Theology Matters

Vol. 26, No. 1 Winter 2020

Confessing Jesus Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life in a Pluralistic Culture

Part I

by John Burgess, Richard Burnett, and James Edwards

On February 18–20, 2020, Theology Matters held its first conference at Providence Presbyterian Church, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina. We chose the theme, "Confessing Jesus Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life in a Pluralistic Culture" because we wanted to address something important. Perhaps there is a more important topic that needs to be addressed. If so, we do not know what it would be. Nor did we know who would come to this conference or how they would receive it. We were delighted that more than 150 people came and thrilled by their level of interest and participation.

On the one hand, we wanted the conference to be primarily for congregational leaders, not for academic theologians. On the other hand, notwithstanding some wonderful, more practically oriented workshops, we did not want it to be primarily about methods or techniques, or another *how-to* conference, a conference on how to grow your church, how to lead, or get people to like us more, etc. (Not that most of us could not use some help in these areas!). Like John Calvin and our forebearers, we believe one cannot separate theory from practice, doctrine from life, or how we think from how we live.

The evaluations of the conference demonstrate that we are not alone in sharing this conviction. They were overwhelmingly positive and suggest there is a hunger for serious—albeit not tedious—theological reflection on basic teachings of the Christian faith. There is a desire to be equipped and encouraged, instructed and inspired in knowledge of the Christian faith. There is a recognition that theology still matters and makes a big difference in the way we think and the way we live.

Many attendees claimed the conference was "a great blessing." Some said it was "life-changing." Most said it should become an annual event. Yet one attendee, a Methodist layman, wrote: "I am tempted to encourage Theology Matters to do another conference or to make it an annual event, but I believe I would first want to see where the Spirit leads. I think many of us were profoundly affected by the message, unity, collegiality, and fellowship we encountered for three days. I pray the conference will be a turning point for all of us. As such, I am not sure it can be repeated or replicated."

The board of Theology Matters is seeking to discern "where the Spirit leads" in this regard. We would like your input. Do you think the following talks delivered at the conference are helpful? Do you think more along the same lines would be beneficial in the future? If so, please share your thoughts with us by emailing us at admin@theologymatters.com.

Table of Contents

Jesus Christ is the Way

by James Edwards

"I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). This most famous declaration from the Gospel of John is the first and only time the Fourth Gospel uses the word "way" with reference to Jesus. Each of the Synoptic Gospels uses the word "way" roughly twenty times—sixty times total—but the three uses of "way" in Jesus' conversation with Thomas (vv. 4, 5, & 6) are its only occurrences in the Gospel of John. John's reference to Jesus as the way, as we shall see, is of strategic importance.

I wish to focus on two essential elements of Jesus as the way in John 14:6. First, I propose that John does not present way, truth, and life as three independent virtues in this verse, but rather as characteristics of Jesus. *Jesus Christ* is the way, the truth, and the life. Second, I propose that John 14:1–6 is not primarily an assurance of the future glory of the disciples in the Father's mansion "there and then," but an exhortation to prepare the disciples for the fulfillment of their mission and commission *here and now*.

Jesus is the Way

"Jesus said, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life.'" In John 14:6, Jesus does not name way, truth, and life as three, independent, stand-alone virtues. Way is not a wise course of action, truth a self-evident verity, life an autonomous and pleasing form of existence. Way, truth, and life are not presented in John 14:6 as virtues unto themselves. Nor does the way itself refer to a path of moral responsibility and action, as it often does in the Torah and Wisdom literature. When Jesus declares, "*I am* the way, the truth, and the life," he declares that the way, truth, and life to which he refers exist only in relation to himself. John 14:6 is not interested in the significance of the way, truth, and life apart from their relationship to Jesus. Jesus is all-determinative for their understanding. In John 14:3, Jesus promises the disciples, "I shall receive you to myself." In John 14:6a, Jesus defines "*I* am the way," by declaring, "No one comes to the Father except *through me*." In John 14, the way, truth, and life are defined by *Jesus.*

Nor are way, truth, and life simply like three arrows in a quiver, each equally deft. They are not like Moses' three signs before Pharaoh—turning his staff into a snake, making his hand leprous, and making blood from water of the Nile—each equally effective. Jesus could not have combined way, truth, and life in different order to the same effect. "Way" is connected to "truth" and "life," of course, but it does not bear equal weight and value. "Way" is not simply the first of three equal terms, but the principal term that defines and determines the other two. The context of Jesus' immortal statement, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," accents *way* rather than truth and life. The question of Thomas immediately preceding, "How are we to know the way?" (v. 5), is about the "way." The second half of verse 6 is also about a "way": "no one comes to the father except through me." The context of John 14:6 seems clear: Jesus is the *way* in so far as he is the truth and the life; or, conversely, because Jesus is the truth and the life, he is the *way*![1]

According to Genesis 3:24, God sealed off the "way to the tree of life" in Eden after the sin of Adam and Eve. Jesus now reopens the way to Life in himself. In fact, he *is* the way. "There is only one true way to the Father that leads to truth and life, the way of Jesus."[2]

A "way" is more than an idea, a feeling, or a possibility. Ideas, feelings, and possibilities have roles to play in theology, of course. The idea of the Trinity is essential to Christianity, the Good Samaritan was moved by his feelings for the man who fell among thieves to render aid, and some doctrines of the church, purgatory and psychopannychism (soul sleep), for example, exist as theological possibilities. "Way" cannot be reduced to an idea, feeling, and possibility, however.

In John 14:6, Jesus is preparing the disciples for his departure from them. They have never before experienced, or even contemplated, life and ministry apart from him. The disciples are facing distress and fear, just as people in our pews and ministers in our presbyteries face distress and fear. We render needy brothers and sisters no assistance when we couch the gospel in equivocations and hypotheticals and possibilities. When you face a firing squad, fairy tales are of no help. Reducing the gospel to concepts and abstractions when addressing people in earnest need is not helpful either. Jesus speaks to the distress of the disciples concretely: "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

A "way" is a concrete term, referring to a road or path or course of action. It *exists,* and one participates in its existence *actively.* In most situations of crises, we want to do something, we want to *act.* "I am the way, the truth, and the life" takes those deeply seated intuitions seriously and speaks to them.

The essence of John 14:6 is thus Jesus as the *way*. We are so familiar with John 14:6 that we may fail to recognize, or forget, that no one in the Old Testament, indeed in the long history of Israel, claimed to be "the way." Moses does not say, "I am the way." Neither of the two great Seers of the Old Testament, Melchizedek nor Elijah, says "I am the way." No prophet, priest, or king in Israel says, "I am the way." The closest analogy is the claim of Jewish rabbis that "Torah is the way to life." Even this is not quite the same, however, for Jesus does not claim to be the way *to* life, i.e., he is not the *means* to an end. As the "way," Jesus is both means and end. Similar to the declaration in John 10:9, "I am the gate to the sheepfold," Jesus does not claim to be a gate leading somewhere, but the gateway itself. Here, too, Jesus *is* "the way, the truth, and the life."

But how, specifically, is Jesus the way? It is not without significance that the greater part of the disciples' relationship with Jesus in the Gospels takes place "on the way." Jesus and the disciples cross the Sea of Galilee, they hike to Nazareth, they trek to Jerusalem.

"The way" is not an incidental or accidental theme in the Gospels and Acts. Jesus reveals himself as Messiah on the way to Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8:27–30). He reveals himself to blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46–52) and to the woman at the well (John 4) traveling to and from Jerusalem. Philip approaches the Ethiopian eunuch "on the way." When the eunuch asked Philip to "show him the way" in order to understand Isaiah 53, Philip "proclaimed to him the good news of Jesus" (Acts 8:35). Jesus was the Way.

