

Author's Commentary  
to  
***We Make the Road by Walking:***  
*A Year-Long Quest for  
Spiritual Formation, Reorientation, and  
Activation*

by Brian D. McLaren  
([www.brianmclaren.net](http://www.brianmclaren.net))

This e-book supplements *We Make the Road by Walking: A Year-Long Quest for Spiritual Formation, Reorientation and Activation*, published by Hachette in the US and Hodder & Stoughton in the UK (2014). The book is available for all reputable booksellers, and comes in digital and audiobook formats.

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This commentary will be expanded and updated as necessary in future editions. If you see a need for additions or corrections, or simply would like to ask a question or make a suggestion, please contact [info@brianmclaren.net](mailto:info@brianmclaren.net).

## **Introduction**

Because *We Make the Road by Walking* was written as a series of sermons to be read aloud, it seemed inappropriate to burden the text with notes. And because I wanted to articulate a constructive and coherent articulation of Christian faith that would be accessible to a wide audience, it seemed inappropriate to include terminology and explanations that would be of interest only to those parts of the audience with more theological or ecclesial background.

That's why I decided to prepare this commentary for people who wanted to go beyond the material in the book.

## Preface

I begin the book with an analogy between the way we as individuals are “in the making” and the way our religious communities are similarly in process. Yes, we have an identity - a name, a lineage, a past full of virtues, vices, victories, and defeats, a place in the social and historical landscape. But living identities are always in flux. That means that we, as individuals and as communities, can grow better or worse over time.

So Presbyterianism and Sufism, Reconstructionist Judaism and the Southern Baptist Convention, Sunni Islam and Pentecostalism, “the New Atheism” and Roman Catholicism, and you and I all share this in common: we are on the road, and we can take turns for the better or worse.

This realization adds weight to the word “repentance.” To rethink is the beginning of a change in direction, which will lead to a change in identity. I believe that God always beckons us towards the light, towards God’s own self, towards more wholeness and holiness and grace. God’s grace abounds - for you and me, and no less for those we may consider “other,” outsiders, outcasts, or enemies.

When I say the book is a book of constructive theology, I mean constructive in the sense of positive - rather than polemical and critical. But I also mean constructive in the sense that I am not claiming to give the one, the only, and the absolutely true understanding of the faith. What I propose is a construction, a composition ... a way of arranging data, in this case, biblical and theological data, together with experiential data.

Of course, I wouldn’t offer this construction if I didn’t believe it was better than the alternatives I have encountered. This is the best I have to offer at this point in my life and understanding.

But at the same time, I can’t pretend that what I’m offering is a perfect and incorrigible construction. Others will no doubt come along and deconstruct certain parts and reconstruct them in ways that make more sense to them. Constructive theology, in this sense, is provisional and collaborative.

I have been guided in this regard by several ideas from Fr. Vincent Donovan. In fact, it could be said that he and several other Roman Catholic authors (Leonardo Boff, John Sobrino, Gustavo Gutierrez, Rene Girard, Romano Guardini, and James Alison) have had a profound influence in the shape of this project. Donovan understood that all human projects are admittedly contextual constructions, even the ancient creeds:

The very formulation of the creed by the fathers of the Council of Nicaea, in the midst of the Greek culture in which they lived, was a cultural formulation. It had to be. It was an authentic cultural playing back, as it were, of the original gospel message. To affirm, as the creed did, that the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Son, was “consubstantial

with the Father, one in being with the Father,” was a thought that the Jews could probably not have had, and one that today would be culturally and linguistically impossible for many African and Eastern nations. This leads to the arresting possibility that (1) new light and even revelation, concerning the meaning and understanding of the gospel, can come from the cultural situation of those hearing the gospel (as with the Greeks) and (2) different proclamations of the gospel could constitute historical individualities, which would be ultimately incommensurable with each other and with every other proclamation.

... If the Greek fathers could transmit to us further revelation of the meaning of the gospel, so too could peoples of the world not yet evangelized.... People of the old church, the European church, have always claimed this right for themselves.... But they have not yet allowed the possibility that ... the peoples of the third church, or of the world not yet evangelized, must be allowed that same right, must be the final judges of their own theological orthodoxy. (Fr. Vincent Donovan, *The Church in the Midst of Creation*, [Maryknoll, 1989], 55-56)

What Donovan asserts for various third-world cultures could also apply to old-world culture in various historical epochs. So ... what fifth Century Europeans could see would be very different from what 21st Century Europeans could see. Donovan continues:

Religion is our own creation. Its horizons are necessarily limited to our horizons. Since it is our creation it will serve us. In a time of social, political, and economic upheaval, we look to it as that one, solid, taken-for-granted basis to our lives. It leads us to cling to the forms and structures with which we are familiar and which we have found comforting. At the dying of an age and the birth of a new one, religion will be in the forefront of those institutions clinging desperately to that immovable rock of unanalyzed assumptions.

But revelation shatters that rock, disturbs our horizons, presents a God who is not like us at all, a destabilizing and surprising God who cannot be used to justify all our projects; instead, One who asks us questions we do not want to hear. (118)

Because of this understanding - which I share, Donovan could boldly say:

Never accept and be content with unanalyzed assumptions, assumptions about the work, about the people, about the church or Christianity. Never be afraid to ask questions about the work we have inherited or the work we are doing. There is no question that should not be asked or that is outlawed. The day we are completely satisfied with what we have been doing; the day we have found the perfect, unchangeable system of work, the perfect answer, never in need of being corrected again, on that day we will know that we are wrong, that we have made the greatest mistake of all. (*Christianity Rediscovered*, 146)

As a work of public and practical theology, *We Make the Road* tries to speak a language that is generally accessible (which is less true of this commentary!). I don't want to say anything in the

book that I wouldn't want shouted (or tweeted) from the housetops. It isn't secret, insider-only information expressed in the jargon of some elite group.

