call 911, i.e. to invoke the rule of law, which I discuss in the next chapter. And in the Birkenau scenario the prison guards were not community leaders, they were pawns, some chosen for their lack of apparent empathy. So these are worst-case scenarios for ignition, though I still want to examine them closely.

Here I want to talk about what happens if the rule of law is out of the question, either because it has failed you as in the Birkenau scenario—it is the system that is oppressing you—or because it is not available to you, as in the Kalashnikov scenario if you can't call the police because you don't have a phone or you're staring down the barrel of the gun. Supposing you have some weapon—mace, a gun, a grenade—the question here is whether taking violence into your own hands is more productive than ignition.

I am not talking morals here, I'm talking pragmatics. If your church or mosque, temple or synagogue is surrounded by a bloodthirsty genocidal mob, and some of your young guys want to make a brave sortie to either cow the mob or fight a path for you all to escape to a safer place, more power to them, I hope they succeed. In those circumstances I affirm flight or fight—those who hide in holes or deceive their way out, or those who turn at bay, show their teeth, and fight to the last. The last-ditch defensive fight against all odds is not the cause of the great evils in this world, save that some make it justification for their belief that the sole effective rejoinder to violence is violence, and others, the media and the politicians, push us to panic before we are existentially threatened, to justify “the best defense is a good offense.”

I'm talking pragmatics. If you've got a bull-horn, or if it's not really a mob because there is still effective leadership out there and you've got a mobile phone to talk to them, if there is any way to effectively communicate to them and they are in any state to listen, then ignition could be a better bet. And most certainly it is a better bet if they are a whole people, an ethnicity or nation.

I want to ask the question, are the worst-case scenarios for ignition justification for a belief that the sole effective response to violence is violence?

Ignition is no good solution to those nightmare scenarios. But neither is violence nor hiding. I think the chance of having a happy ending to those situations is tiny, whether you use fight, flight or ignite. But beyond revealing our blind faith in violence, our thinking about such nightmare scenarios often suffers the following defects.

The first is that that we ignore reliability. Violent self-defense isn't very reliable. We daydream about getting the drop on the perpetrator, but reality usually doesn't work that way. In the Kalashnikov scenario above, if you are surprised, then even if you're carrying a gun, the chance of your surviving your attempt to fire is small. Same thing for the Birkenau example, in spades. So to beat violence as a practical means of self-defense, ignition does not have to be always successful—just more often than violence is. There will of course be cases where violence would have worked, and ignition wouldn't. There'll be others the other way around. I don't know how to tell, generally and ahead of time, which are which.

If a bear is attacking your child, you shoot the bear if you can. If the bear was rabid, without regret. If you were camping irresponsibly in a protected wildlife area and the bear is defending its young whom it thinks your child is threatening, then it was your fault, but you still shoot the bear—then work out your repentance by campaigning for increased isolation for the bears from idiots such as yourself. The difference with humans is that we can communicate with them, and their problems are usually social, and admit of social healing.

In the Kalashnikov example, one can imagine conditions under which you should shoot. If you're a good shot and you have the drop on the guy and you've got good evidence of his intent and of his being closed to communication, you shoot. But in the more likely case that he's got the drop on you and is conflicted about his intent, ignition is a better bet. As I've said already, your chances are tiny—but larger than with violence.

We cannot infer from the Kalashnikov and Birkenau nightmares that violence is *in general* more reliable than ignition, even in these scenarios.

Secondly we ignore structure. Situations such as Birkenau, where the guards implementing the horrors were selected for the task and caught in a net of SS surveillance and reprisal, are bad tactical territory for defence by either violence or ignition. If the person threatening you is themselves encased in a system, an organizational structure where they know they are being watched, and they know they will suffer if they don't obey an order, then they are not free. They are themselves oppressed. They may kill you in an attempt to appease/placate the demands of their commanders/oppressors. Whether using violence or ignition, anyone would prefer making their attack when and where the organizational structure is not so strong.

Whether using violence or ignition, to have a reasonable chance you have to attack the system before you get to Birkenau.

Thirdly while violence can prevent a harm to you from taking place, ignition presents the possibility of both preventing the harm and healing the would-be perpetrator. If one could imagine a case where the two have equal chances of preventing the harm, ignition would be preferable because if it succeeded,

much more would have been accomplished.

Lastly, the media manipulate us by our fears. Certain scenarios stick in our minds because they frustrate our human experience and expectation that ignition very often does work. We are fascinated imagining scenarios where it doesn't. They engage all our fears of being losers, of injustice. Media take advantage of this to sell their products. Such scenarios become the tropes of movies and novels, usually where some utterly implausible solution is found, through incredible luck, that lets the good guys kill all the bad guys in a nice, bloody catharsis. The result is to focus our minds on such nightmare situations rather than on the opportunities we have to ignite God's spirit in people to change the dynamics ahead of time. These opportunities exist, they must be seized on.