Jesus reveals himself as the Way in our lives as well, for our ways are also determined by him. It is no coincidence, says Karl Barth, that in John 14:6 "Jesus calls himself absolutely 'the Way,' and thus the Truth and the Life." For Barth, the Way is the Truth of God's self-revelation and the Life of God's salvation.[3]

Thomas à Kempis captures the significance of the Way in his meditation on John 14:6 thus: "Without the Way, there is no going; without the Truth, there is no knowing; without the Life, there is no living. I am the Way you ought to follow. … I am the inviolable and straight Way. … If you remain in my Way, you shall know the Truth, and the Truth will make you free, and you shall lay hold of eternal Life."[4]

If there is an absolute equation of Jesus as the way, truth, and life for believers, should there not be an absolute equation of Jesus as the way, truth, and life for the church as well? The church is not the way, the truth, and the life. Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. Why is it, then, that in the present hour the church in America is so often identified, and allows itself to be identified, by "ways" other than Jesus Christ?

"White American evangelicals" are widely profiled today as Christians who elevate nationalism over the gospel, who champion xenophobia, who privilege forces of autocracy over the common good, and who are indifferent to morality in its most elemental forms—sexual morality, truth-telling, compassion for the needy, care for the environment, and love of others.

Liberals or "progressives" are widely profiled today as Christians who define morality in social rather than in personal terms, who champion "human rights" for some, but not for the most vulnerable and innocent of all, the unborn; whose commitment to "identity" threatens to render salvation and oneness in Christ subservient to gender, sexual preference, race, and ethnicity.

Tertullian said of Christians of his day, "See how they love one another, how they are ready to die for each other." Of unbelievers, Tertullian said, "See how they hate one another, how they are ready to kill each other."[5] Tertullian's profile of unbelievers, sadly and ironically, often characterizes *believers* in America today. Conservatives and progressives, right and left, have hardened into uncharitable and vindictive "blocs." At the 2020 National Prayer Breakfast, Arthur Brooks challenged the church not to succumb to "our toxic environment of contempt and polarization." We have elevated causes to the status of the gospel, and our greatest causes have become demigods. The Scriptures teach, and all our creeds confess, "The Lord our God, he is God, and there is no other besides him" (Deut. 4:35). We have allowed, and continue to allow, other orders and ideologies and political positions to supersede that claim. When good causes, even the best of causes, replace the Great Commission, the church ceases to be the church of Jesus Christ. "Hirelings" commandeer the sheep for purposes other than those of the Good Shepherd, and then abandon them (John 10:11–13). The Good Shepherd does not abandon the sheep. Jesus has no other purpose than his *Way* in this world, and he calls the church, "Follow Thou Me."

Let us not forget the hostility and malice that Jesus faced in his ministry. In Nazareth—Jesus' hometown—"the wrathful crowd brought Jesus to the brow of a hill, to throw him off to his death. … But Jesus walked through the midst of them and went on his way" (Luke 4:28–30). "Jesus walked through the midst of them and went on his way." Is this perhaps God's word to the church in America today—to follow Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life through the midst of wrathful crowds and rhetoric today?

Jesus is the Way in this World

"Jesus said, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life.'" The second claim I wish to make regarding John 14:6 is that it is directed primarily to present mission and only secondarily to future glory. John 14:6 occurs in Jesus' Farewell Discourse to the disciples. The disciples are aware of the terrifying prospect of a Roman execution, and they are frightened. Given that context, when Jesus says that his Father's house has many rooms, and that he goes to his Father's house to prepare a place for his disciples, his disciples may have imagined that Jesus intended to take them out of this world.

This is almost certainly not the purpose, or at least the *primary* purpose, of John 14:1–6. Jesus does not speak of going to his Father's heavenly mansion for his own personal reward. He goes there, rather, to prepare an eternal place for his disciples (John 14:2–3) so that they will not be separated from him. Where he is, there too they shall be. This promise assures the disciples that their future is Jesus' responsibility, not their own. Because Jesus is the pioneer of their eternal salvation, they do not need to concern themselves with anything other than being faithful to his present will for them. Jesus will prepare a place for them, he will receive them to himself, and they will be with him forever (John 14:3; John 12:26; 17:24). The purpose of this promise is not to direct their gaze longingly to the future, but to assure the disciples that nothing in heaven or on earth can separate them from the love of God and the presence of Jesus. The veil over the end of the human story—*their* human story—is parted in this promise and the disciples see the word and will of God for what it is and must be: the victory and vindication of God's will and way, the glory of the Lamb and his sheep.

The purpose of John 14:6 is thus not to forsake the great commission for the Blessed Hope, but rather to assure believers of the Blessed Hope so that they may be empowered and emboldened in the Great Commission. John 14:1–6 is a *pastoral* and *prophetic* word to the disciples. The heavenly promise of Jesus frees believers and the church from anxiety. Jesus tells both believers and the church the outcome of the story of salvation history to which they have been called, in which they have been commissioned. The outcome is a comedy, not a tragedy, a story that begins in crisis but ends in glory. The ending is the best of all possible endings—God's holy and gracious will prevails, entirely and forever.

This promise transforms and empowers both believers and the church to be about the work to which God appoints them in this world. God does not receive Jesus into his heavenly glory to stop his work of redemption in this world, but to continue it through the church in ways that it could not achieve until the sending of the Holy Spirit as the divine comforter, advocate, and inspiration.

When we believe that Jesus has secured the future, then we can be responsible and effective in the work to which he has called us in his world. "Truly, truly I tell you, whoever believes in me does the works that I also do, and even greater works he will do, because I am going to the Father" (John 14:12).

When we believe that Jesus has secured the future, then we are spiritually equipped to keep his commandments in this world. "If you love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15).

When we believe that Jesus has secured the future, then we may participate in the Holy Spirit's restoration of this world. "I shall ask the Father and he will give another Advocate to you, who will be with you forever, the Spirit of Truth, which the world is not able to receive, because it neither sees nor knows it; but you know the Spirit because the Spirit remains with you and in you" (John 14:16–17). As the Father sent the Son into the world, so Jesus sends believers into the world. "As you have sent me into the world, dear Father, so I also send them into the world" (John 17:18).

Jesus does not take believers out of the world, but keeps them in his name in the world. "I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name!" (John 17:11).

Jesus does not take believers out of the world, but keeps them from the evil one. "I do not ask you, Father, to take them out of this world, but to keep them from the evil one" (John 17:15).

Jesus wills for his believers to be free in this world, because the Truth sets them free. "Sanctify them in the Truth; your word is Truth" (John 17:17).

Dr. James R. Edwards, Ph.D., is the Bruner-Welch Professor Emeritus of Theology at Whitworth University.

[1] Wilhelm Michaelis, *hodos, Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament,* ed. G. Friedrich (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1954), 5.84.

[2] M. Völkel, *hodos, Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, eds. H. Balz and G. Schneider (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 2.492.

[3] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), II/1.29.

[4] Thomas à Kempis, *Of the Imitation of Christ* (New Canaan, Connecticut: Keats Publishing, 1973), 56.1.

[5] Tertullian, *Apology,* 39.7, *Ante-Nicene Fathers,* Vol. 3, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 47.

Jesus Christ is the Truth

by Richard Burnett

We chose the theme of this conference, "Confessing Jesus Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life in a Pluralistic Culture," not because we wanted to be provocative, but simply because we wanted to understand it better. Yet confessing Jesus Christ as the way, the truth, and the life *is* considered provocative in today's culture, and there are many reasons why—many social, political, cultural, historical, and philosophical reasons—and all of them are worth discussing. But since some of us here claim that *theology matters*, we believe our first priority is to try and understand what is stake here *theologically*. Rather than assuming we already know all there is to know, we ask: Is there something we have missed? Is there something else we need to know? Or is there something we need to know *better* about confessing Jesus Christ as the way, the truth, and the life?