I tried to align the book with the broad shape of the Christian year, but I couldn't accommodate all the special celebrations of the year. All Saints Day, for example, gets ignored, even though I very much appreciate that holiday. For those who use this book for a year, they have all the rest of the years of their lives to attend to what is not included in this book.

## Introduction: Seeking Aliveness

I acknowledge early on in this book the global realities in which I as a writer together with every reader find ourselves - the ways mega-corporations profit by plundering the planet with political protection and our tacit permission, the ways the poor majority are exploited and excluded by an elite minority, the ways peace is resisted and threatened.

Some people may see this emphasis as excessively political, and they may wish for a more personal or devotional approach. But my deep belief is that the personal and public/political/social dimensions of life are inextricably interwoven. If Catholic theologian Ewert Cousins was right - that we are entering a second Axial Age, then we must not turn from the personal to the social any more than we must turn from the social to the personal. Rather, we must now try to integrate the personal and the social and see them not as two things to be reconciled but as one multidimensional reality. As will become clear in the pages ahead, I believe the Bible conveys this integrated view more effectively than our familiar theological systems have tended to do.

I introduce the idea of spiritual/social movements in hopes that readers will feel invited into action and participation (“activation” in the subtitle), not just inspiration and information. Christian faith expresses itself both in institutions and movements, and I try to convey in a few paragraphs a vision that integrates both.

When I acknowledge that the Spirit has been moving both inside and outside of Christianity, some will feel uncomfortable. I would have felt that way twenty years ago. But it’s time, I believe, for Christians to stop acting as if God is a wholly-owned subsidiary of any single religion. According to Genesis 1, the Spirit’s activity on earth precedes not only the Christian religion, but all religion - and not only religion, but even humanity, and not only humanity, but even living creatures of any kind. The Spirit is thus ubiquitous and breathing in and through all good and creative activity.

In my most hopeful moments, I imagine the Spirit of God calling Christians to a greater depth and breadth of aliveness ... and at the same time, calling Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, agnostics, and atheists to the same reality. So, just as the first words of Genesis describe the Spirit hovering over the primal waters, I dare to believe the life-giving Spirit hovers over the fluid elements of human culture, including religion. I wonder what might happen if we opened ourselves to the possibility that it isn’t which religion or philosophy we belong to that counts as much as how we respond to that invitation of the Spirit. If God could speak to the Magi in Matthew’s Christmas story in the language of stars, and if God speaks to all people through the handiwork of creation as the Psalmist says, then it shouldn’t be hard to imagine God speaking to people in each human, imperfect, evolving religious tradition in a language and set of imagery that is familiar to them. A more exclusive view, history shows, aids and abets colonialism and imperialism and their attendant atrocities.

In early drafts of the book, I chose *Catechesis* for the title. A few liked the title, but most thought it would repel readers. I very much like the title I finally chose, but I confess that on some level I still wish *Catechesis* could have been the title. I have noticed how many young seminarians - and how many retired pastors - feel drawn to the work of spiritual direction rather than a traditional congregational pastorate, and I wonder if spiritual direction is a contemporary expression of catechesis. I also wonder if a simple, widely-practiced “each one teach one” strategy could take us farther in Christian mission in the next few decades than our current system of congregations, real estate, hierarchy, and bureaucracy. Of course, it’s not an either/or proposition.

At [www.brianmclaren.net](http://www.brianmclaren.net), you can find specific suggestions for using the book with groups in a downloadable document called, “Using ‘We Make the Road by Walking’”. Suffice it to say that the book has been field tested widely, and the simplest way to use the book is to do the following:

1. Require no preparation.
2. Go over the Guidelines for Learning Circles in Appendix II.
3. Have someone read the first paragraph or so from the first Scripture passage at the beginning of a chapter. Then go around the circle, continuing to read the Scriptures, a paragraph per person. Make it easy for people to pass if they’d rather not read aloud. Encourage children to participate.
4. Then do the same with the chapter.
5. Then go through the Engage questions.

One chapter can be discussed comfortably in 50 - 60 minutes.



## Part 1: Alive in the Story of Creation

This seems like a good point to describe the approach to the Bible taken in *We Make the Road by Walking*. Many people think there are only two ways to read the Bible: *their way* and *the wrong way*. But there are many approaches to the Bible, as this matrix shows. The vertical axis goes from innocent (where we ask few questions about the text) through critical (where all questions are allowed) to integral (where we seek to see the text as a whole again, in a post-critical way, after having analyzed it during the critical stage). The horizontal axis spans literal (where the text is read for facts only) to literary (where the text is read for meaning). I describe this matrix in more detail in my book *The Great Spiritual Migration*, Chapter 6.

INTEGRAL/LITERAL		INTEGRAL/LITERARY
CRITICAL/LITERAL		CRITICAL/LITERARY
INNOCENT/LITERAL		INNOCENT/LITERARY

Of course, many of us move back and forth from one category to another, depending on our mood or context.