Ignition as a spiritual discipline

As, or before, I encounter any other human—my spouse, my child, a friend, a stranger, an enemy—I try to remind myself of what they are, and of what I am. We are capable of hosting God's spirit. I set myself to search for the face of God in them, the face of a trustworthy opponent, someone with a message for me, a perception for me. I set myself to be quick to report to them if I see anything amiss—if I have a message for them. It takes paying attention. It is our mutual care, to see what the other does not, and tell each other about it.

This is my daily humble spiritual discipline. It does not require solitude—on the contrary, it requires other people.

The next chapter asks whether the Church+, exercising ignition, can seriously pursue the Messianic agenda of protecting the weak from the strong, responding effectively to end oppression, and establishing security.

Notes:

1. On youtube search for the PBS video "Birmingham 1963," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-0ID37bq8YI>
2. <as yet untitled>: *the role of the Church in the Sudanese Civil War 1983-2005*, by J. Ashworth, H. R. Lual, E. Lowilla, and M. Ryan, to be published in 2014, reproduced with permission from the draft of November 24 2013, private communication from Ashworth.
3. *The Story of People-to-People Peacemaking in Southern Sudan*, NSCC (New Sudan Council of Churches), 2002.
4. Hannah Arendt *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a Report on the Banality of Evil*, Penguin Classics, 2006.
5. A survey of a large number of such experiments designed to answer why simple games such as the one I've described result in a slow degradation towards choice B is in Ananish Chaudhuri, *Sustaining Cooperation in Laboratory Public Goods Experiments: A Selective Survey of the Literature*, 14

Experimental Economics 47-83 (2011). A pdf can be found on the web.

Chapter 11

The Healer Messiah, the Church+, can establish peace and justice

Prior chapters have envisioned the Church+ as a community of people committed to the spirit of God, the spirit who dares to make community with, and confront, even an enemy. In this vision, the Church+ is the living Messiah incarnating that spirit whose agenda is to heal the world into confrontational communion—con-union. The Church+, all who commit to con-une, is inhabited by some persons having very different religious (or irreligious) identities. We are not united because of our uniform belief, but by our commitment to live in community in our diversity. We have a weapon: the spirit of God in us ignites the spirit of God in our enemy, and they are healed. This final chapter asks whether the Church+, exercising ignition, can protect the weak from the strong, stop oppression, and establish security.

Security by coercion

Life for us humans continues to be a hard, violent passage. Sometimes we feel that flame, smoke and cries erupt on all sides. In this chaos we keep trying to find better forms of government.

The root task of government is to meet our fears—to give us security, to keep social order, and to deal with our enemies. A government, by force, prevents the use of force by anyone else in their territory, and promises to protect the weak from the strong inside their territory, and also from the strong outside their territory. And of course for providing security, government takes your money.

That's a reasonable description of a street-gang petty mafia. You pay protection money. I take a less cynical view of government below, but bear with me for the moment to entertain the analogy of government as an evolved form of mafia.

We have evolved better and better forms of mafia, mafia which provide more reliable and less corrupt justice (protection of the weak from the strong), mafia which are hamstrung by checks and balances from their more egregious abuses of power, mafia where the cultural value given to the ideal of one-person-one-vote can on occasion constrain the manipulations of the powerful. But there are obvious problems.

Governments are often manipulated by the wealthy via corruption. Turf wars between governments have been a blight on history. And since a government institutionalizes the interests of the people within its territory, the narrowness of this vision—to benefit a particular population more than the rest of humanity—creates conflict.

In the Hebrew tradition there was an embodiment of the promise of security and justice. Someday, someone in David's line would be anointed King, and would finally establish real justice and peace on this earth. The Hebrews waited, still wait, for this Messiah. They want justice and peace, healing,

Shalom, here, in this world. It clearly hasn't come yet.

The appropriate use of coercion: the rule of law

My metaphor for understanding appropriate coercion, even violent force, is a surgeon's scalpel. While surgery can definitely be beneficial, no one believes that cutting is the root of health. Every use of a scalpel is a wound that will have to heal. We don't permit the untrained or incompetent to wield a scalpel. Surgeons—exclusively highly trained and certified people—use it only where they can anticipate the undesirable effects, and know that they can control those effects, and that the benefit of the surgery outweighs the injury that is done. We don't use it for tuberculosis, or malaria, or dozens of other diseases. The scalpel is never the source of healing. But its appropriate use can be life saving.

So with violent coercion, which cannot be the source of justice. But if your child starts to run into the street in front of a bus and there's no time for talk, you grab them by the collar. Even if they think you are mean or if they get scratched by your fingernails. Even if they become angry at you, and your relationship suffers. The value of stopping them is high, and you have a good relationship and the time to heal the wound inflicted on the relationship when you coerce them. The risks are known and low, because you have the time and knowledge and relationship within which to deal with any negative effects.