I need hardly tell you gathered here that confessing Jesus Christ as the way, the truth, and the life *is* considered provocative today. Many of you know it all too well. You've likely not shed blood over it, but you "bear the marks," as it were. And I hope you will discover—if you have not already—that you are not alone. I hope you discover that there is a deep fellowship among those who hold fast to this confession that can nourish, strengthen, and encourage you. And I hope you know this fellowship extends beyond those of us gathered here today.

The fact is confessing Jesus Christ as the way, the truth, and the life has always been provocative. It's always been contested. It's always been eventually opposed. Sooner or later in every culture it has always caused conflict. And nowhere has it been confessed for long without a price. The reason is because confessing Jesus Christ as the way, the truth, and the life has implications. And this morning I want to discuss our theme in light of a document that sought to face some of these implications; and, it's worth mentioning, the price for those who did was high and, in many cases, could not have been higher.

The Barmen Declaration, as many of you know, emerged out of a dark time in the world and a serious time of testing for the church. It was written under Hitler and adopted on May 31, 1934, by 139 delegates—eighty-six clergy and fifty-three lay members, including several lawyers, teachers, businessmen, three engineers, a couple aristocrats, one physician, one farmer, and one housewife. They were from both Lutheran and Reformed churches, who met in a small industrial city in Northwest Germany called Barmen. The Nazis had planned to interrupt their meeting, but they figured it would dissolve of its own discord as had happened before. This time they were wrong.[1]

The Barmen Declaration is widely recognized as the most important theological document of the twentieth century. I suspect it is. But I also believe it is one of the most misunderstood.[2] I want to emphasize—and can hardly emphasize enough—that it was written in a very different context and under very different circumstances than our own. I believe there is a lot to learn from the Barmen Declaration, but I also believe one should be careful about connecting dots between then and there and here and now. So, I ask you to try and understand it on its own terms and beg you not to try and reduce it too quickly simply to current politics or to matters of "prevailing political and ideological convictions." In its third thesis, Barmen warns explicitly against allowing "prevailing political and ideological convictions" to distort the church's message. But it issues this warning in light of a much deeper, more basic crisis and temptation. Indeed, leaders of the Barmen Synod claimed they were seeking to overcome a *theological* temptation "which for more than two hundred years had slowly prepared for the devastation of the Church."[3] But to understand this crisis and temptation takes some effort.

Each of Barmen's six articles seeks to address a specific temptation facing the church. Each begins with Scripture, is followed by an affirmation and then a rejection or refutation of a false belief. Article one seeks to name the deeper crisis and temptation facing the church and was considered the most controversial.

Here's how it begins: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me." (John 14:6). "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. … I am the door, if anyone enters by me, he will be saved." (John 10:1, 9).

Next comes the affirmation: "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death."

Then comes the rejection or refutation: "We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation,

apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures, and truths, as God's revelation."

Barmen's first article raises a basic question: What is the source of the church's proclamation? What is the standard or rule by which church's preaching is to be measured? By what yardstick, norm, or criterion is the church's speech to be assessed? Or, to put it bluntly: On what basis, by what right, on what grounds does the church say what she says about anything? Where, finally and definitively, does the church get her understanding of truth?

Barmen's first thesis says: "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death." *He* is the source and norm, the basis, rule, and standard of the church's proclamation. *He* is what counts, first and last, as God's revelation. *He* is the ultimate source, criterion, and standard of truth. He is "*the Truth*" (John 14:6), just as Scripture says.

Yet notice a couple things. Note not just any Jesus is asserted here, but "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture." Many through the centuries have confessed Jesus Christ, but not all "as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture." Many through the centuries have created a Jesus in their own image, and modern people not least among them. In his *Quest for the Historical Jesus*, Albert Schweitzer said scholars since the 18th century had sought Jesus in the well of history and had tended simply to see their own reflection, that is, a Jesus who looked like them, who shared the same values as the culture from which they came. Unfortunately, Schweitzer's Jesus is hardly different in this respect.[4] And the Nazis had their Jesus too, a heroic, *Aryan Jesus*, as did many ordinary Germans in the 1930s.[5] And, of course, they are not the only people to create a Jesus in their own image. Since "the human heart is a perpetual idol factory," as Calvin says (*Institutes* 1.11.8), we are all likely guilty in one way or another of creating a Jesus to suit ourselves, which is why the clause, "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture," is so important.

Yet note what else is affirmed here: "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death." Note the phrase, "the one Word of God." The Bible clearly teaches that *Jesus Christ* is the Word of God. The Bible also teaches that *Scripture*, the writings of the prophets and apostles, is the Word of God. The Bible also teaches, as the Second Helvetic Confession puts it, that "the preaching is the Word of God is the Word of God." So, one might legitimately ask, "How many Words of God are there?" "Three?" No. The Bible does not teach nor has the church ever taught that there are three Words of God. Rather there is one Word of God in three forms: incarnate, written, and preached.

This three-fold form of the Word is implicit in the statement, "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear," and the upshot is that we can't understand one form of the Word without the others. We don't know Jesus Christ apart from the Scriptures, and we don't know the Scriptures apart from Jesus Christ. Jesus said: "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; but it is they that bear witness to me" (John 5:39). In short, the three forms of the Word of God relate like the three persons of the Trinity. Just as we cannot know the Father apart from the Son and the Spirit, or the Son apart from the Father and the Spirit, or the Spirit apart from the Father and the Son, so we cannot know one form of the Word without the other two.[6]

But why do you think confessing "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death" was so important for some in Germany in 1934 yet so problematic for others? It's because of the implications set forth in the refutation or "we reject" part of article one, which says: "We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures, and truths, as God's revelation."

With respect to confessing Jesus Christ as the way, the truth, and the life in a pluralistic culture, let me add that not many care as much in a pluralistic culture about what you *affirm* as what you *reject*. In first century Rome, for example, not many cared if you affirmed 'Jesus is Lord.' You could yell it to the top of your lungs. Not many cared. But if you said, 'Jesus is Lord, and Caesar isn't,' that could get you in real trouble. Thus, it was in Nazi Germany. Few cared if you said, 'Jesus is Lord.' But if saying 'Jesus is Lord' meant rejecting "other events and powers, figures, and truths," it was another story.

What were these "other events and powers, figures, and truths" that were vying for recognition as God's revelation in Germany in 1934? They have to do, of course, with what gave rise to Hitler and National Socialism. I'm sure many of you know about the political and economic circumstances preceding Hitler's rise to power. You may also know that most Germans thought Hitler to be a decent, kind, moral, and courageous man, who won an Iron Cross in the War, who proclaimed the virtues of hard work, courage, discipline, and family values, and who preached against the greed, self-indulgence, and moral decadence spread by Western

democracies through "the Roaring 1920s," which he claimed had infected German culture like a disease. And if you've read *Mein Kampf* you know that Hitler railed against the barbarous collectivism and atheistic materialism of Communism in the East and radical individualism and decadent materialism of Capitalism in the West, both of which he claimed destroyed community and especially the values of the German people who were naturally a deeply spiritual people. Yes, as is widely known, Hitler talked a lot about the German people being bound by blood and soil, but he also proclaimed with equal vigor that they were a profoundly spiritual people.

But that's not all. Hitler sold himself as a great defender of the church. In speech after speech he promised to protect the church, pledging, "I never will tie myself to parties who want to destroy Christianity." Rather, he said, "We want to fill our culture again the Christian spirit, not just theoretically. No, we want to burn out the rotten developments in literature, in the theater, in the press—in short, burn out this poison which has entered into our whole life and culture during these past fourteen years."[7]

Citing the Twenty-Fourth Article of the Nazi Party Platform, Hitler proclaimed: "The National Socialist government thinks the two Christian churches [Protestant & Catholic] are most important elements for the preservation of our national individual[ity]. … Their rights shall not be touched." Privately, Hitler loathed the church. But publicly he said and did many things to demonstrate his loyalty to the church. After being sworn in as Chancellor, he boasted in a speech in Stuttgart on Feb. 16, 1933: "Today Christians and no international atheists stand at the head of Germany."[8] Did you know that you could not be a member of the SS, if you were an atheist?[9] Hitler repudiated atheism and rarely missed an opportunity to invoke the name of "God Almighty."[10]

My wife, Martha, and I have spent much of our lives trying to understand how so many "good people" were seduced by Nazism, not least so many otherwise thoughtful, pious, and faithful Christians, the majority, in fact. There are many reasons for this and many very complex. And the more we have studied them the more we've wondered what *we* would have done and *marvel* that so many stood so faithfully.