While some people read the Bible as an academic, political, or intellectual exercise only, many of us read it with personal investment, seeking guidance and wisdom for how we live our lives. We aren't simply seeking information from the Bible: we're seeking inner formation. We may even dare to hope for an encounter with God. The shaded circle in the center represents people who read the Bible with this personal investment, and reminds us that they can come from any of the six zones in the diagram.

Our primary aim in this book is to help people in any of these six zones seek aliveness together. It will be helpful in different ways to people inside and outside the shaded circle too, especially if they are willing to approach the Bible with an open mind and heart.

While this book can be helpful for people in any of the six zones, it has its own center of gravity in the shaded section of the upper right-hand zone. Because we will take a formational/integral/literary approach, we will read the Bible with complete freedom to ask questions about its sources, development, internal tensions, biases, accuracy, cultural context and genre. And we will read the Bible as a library containing poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and other genres. We won't presume agreement among writers; we will allow them to make statements and counter-statements, both to agree and to argue. Nor will we assume that the ancient composers held to

modern standards of historical or scientific accuracy; we will allow them to speak from within their own contexts with their own literary protocols which clearly favor deep meaning over factual accuracy.

For that reason, we will give the Bible the benefit of the doubt when it comes to meaning. We will work with the hypothesis that where the Bible does not convey accurate or objective factual history, it still can facilitate the greater goal of helping us seek meaning. If we engage it with vigor, intelligence, honesty, humility, and imagination, with our hearts open wide to the Spirit of God, we can be inwardly formed into better people, and we can be equipped to do more and greater good in our world.

Our formational/integral/literary approach sets the stage for how we will deal with the miracle stories that are common in certain parts of the Bible (and surprisingly rare in others). Some people believe that all the miracles happened just as they are described in the Bible. Others would say that miracles are impossible, so none of them happened; the Bible is just plain dishonest or wrong when it speaks of miracles. The truth is, everybody has opinions and convictions on the matter, but nobody knows for sure.

In *We Make the Road by Walking* we will leave room for our fellow students both to question miracle stories and to believe they record factual history. We will remember that miracles in the Bible are called signs - meaning they signify. And they are called wonders - meaning they are intended to fill us with awe and wonder. We will assume that one of the meanings of a miracle story, whether or not it describes an actual event, is to challenge us to believe that what seems or feels impossible could actually, with God, be possible. We will allow our faith to be challenged and our imagination stretched by these stories, taking them seriously whether or not we take them literally, seeking the actuality of their larger purpose even if some of us question the factuality of their details.

In regard to the violence attributed to God in the Bible, our formational/integral/literary approach frees us from the need to defend this violence in any way. It also frees us from the opposite extreme: the need to throw out the Bible because it contains this violence. It allows us to trace how violence and the idea of God are in tension in the Bible. And it allows us to see how God and violence are gradually disentangled through the course of the biblical narrative, leading to a gracious, loving, and radically nonviolent vision of God. In a formational/integral/literary approach, we can allow the latter vision to critique the former.

In regard to differences or tensions within the Bible, we won't try to avoid them, nor will we try to explain them away or figure out which version was right. Instead, we'll take them all seriously and see what meaning might be conveyed by each version. We can do so because a formational/integral/literary approach assumes that the greatest literature was never intended to produce universal certainty or even unquestionable clarity. Instead, great works of literature - including our holy texts - raise questions that need to be pondered, point in directions that need to be

explored, surface tensions that need to be grappled with, and inspire the imagination to help us experience true aliveness from one generation to the next.

Readers of the Bible often don't realize that when preachers and authors say, "The Bible says," they actually mean, "Our community and its authority figures interpret the Bible to mean...." Often, those preachers and authors themselves aren't aware that they are part of an interpretive community. To them, their way of reading the Bible is the obvious way or the only legit way - whether it is the way of Dispensationalism, Calvinism, Thomistic Catholicism, Franciscan Catholicism, Liberation Theology, German Higher Criticism, the Jesus Seminar, the Emergent Conversation, or whatever.

People hold their views about the Bible passionately. Sometimes people get angry at those who read it differently. In *We Make the Road by Walking*, we will try to create an atmosphere of respect where we can all hold our opinions with an open mind and heart. We'll make room for one another to be honest about where we are, what we think, what we question, what we don't question, and why. We will make this table a safe place to differ graciously, and we will place achieving mutual understanding above achieving agreement. We will work to create and sustain this kind of conversation space because respect, honesty, and learning go hand in hand. And even when we disagree about details, we will gladly agree about one thing: with sincerity, with passion, and with faith, we are seeking aliveness. Together.

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This first section sets the audacious goal of giving an overview of the whole Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures in just 13 chapters. Obviously, deciding what to include and emphasize and what to leave out was a monumental challenge. Those who would want to criticize my choices, of course, are free to do so, but it's important to remember that whoever designs a curriculum is making choices.

Because this is an explicitly Christian telling of the Biblical story, it is heavily Christ-centered. But Christ-centered tellings run the risk of abusing Jesus' Jewish heritage. Some tellings are supersessionist, replacing Jews with Christians as God's chosen or elite people. Tellings may also be typological, seeing value in the Hebrew Scriptures only to the extent that they elucidate Christian doctrines. In obvious and subtle ways, Christians are made out to be good guys, and Jews, not so good.