So my criteria for use of violence are competence, resources and risk. That is, violence can be used when the need is great relative to the risk that the consequences of the resulting trauma are beyond our sure knowledge and resources to heal.

Pragmatically, if an individual has lost all freedom of choice—by being in drug withdrawal, by being in a situation that triggers deep-seated reactions to past traumas, by being mentally ill—then coercion can be useful to constrain them from hurting others or themselves. Coercion is no solution, healing will have to come from elsewhere, later, but coercion can prevent greater damage.

The rule of law is one of the most valuable human constructs of all time. It is a huge edifice, an enterprise of legislation (some process that gives us all a voice, to pass and publish the laws we agree to live under), enforcement (police), and judiciary (the multi-layer appellate court system, prosecution and defense lawyers). It is very costly, but its benefits far outweigh its costs. The rule of law is the image of the surgeon and scalpel metaphor—it takes great education, great expertise, to appropriately exercise the rule of law, and we bend over backwards to avoid its abuses: assuming innocence until proven guilty, reading Miranda rights, providing public defenders, careful police training. Our results are far, far from perfect, we have a long way to go, but there is a historical skein of legal development whose clear intent is to limit the abuses and trauma of our use of violent coercion. We are embarked on that path and making some headway. It is this skein that I affirm.

The rule of law has proper application in protecting the public peace, in regulation of such things as vehicular traffic, the marketplace and financial institutions, and for protecting the commons, the environment. The limited trauma to society of using coercion to enforce such things is not beyond our competence to heal.

However the rule of law, alone, has not brought peace and justice. We abuse the rule of law by applying it beyond its proper bounds, for lack of a credible alternative. It's like using surgery to correct malaria.

The main impediment to our purifying and reforming the rule of law is that we conflate its proper with its improper uses, which turns it into a monster. The rule of law is necessary but not sufficient, for at least three reasons.

First, the attempt to control a really ugly situation by long term coercion is analogous to daily surgery to correct a chronic problem—there can be no healing. Law works when it reflects a broad consensus of the values of a society, but coercion does not change values. Temporary incarceration to prevent harm is useful, but incarceration as punishment has little value for transforming offenders into cooperative citizens. Our jails are clogged with recidivist offenders. The trauma of long-term incarceration leaves the offender a permanently crippled burden on society.

Second, what happens when we can't agree on a law to be ruled by? Societies riven by deep conflict, societies that cannot agree on the law and are in a state of civil unrest or war, need something to get them to a place where a coherent law can be framed within a broad consensus. Minorities can be oppressed by the rule of law established by the majority.

Third there is the whole jurisdiction problem. A legal system has to exercise a monopoly on coercive power within its territory, its jurisdiction, else it can't protect the weak. What happens when the territorial boundaries between different legal systems are in dispute?

So the rule of law is insufficient. We need something more, another alternative.

In the surgeon/scalpel metaphor, we must not use coercion beyond our competence to heal the resulting trauma. War, which involves large groups of people, is utterly beyond our competence. We have no science that lets us enumerate in advance the resulting horrific traumas, much less the means to keep them from festering.

I do not believe in any form of just war. This goes for violent revolutions, and wars to defend a given system of law, and wars to prevent genocides. It's not that systems of law shouldn't be radically changed for the better (the goal of revolution), or that a better system of law isn't preferable to a worse system of law (the justification of wars in defense of a given system), or that genocide shouldn't be ended. In these cases I reject war because I think there is a better alternative.

Security by healing

Into the fire and smoke, the endless territorial wars, the oppression and corruption, has come a really new idea. Perhaps the Messiah (anointed one) has staged a preemptive strike. If Jesus is our picture of the Anointed, he has not yet established justice and security on earth, he's barely started, but his strategy is revealed, and it is... surprising. This Messiah's not into coercion. Unlike David, this is no soldier king. The hands of this king are the hands of a healer.

He still counts on establishing security and justice.

We are always free to refuse God. God does not coerce our choice. Of course our choices have consequences, but bad choices do not always have obvious immediate bad consequences. God blesses us with sun and rain even when we do evil. Jesus demonstrates that humans incarnating God's spirit will risk suffering rather than coerce. God's kingdom will be established not by force, but by sitting down with an enemy and eating with them, by treating them as a trustworthy opponent, by igniting the

spirit of God in them, and confronting them at table. By con-union.

The Church+ will risk suffering rather than coerce. When a disciple drew sword and cut off the ear of one of the people who came to arrest Jesus, Jesus said "No more of this" (Luke 22:51). He is done with the use of force for social change, by heaven or earth.