The German people, as you know, had experienced suffering, death, and devastation on a scale that is difficult for us to imagine, and then an equally devastating economic collapse. Yet more devastating was the guilt and shame many felt or were made to feel for their role in the war. Even Bonhoeffer had a speech he delivered repeatedly in America in 1929 and 1930, denouncing the injustices of the Treaty of Versailles.[11]

The Nazi Party gained power not because the country was polarized, but because it had fragmented and fell into chaos. Hitler promised order. He told the German people they were not really to blame for the war. They were the victims, their cause had been just, their motives pure. And laced throughout his speeches he told them something that spoke deep to their hearts. He told them they were a very special people for whom God had very special plans. He reminded them of the glories of their past and their potential for the future.

It was not a hard sell. Who could deny the German people were not special? Who could deny their extraordinary gifts, talents, and contributions to this world, the strengths of their culture, the power of their universities? And why, they asked, were so many of the world's greatest physicists, chemists, biologists, mathematicians, philosophers, and theologians German? Why were the world's greatest composers German: Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Shubert, Schumann, Wagner? How does one account for this?

Many claimed it could only be accounted for by one thing: the blood! There is something in the blood. Many claimed it could be demonstrated on scientific grounds. The scientific community had long been influenced by all sorts of eugenic theories, especially the medical community, and not only in Germany. Looking back, some of the things not only a minority in the German medical community believed, but what the majority believed, seem amazing.[12] They were, of course, *seriously misguided*. But it is hard to argue that many who embraced these ideas were not *serious people*. Certainly, many were not. Many such as Alfred Rosenberg expressed these ideas in particularly virulent form. And we can sweep them all aside as simply more or less sophisticated forms of racism. But may I share something that I find very disturbing? If you would have told them they were motivated by hate, they would've denied it, emphatically. On the contrary, most would've said they were motivated by love and not simply love for themselves but for the world. The argument, you see, went like this: "If what makes us special is in our blood and we're going to keep giving the world such brilliance, leadership, and talent, then don't we owe it to God and to the world to keep our blood pure?"

May I add here, parenthetically, that if we're going to get at the root of racism, we've got to do more than simply tell people not to hate. We've got to get at what they love or love inordinately. … A topic for another day. But I hope you see that for them it was *perfectly rational*. And if you investigate these ideas and consider the events that began to unfold in Hitler's rise to power and first year in office, you can begin to grasp the significance of Barmen's warning.

So, what were these "events and powers, figures, and truths" vying for recognition as God's revelation? They had to do with history, nature, and experience. Many felt under National Socialism that they were experiencing a national revival. Their sense of pride was being renewed. Their place in the world was being restored. Marvelous events were unfolding before their eyes. Against all odds, all the injustice of the world, and all the humiliation they had endured, the German people were proving again how special they were. Hitler simply whispered into their ears the *myths* they had made up about themselves and the world until they believed them, again. And now, from out of the ashes, the German race was lifting herself up again. Was history not proving again you can't keep the German race down? Who could deny it? Was it not clear they were standing "on the right side of history"? Were they not experiencing a unique "moment in history"? Such views were expressed not merely by politicians but endorsed and underwritten by many within the church.

How do I know this? Because ten days after the Barmen Synod, June 11, other ministers and professors—including two of Germany's greatest Luther scholars, Paul Althaus and Werner Elert—gathered in a Bavarian town called Ansbach and drafted a response to the Barmen Declaration. It's called the Ansbach Counsel (or "*Ansbacher Ratschlag*") and it represents one of the more nuanced statements of Nazified Christianity of its day. And for those who think the temptation facing the church at the time can be reduced more or less to issues under the familiar categories of left or right, liberal or conservative, or between those who believe the Bible and those who don't, the Ansbach Counsel poses a problem. It simply doesn't fit neatly either side, left or right, liberal or conservative. Rather it reflects aspects of both camps. As far as the Bible is concerned, the Ansbach Counsel's first article begins with a rather firm, clear, and unambiguous affirmation of its authority. It states: "The church of Jesus Christ, as the workshop of the Holy Spirit, is bound to God's Word. Therefore, its members are obliged in obedience to the Word of God." Moreover, it adds: "In the confessions of our Evangelical-Lutheran Church we recognize the pure presentation of the content of Holy Scripture."[13]

But it's the third article I'd like to call your attention to and ask that you try and make an effort to understand it because it could really help you someday and those entrusted to your care. It states:

> The unchangeable will of God meets us in the total reality of our life as it is illumined by God's revelation. It binds each person to the situation in which he is called by God, and obligates us to the natural orders to which we are subjected, such as family, people (Volk), race, i.e., blood relation. We are in fact assigned to a certain family, a certain people, and a certain race. As the will of God always continues to meet us in the here and now, it also binds us to the specific historic moment of the family, the people, the race, i.e. to a specific moment in history.[14]

There are some remarkable phrases here: "natural orders," "blood relation," "assigned to a certain family, a certain people, and a certain race," "binds us to the specific historic moment of the family, the people, the race, i.e. to a specific moment in history." But the line I want to draw your attention to is the first one: "The unchangeable will of God meets us in the total reality of our life as it is illumined by God's revelation."

What do you make of this statement? It starts so strong and authoritative, in speaking about "the unchangeable will of God." But what do you make of what follows: "the unchangeable will of God meets us in the total reality of our life as it is illumined by God's revelation"? What a marvelously expansive phrase, so broad and inclusive: "God meets us in the total reality of our life as it is illumined by God's revelation." But what does it actually mean? It's vague. It's ambiguous precisely because it fails to define what "God's revelation" *is*. This is no accident.

This statement was written in direct opposition to Barmen's first article: "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death." Drafters of the Ansbach Counsel thought Barmen's first article was too narrow, too restrictive, too exclusive in its understanding of revelation. Of course, there's irony here that it was the Nazified Christians who wanted a broader, more inclusive understanding of revelation. They were particularly offended by Barmen's statement, "We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures, and truths, as God's revelation."

Their problem was that Barmen didn't leave room for other sources of revelation. The Nazified, half- or part-Nazified Christians wanted to affirm "other events and powers, figures and truths" as God's revelation. They wanted to affirm other sources of revelation such as nature, history, and experience, and if not "apart from," then at least "besides this one Word of God." They wanted multiple sources of revelation. They wanted, in other words, more than one standard, one rule, one yardstick, one norm by which to measure the church's proclamation. And, of course, this goes for the church's ethics too. Jesus Christ alone as attested by scripture alone by grace alone through faith alone, as the Protestant Reformers had said, was too exclusive, too narrow.[15]

"Now," you may say, "wait a minute. Might you be getting carried away here? Doesn't God meet us in history, in nature, in our experiences, in 'the total reality of our life'?" Sure, he does! Why not? But how would you *know it? How would you know it was him* apart from and besides Jesus Christ as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture? Sure, God can speak to us through many means. Karl Barth wrote: "God may speak to us through Russian communism, a flute concerto, a blossoming shrub, or a dead dog. We do well to listen to Him if He really does."[16] But how would we know it was him, the one true God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost apart from Jesus Christ as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture?"