The results of these approaches have ranged from destructive to tragic. That's why I'm advocating a different approach that might be called "integral." I emphasize the value of the Hebrew Scriptures in introducing themes that point to aliveness and matter to us all. These themes Jesus will himself embody and proclaim. In this way, I would hope that readers/hearers would in these chapters see Christianity and Judaism as colleagues, not rivals, as a daughter and mother who love one another rather than resent one another's existence, as has too often been the case in the past.

In short, I try to tell the story of the Hebrew Scriptures in a way that many Jews and Christians (and Muslims too) can appreciate and affirm.

## Chapter 1. Awe and Wonder

We face a great challenge as Christians today. The compositions in our biblical library took shape in a radically different context from our own. Not only that, but our theological systems through which we typically interpret the Bible - Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, or Pentecostal - all rose in “the old universe.”

“The new universe” is a conception of reality that has been revolutionized in just a few generations in at least seven key ways.

**Astronomy** - Thanks to Edwin Hubble and other astronomers, we understand ourselves to live in an ever-expanding universe where motion and change have been the norm since the singularity we call the Big Bang.

**Cosmology** - Thanks to cosmologists, geologists, and others, we understand ourselves to live in a 14.7 billion-year-old universe, in which life has only existed for a relatively short time, and our species has only been around for a blink of the eye.

**Physics** - Thanks to Einstein, Heisenberg, and others, we find ourselves in a universe where neither matter, energy, nor time are absolute, a universe of previously unimagined complexity in which uncertainty and mystery surround us.

**Biology** - Thanks to Darwin and Crick and others, we live and move in an evolving universe in which we are deeply related and connected to all living things by our DNA and our shared evolutionary history.

**Neuropsychology** - Thanks to researchers in medicine and especially brain studies, we wake up each day in a world in which souls/spirits and bodies can no longer be defined apart from one another, a world in which to be human is to be embodied.

**Anthropology** - Thanks to Richard Leakey, Rene Girard, and others, we see ourselves as members of human cultures that can trace their evolutionary roots back to Africa, our actual “Eden,” and we have come to see ourselves as evolving primates whose evolution is now cultural as well as biological.

**Philosophy** - Thanks to Thomas Kuhn, Nancy Murphy, Paul Ricoeur, Ken Wilbur, Steve McIntosh, and many others, we have come to see how we are constantly moving from one period of intellectual coherence into another, and so the assumption of a fixed and final philosophy has been abandoned.

Rather than trying to drag us back into the proto-astronomy, cosmology, physics, biology, neuropsychology, anthropology, and philosophy of the Bronze Age in which Genesis arose, and rather than trying to contain us in the modernist Enlightenment age in which the Bible was most recently re-interpreted, in this chapter I try to let the ancient creation narratives stand alongside our own today - in dialogue with each other.

I also try in this chapter to introduce a way of talking about God that is flexible rather than rigid, through phrases like, “God, whatever God is” and “God, the Creative Spirit,” and by presenting

various ways theologians and mystics describe the relationship between Creator and creation without needing to narrow the options to one.

For more on the idea that Genesis 1 describes the universe as a temple, with human beings the “image” of God within it, see John Walton’s *The Lost World of Genesis One* (IVP Academic, 2009).

I hope the Genesis 1, Psalm 19, and Matthew 6 passages resonate with one another to convey the image of a caring and good Creator who loves and values creation, and whose glory is seen through it.

Many chapters that follow contain creative tensions that can engender lively conversation. This one contains very little tension, but hopefully it invites readers into a generous and appreciative space that will be hospitable for all.

## Chapter 2. Being Human

Here, in contrasting the two creation narratives in Genesis, I try to make explicit the formational/integral/literary approach to the Bible which this book follows.

If readers are interested in the value of multiple stories, they will enjoy the TED talk by Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie called “The Danger of a Single Story” ([http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story)).

I emphasize the goodness of creation because our industrial-extractive-consumerist economy has cheapened creation, desecrated its goodness, and reduced deep inherent value to cheap monetary value. Sadly, a distorted conventional form of Christian theology has provided theological justification for this cheapening.

The interpretation of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil draws from the work of James Alison (beginning with *The Joy of Being Wrong*), who in turn draws from the work of Rene Girard (beginning with *Things Hidden*). There are many other interpretations of this primal story too, but this interpretation resonates throughout the whole Bible, so it’s the one I chose to highlight.

Rather than critique the traditional language and doctrine of “the Fall” - a term found nowhere in the biblical text, I simply tell the story without that language. Of course, “the Fall” is so deeply embedded in many Christians’ minds that they will either assume I intended it, or be shocked and concerned that I didn’t state it explicitly. I hope many readers will be able to hear, feel, and receive the story in a fresh way, and that they will be convinced, as I have been, that this alternative approach is a better, fuller, fairer, wiser, and more fertile interpretation.

If readers feel it is important to use the term “Fall” in grappling with this text, I would still caution them against bringing with it the unhelpful assumptions I discussed in *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?* and in *A New Kind of Christianity*.

The image of a hand reaching out to grasp the forbidden fruit in Genesis 2 is echoed in the story of the man’s withered hand being healed in Mark 3. Just as we live in the tension between two trees, the tree of aliveness and the tree of judging, we also live in the tension between the open hand and the clenched fist, the hand extended to accuse, steal, or wound and the hand outstretched to comfort, give, and serve. As I finished this chapter, I couldn’t stop thinking of Jesus’ nail-scarred hand and the man’s “withered hand” being restored in contrast to the grasping hand of greed, the clenched fist of hostility, the hand grasping a stone to hurl at another in judgment. I could imagine these images inspiring some creative artistic expressions in response to this chapter.