That's what gave such power to the early Church+, the Healer Messiah. There is a new meeting place, for Jews and Gentiles, for male and female, for bond and free, for rich and poor, for black and white, for homo and hetero, for Christian and Muslim, for Zionist and Hamas, for American patriot and Iranian patriot. We live life together in tension with our erstwhile enemies become trustworthy opponents.

Even if war succeeds, I don't want it. War is counterproductive because its goal is dominant control of the situation—victory. That's not enough, that's not what I want, that's not justice. Confrontational communion is about synergy—finding a way to live in a web of relationships such that all sides thrive. My only salvation is my enemy's salvation.

I wrote the following in August 2011, during the violent conflict before Gaddafi was deposed:

Whoever comes to power in Libya will owe their position to violence. The downstream costs of that violence are beyond anyone's ability to calculate. A movement which began in nonviolence succumbed to faith in violence, the faith that the violent can only be overcome by violence. One has great sympathy for them. The justification these people used was that there was, under Gaddafi, ongoing violence whose trauma was unbearable. But as long as violence carries the day, little new has happened. We have to learn to use violence only when it is not beyond our competence, and for that to happen we need alternatives.

I wrote the following in August 2013, just after the fall of Egypt's Islamist President Morsi:

Egypt needs a government that represents both secularists and Islamists. It's seemingly impossible, but without them both, Egypt can't be Egypt. They need each other.

Our battle cry must be "We need each other."

Often confrontational communion is neither easy nor pretty. Nelson Mandela and F. W. de Klerk shared a Nobel Peace Prize, but David Blair wrote in London's *The Telegraph* of 6 Dec 2013:

Mandela thought his white counterpart was dishonest; worse, he decided that de Klerk was treating him like a fool by expecting him to swallow the lies. De Klerk, for his part, believed that Mandela's saintly image was fraudulent given that the ANC leader was effectively accusing him of being a murderer day after day.

...

Yet these two men, politicians to their fingertips, knew that they needed one another. If a negotiated burial of apartheid was to be achieved, then Mandela and de Klerk would have to stay on speaking terms. And so they did - but only just.

I don't know, as a practical certainty, that ignition is enough to do the job of bringing the powerful to negotiation. I think ignition will be an increasingly important contributor to establishing freedom and justice, but I lack the empirical data that would permit me to assert that ignition is enough.

I'm going on faith. I am personally dedicated to finding the limits of how far ignition can take us. Both those who have coercive power, and the revolutionaries, are learning the limits of what coercion can do. My hope is that the experience of con-union in the Church+ will help the powerful who currently see no way of maintaining order other than oppression, to dare con-union with those they have oppressed. We need a lot more de Klerks. My hope is that the experience of con-union in the Church+ will help jobless youths who currently see no way of changing the system other than with violence, to dare con-union with their oppressors. We need a lot more Nelson Mandelas.

Jesus didn't mean to start a new religion. He meant to build a kingdom, to augment and transform our notion of government, to give us a means for opponents to productively engage each other to engender justice and peace. Unfortunately our common notion of church is a place where birds of a feather flock together, and if a deep difference of opinion arises, we split and form a new congregation of like-minded souls. In contrast, the Anointed, the Messiah, the Church+, is a place of productive conflict. The Church+ bridges every boundary that separates us, spanning every ethnicity, every religion, every nationality, every out-of-comfort zone.

I'm not saying we shouldn't have traditional churches and denominations, nor that we shouldn't have the Christian religion, which is my home. But I call the Christians, and the Humanists, and the Muslims, and the Hindus and the Jews and the Buddhists and the Atheists and the Sikhs and everybody else, to a commitment to a community owned by none where our conflicts are productive, indeed, a place where we appreciate difference as the gift we can make to each other. In the kingdom of God, you eat with your enemy, you see that your only salvation (healing) is in your enemy's salvation, you cast your lot with your enemy, you make community with your enemy, you dare that in displaying God's spirit you will ignite God's spirit in your enemy, and you struggle with each other within that community, refusing either control or appeasement.

When we say that Christ is Lord, that word "Lord" is a military term: we are saying that we accept the Healer Messiah's strategy for bringing about security and justice. We do not meet our enemy's use of force with either force or cooperation, and we keep up the demand. This is a higher standard even than people-power or democracy: it is not a matter of winning elections, or exerting economic pressure, or any other kind of domination. If activism implies working so that your side wins and the other side loses, this isn't activism. Our enemies may grind many of us up and spit us out, but their behavior will eventually be changed by inspiration at a lower cost than any other means.

I have lost faith in coercion for social change. Peace is not established by coercion. Our struggle with one another in communion is shalom, and is the most effective engine of change.

Let me put that another way.

I have faith in God's spirit revealed in Jesus.

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About the Author

If you enjoyed this book, or want to join the discussion about it, or just want to see my smiling face, please consider visiting ruuaacch.org, where I and others work on using ignition and con-union in various conflict situations, and you can help.

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