Do you see what is at stake here? How many of you have heard people say—perhaps in your own congregation—something like this: "Can we really know the mind of God? God is so mysterious. God is ineffable. God is beyond words"? Did you know Augustine had some of the same folk in his congregation? And do you know what he told them? He said: "Do not say that God is ineffable for that is to say something about God."[17] In other words, Yes, God is mysterious! Sure, he is beyond words! But how do you know? How do you know God is *beyond* words *except through words*, that is, apart from God telling you with words? Or did you find out from a hummingbird whispering something in your ear? If so, what language did the hummingbird use?

"Okay," perhaps you're asking, "but is this really such a problem?" I'll grant you it took me a while to understand this. You see, we had a professor in seminary who said that he had learned as much about God listening to Bruce Springsteen than from reading the Bible or from anything he'd heard in church. I was sort of surprised by this statement. I found it strange. Of course, I heard a lot of strange things in seminary. But I hadn't really listened to Bruce Springsteen. Was I missing something? What did I know? I was from North Carolina. This was New Jersey. They think a lot of Bruce Springsteen up there. I didn't go out buy any of his music and didn't think much more about this professor's claim. But later, when I was a pastor, I soon began to hear folk say things such as: "Well, Preacher, I'll be honest with you, I can worship God as well standing on a seashore or watching a sunset or sitting in a deer stand as I can in any church" or "Preacher, I've learned more about God from my mother or grandmother, than anything I've read in the Bible or heard in church." And then it dawned on me. *Maybe so! Maybe they have learned more* about God from nature, their mother, or Bruce Springsteen (I don't know what they were doing when they were reading the Bible or in church). But the real issue, you see, is not where we learn *more or less* about God, but where we learn the one thing necessary, *the Truth*! The truth about *God*. This is *not* a more or less question.

You and I may learn all sorts of things about God by many different means but how would we know they are true—and what difference would it make—unless we know the truth about God, namely, that he loves us and sent his Son to die for us in order that we might live with him forever? And to be sure, you and I did not learn this—and we would never have learned this—merely sitting on a deer stand, standing on a seashore, or watching a sunset, as inspiring as these experiences may be.

Paul proclaims: "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined" (1 Cor. 2:9). You and I may learn all sorts of things about God by different lights, including "the light of nature," but how would we know they are true apart from him who Scripture calls "the true Light" of this world? How would we know their true significance until we knew "all things were created through and for him" and "and in him all things hold together" (Col.1:16–17)? "He is the source of your life" (1 Cor. 1:30), Paul says. "Your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Col.3:3).

Do you understand what is at stake here? I can learn all sorts things about you and you can learn all sorts of things about me—all sorts facts, all sorts of truths—and yet I still won't know you and you still won't know me. I can watch you. I can look you up on the internet, and even talk with you, and still not know *you*. I will not know you until you reveal yourself, your true essence. And the same goes for the Bible. You and I can know all sorts of things about the Bible and still not know what the Bible is about. We can know all sorts of facts, all sorts of truths about the Bible, and still not know the truth of the Bible, Jesus Christ, its Living Center, of whom the Old Testament speaks in expectation and the New Testament in fulfillment. And you and I can know all sorts of things *about* God—his "power and divinity" (Rom. 1:20), for example—and still not know God.

The point I'm trying to make is that Jesus Christ is not just one truth among others. He is *the* Truth, the standard by which all others are measured. "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death."

Why is this important? Why should you and I care? There are many reasons, not least of which have to do with who you and I are. You see, there are "still other events and powers, figures, and truths" in this world vying for recognition and acknowledgement that claim powerful authority in defining my being and yours.

They are vying for recognition and acknowledgement even in the church and among Christians today "apart from and besides this one Word of God." They have to do with interpretations of our nature, experience, and

moment in history, which are being canonized today as ultimately decisive, definitive, and incontrovertible truths of my being and yours. They function in effect as sources of revelation and thereby compete with, if not challenge and undermine, the claim that "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death."

Please don't misunderstand me: nature, history, and experience can teach us a lot. And, of course, we can learn a lot from our mothers and grandmothers. My mother is here today, and may I tell you one thing she taught me? She taught me, "Son, life is too short to have to learn everything by experience." In other words, "Better figure out what you believe." A pretty good lesson, I'd say, and I'm very grateful to her for it.

So, to be sure, I don't deny that nature, history, and experience can teach us a lot. I don't deny or wish to underestimate the power of nature or nurture. I don't dispute or wish to minimize the influence of our genes or experiences. Nor do I deny there are certain immutable aspects of our being that we may refer as truths of our being. I don't deny that there are many truths about your life and mine.

Some truths may be difficult to reconcile with others, especially as some of us—no, *all* of us—have been broken in one way or another and in various ways. But the question I'm asking is: What is the truth of your life?

Ultimately, one cannot live from many truths. One can live truly from only one truth. Certainly, there's a relationship between the truth and the truths of our lives, and I want to talk more about that next time. But today I simply ask you to consider one thing: What is the truth of your life?

John Calvin teaches we will never know the truth about ourselves until we know the truth about God. The truth about God is that He is our Redeemer, that Jesus Christ is our Savior.

What is the truth of my life? Calvin and his contemporaries confessed it is the same as "our only comfort in life and in death," namely,

> That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him. *Heidelberg Catechism, Q.1.A.1*

This is one implication of confessing Jesus Christ as the way, the truth, the life, and that's enough for today.

The Reverend Richard E. Burnett, Ph.D., is the Executive Director and Managing Editor of Theology Matters.

[1] "The day before the synod, [Georg] von Detten," director of the National Socialist Office for Cultural Peace, "had personally urged upon Heinrich Himmler, Chief of German Police, that under no circumstances should the synod be disturbed. He argued that there was a chance of an internal split and police action would only have the effect of unifying the synod. Himmler followed this advice. Yet there can be no doubt that originally the State had planned to suppress or to disturb the synod meetings," Arthur C. Cochrane, *The Church's Confession Under Hitler* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 146. Cochrane's book remains one of the best in English on the Barmen Declaration and the Confessing Church. For a list of the members of the Barmen Synod, see 264–267.

[2] On and as an example of the various ways the Barmen Declaration has been understood and misunderstood in American mainline Protestantism, see Theodore A. Gill, Jr., "Barmen in the Presbyterian Church (USA): A Process toward Reception in the United States," *Ecumenical Review* 61/1 (March 2009), 81–91.

[3] Pastor Hans Asmussen, "one of the most eloquent and courageous leaders in the Confessing Church," according to Arthur Cochrane, stated in his address at the Barmen Synod: "We are raising a protest against the same phenomenon that has been slowly preparing the way for the devastation of the Church for more than two hundred years. For it is only a relative difference whether—beside Holy Scripture in the Church—historical events or reason, culture, aesthetic feelings, progress, or other powers and figures are said to be binding claims upon the Church." Cochrane, *The Church's Confession Under Hitler,* 151, 255.

[4] "The historical investigation of the life of Jesus did not take its rise from a purely historical interest; it turned to the Jesus of history as an ally in the struggle against the tyranny of dogma. … For Bahrdt and Venturini He was the tool of a secret order. They wrote under the impression of the immense influence exercised by the Order of the Illuminati at the end of the eighteenth century. For Reinhard, Hess, Paulus, and the rest of the rationalistic writers He is the admirable revealer of true virtue, which is coincident with right reason. Thus each successive epoch of theology found its own thoughts in Jesus; that was, indeed, the only way in which it could make Him live. But it was not only each epoch that found its reflection in Jesus; each individual created Him in accordance with his own character. There is no historical task which so reveals a man's true self as the writing of a Life of Jesus" Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, trans. W. Montgomery (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1911), 10.

[5] Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

[6] Prior to the Barmen Declaration, according to Arthur Cochrane, "no Reformed Confession assert[ed] that God's Word is one. The Reformers dealt with the three forms of God's Word—revealed, written, and preached—but they did not concern themselves with the problem of their unity" *The Church's Confession Under Hitler*,

189. Part of Barth's contribution was to elaborate the indissoluble unity-in-differentiation of God's Word in the first volume of his *Church Dogmatics*. For a brief summary of Barth's understanding of the "Word of God," see the *Westminster Handbook to Karl Barth*, ed. Richard E. Burnett (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 223–227.