## Chapter 3. A World of Meaning

*We Make the Road By Walking* takes a narrative approach to the Bible, which means it invites biblical stories to unfold and interact in sequence from beginning to middle to end. However, I didn't want to wait until Advent to introduce Jesus. So I decided to link the creation stories of Genesis with the *new creation* story in John's Gospel.

My assumption is that when the writer of John's Gospel uses the term "logos," he is not seeking to define Jesus and his message by assumptions inherent in the Greek term - whether as used by Plato or Heraclitus or any other Greek philosopher. Rather, he is presenting Jesus as an alternative logos. The pattern, logic, or meaning of the universe proclaimed by Jesus, in other words, confronts rather than conforms to Greek assumptions, especially the assumption of Heraclitus, that the logos of the universe is "polemos," or hostility, conflict, and violence. For example, in Fragments 53 and 80 (Thanks to Paul Nuechterlein for this reference), Heraclitus says:

War [or violence] is the father of all and the king of all; and some he has made gods and some men, some bond and some free.... We must know that war is common to all and strife is justice, and that all things come into being and pass away through strife.

No, John claims: the "logos" is not strife but life, not war but love, not fighting but friendship, not enslaving but servanthood, not stealing but self-giving.

Here's how Rene Girard describes John's logos:

The Johannine Logos is foreign to any kind of violence; it is therefore forever expelled, an absent Logos that never has had any direct, determining influence over human cultures. These cultures are based on the Heraclitean Logos, the Logos of expulsion, the Logos of violence, which, if it is not recognized, can provide the foundation of a culture. The Johannine Logos discloses the truth of violence by having itself expelled. First and foremost, John's Prologue undoubtedly refers to the Passion. But in a more general way, the misrecognition of the Logos and mankind's expulsion of it disclose one of the fundamental principles of human society.

. . . This revelation comes from the Logos itself. In Christianity, it is expelled once again by the sacrificial reading, which amounts to a return to the Logos of violence. All the same, the Logos is still in the process of revealing itself; if it tolerates being concealed yet another time, this is to put off for just a short while the fullness of its revelation.

The Logos of love puts up no resistance; it always allows itself to be expelled by the Logos of violence. But its expulsion is revealed in a more and more obvious fashion, and by the same process the Logos of violence is revealed as what can only exist by expelling the true Logos and feeding upon it in one way or another. (Things Hidden, pp. 271, 274)



In the end, the chapter presents a choice between four common ways people understand the logic of the universe:

1. Life is a war, a survival-of-the-fittest competition to the death.
2. Life is compliance, a keep-your-head-down-and-do-what-you're-told story of power, domination, and submission.
3. Life is a machine that runs on cold and objective utility, not meaning or morality.
4. Life is a story that includes conflict, compliance, and mechanism - but has a higher or deeper purpose and meaning rooted in goodness, pregnancy, creativity, and love.

My friend Cassidy Dale simplified these four down to two in his book *The Knight and the Gardener* (available for free online). The knight is the warrior who seeks domination and uses whatever mechanisms he can master to pursue his agenda. The gardener works with a good and fertile world - and faces its inherent challenges - to promote and enjoy aliveness. Obviously, the two stories overlap, interact, and sometimes vie for dominance in the biblical library. But the "good news" is not a call to arms, nor is it a call to compliance, nor is it a call to objectification and mechanization. It is a call to aliveness, creativity, pregnancy, and love.

## Chapter 4. The Drama of Desire

Readers with a lot of religious background will bring many assumptions into the Genesis 3 text. Many will assume a traditional understanding of The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which posits “Good” and “Evil” as two fundamental and pre-existing (philosophers would say “ontological”) categories in the universe. Others will read into the figure of the serpent a lot of later theological data relating to the Satan, devil, Lucifer, etc. Readers are free to make these assumptions if they must, but I try to read the chapter more “cleanly,” without importing those familiar assumptions.

My reading in this chapter suggests that the categories of “Good” and “Evil” are not pre-existing, eternal categories. Initially, there is no evil; there is only good. Evil is created when by humans when we defect from or rebel against the good world and good Creator behind it. We choose to disassociate from and objectify “the other” and classify “the other” as evil. In this way, we break out of our fundamental relatedness with God and God’s good world. While God says, “It is good,” we say, “No, we judge this or that as evil.” This break in relationship is the essence of evil.

I intentionally choose to use words like evil and wrong in the text rather than the word sin. This is not because I am trying to soft-pedal or minimize sin, but rather the reverse. In many religious communities, the word sin has come to mean an infraction, often trivial, that puts us in danger of God’s wrath, from which we must be saved. Such a perspective trivializes sin and renders God an unmerciful perfectionist. In *We Make the Road by Walking*, sin is an act of foolishness, selfishness, and rebellion that puts us and others in danger. God wants to save us from the danger. God’s wrath is not against us; it is against what is against us. God is not a merciless perfectionist judge out to punish us; God is a compassionate and wise parent out to protect us.

This choice to disassociate, objectify, and classify one of God’s good creatures as evil gives the judge or accuser permission to exploit, desecrate and even destroy it. Almost anyone who has ever destroyed anyone or anything would say they were dispensing with something evil, so the diminishment or desecration are preconditions for destruction. Before a man sexually exploits a woman in lust, or a coal or oil company ecologically destroys a mountain and watershed in greed, or an ethnic group or nation colonizes and humiliates another in pride and hate ... the wrongdoer rejudges or revalues the person, watershed, or ethnic group as something less than “good” in the way the Creator valued it.