[7] Ernst Helmreich, *The German Churches under Hitler: Background, Struggle, and Epilogue* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979), 129.

[8] "… I also pledge that I never will tie myself to parties who want to destroy Christianity." Helmreich, *The German Churches under Hitler*, 129.

[9] Herbert F. Ziegler, *Nazi Germany's New Aristocracy: The SS Leadership, 1925–1939* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 85–87.

[10] In 1946, Karl Barth returned to the University of Bonn where he had been dismissed from his teaching post for refusing to take an unconditional oath of allegiance to Hitler. He delivered lectures on the Creed to students at Bonn, many of whom had been soldiers in the Wehrmacht. In his lecture on "God Almighty," he stated: "The essence of all power, namely ability, possibility, freedom as a neutral existence, absolute freedom, abstract ability, power in itself, is an intoxicating thought. Is God the essence of all sovereignty, simply *potentia*? He has often been understood as such, and it is natural to imagine this *potentia*, 'power in itself,' as the divine, the most profound, truest and fairest, to admire, honor, worship and praise this power in itself as the mystery of existence. Perhaps you recall how, when Hitler used to speak about God, he called Him 'the Almighty.' But it is not 'the Almighty' who is God: we cannot understand from the standpoint of a supreme concept of power, who God is. And the man who calls 'the Almighty' God misses God in the most terrible way. For the 'Almighty' is bad, as 'power in itself' is bad. The 'Almighty' means Chaos, Evil, the Devil. We could not better describe and define the Devil than by trying to think this idea of a self-based, freed, sovereign ability. This intoxicating thought of power is chaos, the *tohu wobohu* which God in His creation has left behind Him, which He rejected when He created heaven and earth. That is the *opposite* of God. …" Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G.T. Thomson (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 47–48.

[11] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The First American Tour" in *No Rusty Swords*, trans. John Bowden (London: Collins, 1965), 76–85.

[12] The amount of literature on Nazi medical science, and especially the field of eugenics, is vast.

[13] "*Der 'Ansbacher Ratschlag' zu der Barmer Theologischen Erklärung"* in Kurt Dietrich Schmidt, ed., *Die Bekenntnisse und grundsätzlichen Äußerungen zur Kirchenfrage.* Bd. 2: *Das Jahr 1934* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1935), 102–103. Translation mine.

[14] Ibid, 103.

[15] In "Regaining Perspective," *Presbyterian Outlook*, May 21, 2002, William Stacy Johnson claims, "The 1934 Barmen Declaration in Germany was about not allowing divine grace to be circumscribed by the 'Aryan paragraphs' which the so-called German Christians (and not the state) were pressing the church to accept." Yet this is not what the Barmen Declaration was about or claims at any point. Neither the German Christians or Barmen Synod claimed that divine grace was "circumscribed" by the Aryan paragraphs or by anything else, for that matter.

[16] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1:55.

[17] "God should not be said to be ineffable, for when this is said something is said. And a contradiction in terms is created, since if that is ineffable which cannot be spoken, then that is not ineffable which can be called ineffable. The contradiction is to be passed over in silence rather than resolved verbally. For God, although nothing worthy may be spoken of him, has accepted the tribute of human voice and wished us to take joy in praising him with our words." Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), I, vi, 11.

Jesus Christ is the Life

by John Burgess

Where Is Life? My grandparents were lifelong Presbyterian missionaries in Central America. When I was four years old, my grandfather came to see us. He had been in the United States on business and took a bus to Denver, Colorado, where we lived. I myself don't remember the meeting, but my mother tells me that as he got off the bus, I ran right up to him, and he bent down and scooped me up into his arms. I do remember that he slept in my bedroom, on the bottom bunk of my bed, and at night he would take out his set of false teeth and place them in a glass of water on my dresser.

My family thought of my grandfather as a great man. He had planted dozens of churches among the Indian tribes of the Guatemalan highlands. He had become fluent not only in Spanish, but also in the language of the Quiche Indians. He knew Guatemala's leading social and political figures. He published a newspaper and wrote dozens of tracts on various religious topics.

Only a couple of months after his visit, we received word that he had died at home in Guatemala of a heart attack. I remember lying in bed that night, weeping to myself in the dark room. Not quite five years old, I cried out to God, "I don't want to die. I don't want to die." Whatever had taken my grandfather away was too awful, too repulsive. I did not want it to come near me. I wanted to live.

Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." At its opening, the Gospel of John declares that "in him"—the Word, the Logos, who becomes flesh—"was life, and the life was the light" of every human being (1:4). And as it draws to a close, the Gospel of John returns to this theme, for John declares that these things "are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (20:31). Jesus offers us life, true life, life that endures, eternal life. And Jesus himself is nothing less than *the* life.

Human beings long for life. Isn't it interesting that words such as flourishing and thriving have become so central to our Western social vocabulary today? We want our children to flourish and thrive. We want our congregations to flourish and thrive. We want those who have been oppressed and marginalized to have a decent shot at life, to flourish and thrive and realize all of their potentialities. Grow, develop, expand, increase—these words define not only our economic life but also our psychological and spiritual wellbeing.

The word life appears 46 times in the Gospel of John, more than in the other three gospels combined. Fifteen of John's 21 chapters refer to life or to what is living. I have referenced just a few on your handout. "Your son will live" (4:53). "For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself" (5:26). "I am the bread of life" (6:35). "Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life'" (6:68). "Out of his heart [of the one who believes in Christ] shall flow rivers of living water" (7:38). "I lay down my life, that I may take it again" (10:17). "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25).

We could add many others. John 4:14: "Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." John 5:21: "For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will." John 10:10: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." John 17:2: "Thou hast given [the Son] power over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom thou hast given him." The promise of life comes cascading across the pages of the Gospel of John and embeds itself in images from everyday existence that offer life in its goodness and fullness: bread, wine, light, water, blood, and spirit.

Just what is this life all about? Certainly it is an embodied life. But it is also a life that is not dependent just on the condition of the body. Every pastor has seen people who are physically weak or debilitated and yet are completely alive, as though there is some life principle that sustains them even in the face of suffering and death. And, conversely, every pastor knows people who are physically healthy yet not really alive, so turned in as they are on themselves. We are speaking here about what the Church Fathers, drawing from the Scriptures, called the heart. The heart is the very center of our being. It is the principle that integrates mind and body, thought and activity. When we ask about life, we are asking about the heart and its longings and desires, hopes and dreams. We want to know, is our heart really alive? In the words of the prophet Ezekiel, when we look at ourselves, will we find a heart of stone or a heart of flesh (36:26)?

The human heart longs for life. But the human heart is fragile. Life events weigh on it. The heart can soar with joy, but it can also be disappointed. The human heart can feel compassion and love, but it can also be crushed. I am convinced that the question of our time is not simply whether we as Americans will flourish and thrive—professionally, socially, personally, or physically—but whether we will have a heart, a heart of flesh that can still feel life as a wondrous gift, can feel life as the gracious presence of the One who is the way, the truth, and the life. Can the little boy who cries out, "I don't want to die, I don't want to die," not lose heart but really live—really *live*—in the face of death, which seems to take away every good and precious thing?

Two recent incidents have reminded me of just how much humans long for life—and will do whatever they think it takes to feel alive again in the face of death. I know a middle-aged man who for years has been driven by professional success and making lots of money. His wife and two daughters have suffered under his mood swings, from his excessive doting on them to his neglect and even verbal abuse of them. One day he suddenly passed out at work and was rushed to the hospital. It turned out that his brain had a tumor, and that he needed an emergency operation. His family rallied around him, prayed for him, and waited to see if he would live. Their prayers were answered. The surgery was successful, although a long period of rehabilitation would follow.

His wife hoped that he would see life differently now, that he would be able to give thanks for life, life rescued from death, and would live with gratitude for his family. But that didn't happen. Instead, as he got better, he became more self-centered than before. He became obsessed with protecting his life. He began working out excessively at the gym. And, then, in his desperate longing to feel alive again, he secretly began an affair. When his wife finally moved out and divorced him, he celebrated by having the house in which they had lived for twenty years torn down, so that he could build a new house on the site, shorn of all memories of the past.

The second story has to do with a man who is a distinguished professor at a major American university and a leading scholar in his field. He is not a religious

person, although he respects religion and believes that it genuinely expresses human longings for transcendence. One day I learned that he has a son who is a performer—well, let's just say, of the type that I could never imagine seeing and, indeed, that I cannot understand why anyone would see. And it has startled me that this professor is very proud of his son and on his website even features him and his performances.

Recently, I was at a conference where this professor gave a keynote address. It was a scholarly tour-de-force, but suddenly he paused and asked for the privilege of sharing something personal. He introduced the audience to his new wife, who came forward and joined him at the podium. He noted that many in the audience knew his story, how several years ago he had lost his first wife to a terrible battle with cancer. For several years, he and his son had lived through hell, as they watched her die. Now, the professor declared, he had found love again, he was coming back to life. And, then, he talked about his son, how devastated his son had been at his mother's death and how his son had struggled with depression. But his son too had come back to life, too, had come back to life by transgressing social norms and creating something outrageously new through his performances. And suddenly I saw everything in a new light. Transgressing social norms, creating something outrageously new—this son was desperately searching for life in the face of death.

Many people in our time—even prosperous, well-to-do Americans—are crying out, "I don't want to die." They want to flourish and thrive. But as sympathetic as I am to these two men—I have no interest in judging or condemning them—I am nevertheless troubled by their stories. I feel troubled because I know from my own life that all my efforts to make life, grab life, protect life, break through to life have never given me the life I was really seeking. I have had to learn that life—real life—is something that only God can give and that I can only receive from God's hand. True life—what the Gospel of John dares to call eternal life—comes as pure gift, sheer grace, and it evokes wonder and awe, joy and thanksgiving, and humility and repentance.

I am now at an age in life in which every year I lose beloved friends and family members. I have had to recognize that my own mind and body are aging, and that I too someday will die, however incomprehensible that still is to me. Interestingly, it has been not only the Gospel of John, but also the Book of Job that has helped me in recent days remember the wondrous, mysterious, and perplexing gift that is life from God. So, as we think in this first presentation about Jesus as the life, I invite us to ponder Job.

Suffering Job has come to represent all human beings who no longer feel that they are really alive, that they can really live. His wealth and physical comfort are taken from him. His children are senselessly killed. His health is broken. And he is convinced that God has done all this, that God has turned against him, that God is no longer a source of life but rather his enemy, his adversary, his destroyer. Here even the longing for life seems to have been extinguished. Job's plea is not, "I don't want to die," but rather, "Please, let me die." If we cannot count on God to give us life, where do we turn? As Job's wife declares, nothing is left for us than to curse God and die. Old Testament scholar Carol Newsom has written thoughtfully on the Book of Job, and she calls it a polyphonic text. [1] That is to say, the Book of Job does not present us with a single, rational, logical argument but rather with a variety of perspectives on suffering that clash and resist coherence. Job, we could say, offers us a spirituality that takes account of how we, believers in the God of Israel and the church, actually experience suffering. When life bears down on us, we, like Job, sometimes feel God's gracious, comforting presence, and sometimes we wonder where in the world God is. Like Job, we sometimes are able to trust that God is at work, even if we cannot yet see how, and sometimes we cry out with Jesus, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" These contradictory moments may come one right after another, or they may even come up against each other at one and the same time. Job and his friends give voice to the multiple, contradictory ways in which we humans react to the threat of annihilation. But what is at stake for Job—and for us—is not simply physical life and wellbeing. Rather, this is a book about the human heart and whether the heart can live, when life circumstances would crush it.

From the outset, Job is concerned about the condition of the human heart. At the beginning of the book, while he and his children are still flourishing and thriving, he rises early each morning to pray for them, for "it may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts" (1:5). And after he has lost everything except his bare physical existence, he nevertheless remains concerned to preserve what he calls his integrity, a heart that is rightly oriented toward God. Job declares to his friends, "until I die I will maintain my integrity" (27:5, TANAKH: The Holy Scriptures, Jewish Publication Society, 1988, hereafter cited: JPS); "let [God] weigh me on the scale of righteousness; let God ascertain my integrity" (31:6, JPS). Job insists on keeping his heart whole, even when life has become a terrible burden.

This kind of integrity is apparently not a static, stoical indifference to life and its tragedies. The heart like Job's that has integrity does not rest in blissful peace. It struggles, it resists, it protests, it argues, it demands. Amazingly, the Job who suffers has a heightened sense

of life. He feels life more fully than ever. He plumbs more deeply the depths of his heart. So, let us for a few minutes follow the contradictory impulses of Job's heart, and how he seeks life, real life, life in God—for Job's impulses set forth everything that we experience today as we look for life. I will briefly trace eight of Job's reactions to his situation, eight manifestations of his longing for life, eight perspectives on God and God's presence and God's absence in his life.

One impulse of the suffering heart: Life can get so bad that a person just wants to die. Job suffers "loathsome sores" from the "sole of his foot to the crown of his head" (2:7), and the pain and humiliation of his condition are so great that he can only curse the day of his birth, which strikes us as perilously close to cursing God himself. Job declares, "Perish the day on which I was born, and the night it was announced. … May that day be darkness; may God above have no concern for it. … May it not be counted among the days of the year. … May it not see the glimmerings of the dawn" (3:3, 4, 6, 10, JPS). Job wonders why God did not simply let him die at birth and be at peace (3:21). Perhaps all of us have known people who were so sick that they could no longer see any point in living, and we were able to sympathize. They weren't going to get better, and death would mean release, relief. Paradoxically, death in such a situation seems more life-giving to the heart than life itself.

But, one might ask, Is this protest against life actually a protest for life? Is this "I want to die" is, in fact, an "I don't want to die"? Is Job asserting in the only way that he knows how that he still has a heart, that he has not turned to stone? As scholars have taught us about the Psalms, the Old Testament voice of lament and complaint—Why do you sleep, O Lord? Why do you hide your face? (Ps. 44:23, 24)?—paradoxically rests on the confidence that there is a God, and that this God has listened and answered in the past and therefore will listen and answer in the present. But this confidence is not easy. It is plagued by doubt, fear, and uncertainty. Will God, in fact, listen and answer? Significantly, Psalm 44, that classic psalm of lament, concludes with a series of pleas, not thanksgivings. "Rouse yourself, O Lord! Awake, do not cast us off forever! Rise up, come to our help. Redeem us" (vv. 23–26, passim). But Job does not seem capable even of calling on God to arise. His is more like the condition of the suicidal person, who simply finds no coherence any longer to life. The protest against life becomes a longing for death.

A second impulse of the suffering heart: God is an oppressor, not a liberator. He is an exacting judge, not a merciful Father. Job 7:17: "What is man, that thou dost make so much of him, and that thou dost set thy mind upon him?" The Book of Job here parodies Psalm 8, which declares, "What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him? Yet thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honor" (vv. 4–5). For Job, God is all too close. Job's friends insist that suffering is punishment for sin. Job must have done something wrong. But Job protests that even if he has sinned—and he denies that he has—God is all too obsessive compulsive about it. "You inspect [man] every morning, examine him every minute. Will You not look away from me for a while, let me be, till I swallow my spittle? If I have sinned, what have I done to You, watcher of men? Why make of me Your target, and a burden to myself? Why do You not pardon my transgression? (vv. 18–21, JPB). Job's friends keep telling him that all will be well if he will just turn to God in prayer. The problem is that Job needs a God who will first turn to him and give him life, not death.