I doubt this alternative way of understanding sin will appeal to people who have been trained to see God as a stern father and humans as naughty boys and girls who need threats and punishments to keep them in line. Nor will it appeal to people who want to say, “Everyone is good, everything is fine.” But I think this a healthy and wise way to think about the moral

“magnetic field” in our universe ... the moral ecosystem that I believe Genesis is trying to convey in its rich imagery and stories.

Again, this thinking is influenced by the work of Fr. James Alison and others in the field of “Mimetic Theory.” It also reflects the interest of “Integral Theorists” and “macrohistorians.” And it exemplifies a literary way of taking the text reverently and seriously without taking it literally.

This brief chapter can’t explore all the possible meanings of these rich, multi-layered stories. For example, there’s a way of reading the text that makes Eve the hero, not the villain. And there are fascinating questions that tease our curiosity. What is going on with God preferring blood sacrifices over vegetarian ones in the Cain-Abel story? Some will infer that there were instructions given about sacrifice that we aren’t privy to. Others may read this story as early evidence that God “chooses favorites,” setting up religions of favor and religions of disfavor. If that’s the case, it’s interesting to note that being favored by God marks one to become a victim, not a victor. It’s also interesting to note that the blood of the victim cries out ... which has a power of its own in the story. And the victor - who is also the murderer - suddenly finds himself fearing that he will become a victim too, and in response, God protects the murderer Cain in a way that the victim Abel wasn’t protected. All of this is to say that superficial readings of the text are all contestable, and there is more going on here than meets the eye of rigid interpreters with a narrow perspective.

The focus on desire and imitation will be a theme throughout this year of exploring the biblical library. It’s important to remember that we’re not saying desire and imitation are bad. We’re saying they are morally significant. We can imitate destructive models or constructive ones; we can live by destructive desires or creative ones.

This emphasis on desire will make many readers think of Buddhism, which also takes desire very seriously. Non-buddhists often misunderstand, I think, the way Buddhism speaks of desire. The desire that is to be avoided is what I’m calling “the desire to acquire,” desire that plunges us into a state of ingratitude and discontent and greed, desire that plunges us into rivalry with others. In this way, the Bible and the Buddha agree: acquisitive desire leads to great suffering.

In Buddhism, the alternative is often communicated as detachment, which isn’t, as I understand it, the utter absence of desire: it’s the presence of a higher desire ... the desire to know contentment, the desire to be free of greed, the desire to live in harmony rather than rivalry with others, the desire, in an ultimate sense, for enlightenment.

Jesus articulates this slightly differently in a different context. But the similarities are not insignificant, nor is the fact that both leaders did not set up a system of doctrines to be mastered and taught, but lived a way of life to be learned and practiced by positive imitation.

## Chapter 5. In Over Our Heads

It's becoming clear that in my reading of the Bible, violence is a serious problem. It wasn't in the approach to the Bible I was taught. Perhaps that's because in the version of Christianity in which I was raised, there was a long and unacknowledged tradition of violence - from European colonial powers, from American settlers (aka colonizers or land thieves), from a history of slavery and racism and apartheid/segregation. Perhaps many of us didn't notice the theme of violence in the Bible because we were busy hiding our own violence from ourselves. Whatever the reasons for our ability to miss it, the Noah story - especially when compared with its Babylonian antecedents - puts human violence front and center.

Neither traditional conservatives nor liberals have been very comfortable with the power of storytelling in oral cultures. As I've worked on this book, I've grown to respect how different the ancient mind was from our mind today. This chapter is one of the few where I try to be explicit about this different approach to the Bible that I believe we must become comfortable with. It's not simply a matter of a new interpretation of this or that story; it's a new way of interpreting altogether ... a new way of understanding what we mean by the word "interpretation." My shorthand for this way of interpretation is "the wisdom of storytelling." My work on this project has deepened my respect for that unique kind of wisdom.

The words "God must be better than that" will come up several times in the chapters to come. They suggest that the Bible records a quest not unlike the quest of scientists. Just as they aspire to develop theories, test them, and then replace them in their quest for a more complete and accurate understanding of the universe, people of faith develop beliefs and stories, test them, and then replace them in their quest for a more complete and accurate understanding of God.

The Bible, then, is indeed a revelation of God. But it doesn't reveal God in one final official portrait. Rather, it shows us sketch after sketch, portrait after portrait, by artist after artist. As we see those sketches and portraits change over time, we begin to understand that the glory of God is so great that no single portrait could ever perfectly and definitively contain it.

Several people are doing helpful work on this subject, including Adam Hamilton, Rachel Held Evans, Peter Enns, Derek Flood, and Steve Chalke.

## Chapter 6. Plotting Goodness

This chapter sets up a contrast between what I call “true faith” and its alternatives. And then it sets up a contrast between “true aliveness” and its alternatives. This line of demarcation doesn’t run between religions, or even between individuals. It runs within us all.

I was first exposed to a fresh approach to the pivotal passage of Genesis 12:1-9 by the British missiologist Lesslie Newbigin. Newbigin said that the fundamental heresy in all monotheistic religion comes from a misunderstanding of election, or God’s choosing of some people. They are chosen, Newbigin said, not for blessing to the exclusion of others, but for blessing so they could extend that blessing to others. I think Newbigin got it right.