A third impulse of the suffering heart: There may be no hope for me now, but I trust that God will vindicate me after death. Job 19:25–26: "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth—this, after my flesh has thus been destroyed." Karl Marx famously described this impulse as "the opiate of the people." He argued that the church has kept suffering people passive and powerless by assuring them that if they patiently accept their lot on earth, they will receive their just reward in heaven. Marx was half right. Sometimes the church really has kept people down. But he was only half right. There really are times when suffering humans cannot change their life circumstances. When we think of all those whose life has been cut short by no fault of their own—disease, war, famine—innocent children who have never had the chance to grow up and experience life in its fullness—we must have hope that there is a God who redeems life beyond this life.

A fourth impulse of the suffering heart: I long for God, I just want to be near him. See the continuation of Job 19, v. 27: "But I would behold God while still in my flesh. I myself, not another, would behold him, would see with my own eyes." Here God is not the unfathomable giver of a life that no longer seems worth living, not the tormentor who seeks out every human imperfection only to punish it, but also not simply the redeemer of life beyond death, but rather "a very present help in trouble" (Ps. 46:1). Jews and Christians have believed that we can encounter God as a gracious presence especially through prayer and worship. Psalm 122: "I was glad when they said to me, Let us go to the house of the Lord!" (v. 1). Psalm 84: "For a day in thy courts is better than a thousand elsewhere" (v. 10). Matthew 18:20: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

Impulse number five: I long for God, but I cannot find him. Job 23:8–9: "Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him; on the

left hand, I seek him, but I cannot behold him; I turn to the right hand, but I cannot see him." Perhaps every Christian has experienced a dark night of the soul. We pray and fast and call on God but hear nothing in return. We feel as abandoned as Jesus on the cross. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote, "[God's] invisibility is ruining us. This madness of being constantly thrown back to the invisible God himself—no one can stand that anymore."[2] A commentator adds, "We have so few grounds in either the world or the church for trusting in a fully unprovable reality such as God."[3]

Impulse number six: God's presence is frightening. It is more than I can endure. Job 23:18 states: "Therefore, I am terrified at his presence; when I consider, I am in dread of him." Job reminds us that God is God, his ways are not ours. He is pure energy, and we should not presume upon his goodness and kindness. In the words of Hebrews, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (10:31). One of my mentors, the theologian and ethicist James Gustafson, captures especially well this sixth impulse of Job's suffering heart: we "cannot fully account," writes Gustafson, for the "tragedies inherent in the movements of history and nature . . . as the outcome of sin." They are also "the outcome of the sovereign powers . . . that are beyond the capacity of all human will, technology, and institutions to fully determine." As Abraham Lincoln declared in his Second Inaugural Address, "The Almighty has his own purposes." Gustafson adds, "God will be God."[4]

Impulse number seven: God is the creative, mysterious power at work in all that exists. Job 38:28–29: "[Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind.] Who begot the dewdrops? From whose womb did the ice come forth? Who gave birth to the hoarfrost of heaven?" And for three chapters, we get beautiful poetry about the indescribably intricate web of life, ranging from plants and animals, to stars and seas. Up to now, Job has lamented that God is all too absent, or, alternately, that God's hand is all too heavy upon him. Job has longed for God, has been terrified of God, has hoped in God, and has longed for God. And now God himself speaks, and what Job hears is, "Gird up your loins, and answer me, where were you when I. …?"—and God lists his marvelous deeds, one after another.

Finally, an eighth impulse: I have seen the Lord, and I no longer need to fight him. Job 42:5–6: "I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee; therefore I recant and relent, being but dust and ashes." Now Job experiences God's comforting presence, yet this presence is so glorious and sovereign that Job can only fall down in fear and trembling. Who is any of us to stand before God, the Lord Almighty? And, yet, this God addresses us by name, this God comes to us and lets us see him. God with us—Immanuel—is good news that nevertheless humbles us.

What gives Job's heart integrity is its ability to hold these conflicting feelings and reactions together. He does not discount some as irreligious or privilege others as godly. God declares that in all that "my servant Job has spoken"—in all eight of the impulses of his suffering heart—he has "spoken of me rightly" (42:7). Nevertheless, a significant progression does take place in Job's experience.

After his many cries of lament and complaint comes God's voice from the whirlwind, and it teaches him that God's life-giving power is always at work in the world, even when we are unable to perceive it, even when God seems absent or, on the contrary, even when God seems all too near and threatening. By the end of God's address to him, Job has learned again that life is a wondrous gift, a miracle. God has revealed himself to Job in all that exists, and Job bows down in adoration and humility. Just how small we really are in the larger scheme of things—a mere speck of dust in the universe—and, yet, God has granted us life. We exist alongside the Pleiades and mountain goats, the ostriches and hawks, and the monstrous creatures of earth and sea, Behemoth and Leviathan. It is as though God is asking Job, is asking us, Will you understand that you truly have received—to return to the words of the Gospel of John—you truly have received "grace upon grace" (1:16)?

What finally happened to Job after all this? Job 42:16 simply tells us, "And after this Job lived . . ." He *lived*. Tomorrow we will return to the question of how we receive this life—the life that we believe is ultimately Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Dr. John P. Burgess, Ph.D., is James Henry Snowden Professor of Systematic Theology, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

[1] Carol Newsom, *The Book of Job* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[2] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "To Helmut Roβler," in *Ecumenical, Academic, and Pastoral Work: 1931–1932* in Dietrich Bonhoeffer English Works (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2012), 11:55.

[3] Wolf Krötke, *Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologians for a Post-Christian World*, trans. John P. Burgess (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 168.

[4] James M. Gustafson, *An Examined Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 109.

Dr. Randal Working is President of *Theology Matters*. Dr. Richard Burnett is Executive Director and Managing Editor. The Board of Directors consists mostly of ruling and teaching elders in various Presbyterian denominations. *Theology Matters* exists to inform and encourage, instruct and inspire, members of the Presbyterian family and wider Christian community through the clear and coherent articulation of theology that is reformed according to God's Word. It is sent free to anyone who requests it. You can reach us at 864-378-5416 or email us at admin@theologymatters.com or find out more about us by going to our website: www.theologymatters.com.

Theology Matters
P.O. Box 50026
Greenwood, SC 29649

Change Service Requested

NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION U.S. POSTAGE PAID AUTOMATED MAILING SYSTEM

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Even as we prepare this edition of *Theology Matters* to mail to all of you in more than eighty nations all around the world, we are painfully aware that we are living in times unlike any others we have known. Things are likely to have changed for many us by the time you receive it. Some of you may be very sick by then. Some of you may be grieving the loss of friends and family members. What can we do? Let us continue to worship, love, believe, and obey God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord. And let us continue to pray with and for each other. Yes, there are other things: caring for the sick, sustaining the lonely, comforting those who mourn. But let us begin with, and undergird all these other things with, worship and prayer.

"Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable" (Psalm 145:3). Augustine cites this verse in the very first sentence of his *Confessions*. May I share with you what my friend, Jim Goodloe, recommends? Say this verse to yourself every night before you go to sleep. And say it to yourself again every morning, as soon after you awake as you can remember to do so. Frame your days and nights with it. Hold it before you always. No matter how great "the pestilence that stalks in darkness, or the destruction that wastes at noonday" (Psalm 91:6), the Lord is greater, and beyond all our comprehension. Let us hear from you. May the Lord bless and keep you.

Richard Burnett, Managing Editor

Many know that theology matters. Some know that it is important. Yet relatively few know that *good* theology does not simply happen. Good theology requires a lot of time, talent, energy, and resources to nurture, cultivate, produce, and distribute.

Theology Matters is free to every person that requests it. We are only able to provide unique theological leadership of this caliber to the church of Jesus Christ for free because of our faithful and generous supporters. Would you please help us?

Would you please make a gift today?

Visit www.theologymatters.com/give. Thank you!