This understanding undermines what I have called “the 6-line narrative” or “the soul-sort narrative” that many of us were given - the idea that the Bible tells us how God is going to sort some souls out for heaven and others for hell at the end of life. It presents a radically different narrative - what my friend Rabbi Michael Lerner presents as “tikkun olam,” the opportunity for us to join God in the blessing of the world.

The phrase “plotting goodness” comes from my friend Bart Campolo, who not only uses it but embodies it.

## Chapter 7. It's Not Too Late

Without ever mentioning the technical term, this chapter opens up the subject of “penal substitutionary sacrifice.” This doctrine is widely held among many conservative Protestants and Catholics. In fact, to some, it is synonymous with “the gospel.”

This teaching says that humans are separated from God and under God’s damnation because of their imperfection, needing “atonement.” God demands blood sacrifice as a punishment or atoning payment for sins. Blood-shedding and violent death are, then, “penal” - necessary for punishment. Just as a ram was substituted for Isaac, Jesus, this theory says, was substituted for us - hence “penal substitutionary” atonement.

It is this penal substitutionary theory of atonement - and the gospel - I was taught as a Plymouth Brethren boy, and it was central to the conservative Evangelicalism in which I found myself as a pastor. In recent years, a wide range of voices has risen to critique the theory, followed by other voices seeking to defend it.

My own thinking in this regard was deeply influenced by Dallas Willard, Lesslie Newbigin, and later, the work of Rene Girard. In my book *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, I try to move the theory out of center stage by presenting it as one of several theories of atonement. In my book *A New Kind of Christianity*, I more directly challenge the assumptions behind all atonement theories. Most recently, in *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road*, especially in the chapter on Eucharist, I presented an interpretation of the death of Jesus that I think is much more satisfying, sensible, and biblically sane than the theory with which I was raised. Chapters 32, 32A, 32B, and 32C will narrate Jesus’ death from this fresh perspective.

Interestingly, in Genesis, God does not ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as an atonement for sin. Nor is Isaac punished for his own sin or his father’s sin. Rather, the sacrifice is presented as a test of Abraham’s loyalty, faith, and love. Both understandings present real problems. Does God not know whether we are loyal unless an elaborate and morally abhorrent test is devised? Does God need to be appeased? With blood? With human blood? Is God ethically able to command the most heinous form of murder - the killing of one’s own child? Does something cease to be evil if God commands it, and if that’s the case, how do we determine when God suspends normal moral laws? Does God sometimes command humans to do what is otherwise evil? Might God, under such a circumstance, be confused with the devil? Is the life of a child expendable in order to prove the faith of the parent? Is God unable to forgive without inflicting pain and even death on someone? Does God have an anger management problem? It’s hard to accept “yes” answers to any of these questions.

That’s why I prefer the approach to this text that is opened by the work of Rene Girard. Catholic theologians like James Alison and Protestant theologians like Michael Hardin and Paul Neuchterlein are working together to understand the role of violence, and especially ritualized

human sacrifice, in ancient cultures, including those of the Bible. (For more on reading the Bible from this vantage point, check out [www.girardianlectionary.net](http://www.girardianlectionary.net).)

From that vantage point, the Isaac story becomes valuable and powerful rather than horrible and problematic.

So much of my training as a young Christian involved learning to “find” penal substitutionary atonement echoes on nearly every page of the Bible. I was afraid to question the doctrine because I thought the whole Bible - and especially the cross and death of Jesus - would be meaningless without it. In the coming chapters, I hope you’ll feel, as I do, that the Bible offers far more beauty and meaning when we don’t read penal substitutionary atonement theory into every page.

The theme “it’s not too late,” it turns out, also applies to Christian theology. It’s not too late for Christians to rethink long-held doctrines (like penal substitutionary atonement) and discover more morally satisfying and motivating understandings. We will seek to do so repeatedly between now and Chapter 32C.

## Chapter 8. Rivalry or Reconciliation

The theme of “election” (or God’s choosing of some people - which I mentioned in the Chapter 6 commentary) is central to this series of stories involving Jacob and Esau. Traditional interpreters often use this series of stories to justify the idea that God loves or chooses some and hates or rejects others. The social consequences of such a belief have a gruesome history.

Time after time, the favored or privileged become racists, slave-owners, empire-builders, colonizers, land thieves, and genociders. And if anyone challenges them, they point to God to justify what they’ve done. “God chose us for this favor and privilege,” they say. No wonder so many people want to distance themselves from this kind of religion, and this kind of God!

In my book *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?*, I deal at some length with the monumental problem of religious violence rooted in religious identity. In this chapter, I try to show how one specific story sequence - the Jacob-Esau sequence - has been used to promote hostility and exclusion of “the other,” but should be used to promote grace and reconciliation, revealing “the other” as “brother.”

It came as a kind of surprise when, while writing this chapter, I noticed how Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son is in dialogue with the Jacob and Esau story. I hope that insight is as meaningful for you as it was for me.

So much of our traditional preaching involves drawing “points” from one story. So much of the meaning in the Bible, though, isn’t found in one story, but in the interactions of many stories. I hope you’ll get that sense in these early chapters of this book.



## Chapter 9. Freedom!

Moses is such an important figure to Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and he's such a fascinating character. It's hard to cover the first half of his life in one short chapter, but I've done my best in this one.

Recalling my comments about penal substitutionary atonement from Chapter 7, many of us were raised interpreting the Passover story in light of this theory. The main point wasn't that God was freeing the Hebrews from slavery; it was that God was sparing their firstborn sons from punishment.

There are many problems inherent in the story of the plagues, culminating in the killing of the firstborn. I'll deal with the problem of divine violence more directly in Chapter 11. But for now, I should point out that primogeniture - the passing on of wealth through the favored firstborn son - was at the center of a patriarchal society and economy. Taken together with all the younger children who make it big in the Bible (including Moses himself), there's clearly some social commentary going on that we're likely to miss: just as God opposes slavery, God comes out as something less than a dependable supporter of primogeniture and patriarchy ... a fascinating move in the ancient world.

## Chapter 10. Getting Slavery out of the People

Many of us were taught that the ten commandments were the moral high bar we had to jump over to make it to heaven. This chapter takes a radically different approach.

I try to situate the commandments not against the backdrop of heaven and hell (concept unknown to the ancient Hebrews), but against the backdrop of slavery and liberation.

Americans like me tend to think of slavery as something in our past, “solved” by the Civil War in 1865. In this chapter I try to expand our understanding of a slave economy to mean any exploitive economy that unjustly enriches those at the top of the pyramid through the labor of those at the bottom.

Nelson Mandela passed away as I was finishing the book, and I hope the title of this book will resonate for readers with the title of his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*. Like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela led a nonviolent revolution, inspired as King was by the story of Moses and the wilderness journey toward the promised land of freedom.

There’s a theory gaining adherents over recent years that the Hebrews originated with a diverse group of unaffiliated “free” tribes in the Palestinian hill country. Called the Habiru, they didn’t want to be ruled by either the neighboring empire of Pharaoh Ramesses II to the South or that of the Hittites to the north. In those days, fragile small tribes like the Habiru would typically make special treaties called “suzerainty treaties” with powerful neighbors. They would promise loyalty and financial tribute as stipulated in the treaty, and receive benefits like protection and non-invasion in return.

The ten commandments have the same form as these ancient suzerainty treaties. But instead of making treaties with their neighbors, the Habiru seem to have made a treaty with their God and with one another. The stipulations were, in essence, the requirements necessary for people to live in freedom, without submission to a dictator. For more on this approach to the commandments, see David Bodanis’ (to be published in 2015) *The Ten Commandments: How They Shaped Our World*. Although David is a historian, not a theologian, I find his analyses of the ten commandments to be among the richest I’ve ever encountered. (You can see a video of him here: [http://vimeo.com/13702597/.](http://vimeo.com/13702597/))

Whatever their source, the commandments provided a conceptual and moral center for the Hebrew people. The Tabernacle, and later the Temple, provided a geographical and social center. In the chapter I present the idea that the sacrifices offered there functioned less as appeasement and more as a family meal of reconciliation and conviviality - a get-together “at God’s place,” so to speak. I don’t mention in the chapter the fact that sacrifices kept a priestly class well endowed with lots of protein and other foodstuffs - not an insignificant matter in the ancient world.

I end the chapter on the theme of wilderness - what we learn and how we grow on the journey with all its difficulties and trials. Learning to walk together and work together and endure together are skills, I suppose, that can't simply be commanded. They must be developed. They're the social muscles necessary for all free people.

## Chapter 11. From Ugliness, a Beauty Emerges

The subject of divine violence in the Bible is just beginning to get the attention it deserves. I address it in some detail in *Everything Must Change, A New Kind of Christianity* and *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?* I'm grateful for colleagues like Derek Flood, Peter Enns, Brian Zahnd, and others who are focusing scholarly and popular attention on this subject - a subject that, in light of September 11, 2001, and its aftermath of retaliation, we can't afford to ignore.

The response to divine violence I offer in this short chapter certainly doesn't answer every question. And it won't satisfy extreme biblical literalists and inerrantists. But I think it stakes out a responsible position, and until I hear a more morally and theologically satisfying approach, I'm standing by it.

## Chapter 12. Stories that Shape Us

If the problem of divine violence is in the top three issues facing committed readers of the Bible in today's world, the problem of supernatural miracles must be in the top five or ten. Many of us are deeply committed to the idea that supernatural miracles occurred as recorded in the Bible - including the story of Elijah and the fiery chariot in this chapter. Others of us are equally committed to the idea that miracle stories render the Bible a primitive mythological text that doesn't deserve serious attention. I am committed to the proposal that the miracle stories can be taken seriously whether or not we take them literally, and that they challenge our moral imagination in powerful, irreplaceable ways.

I hope learning circles who read *We Make the Road by Walking* can welcome a wide array of people without requiring them to agree with one another in every detail. I hope they can agree to interpret the Bible with "science, art, and heart," and that they can struggle to know the difference between what's essential and substantial at the center, and what's fireworks on the margins. I'll return to this issue in Chapter 21.

The dream of a better future where justice, reconciliation, and peace run wild is one of those substantial things. It is in many ways the bridge between the Hebrew Scriptures and Jesus and his message of the kingdom of God. That dream becomes the star by which we navigate both personally and as communities, cultures, and civilizations.

In this chapter, I try to give an overview of many centuries of history, and I try to explain how the line between fiction and fact isn't always easy to draw. I also highlight how imagery for God in the Bible changes over time. I think that's important for us today, because many Biblical images of God are treated as absolute and literal by many believers, while they seem quaint, strange, outdated, or even insulting to modern readers who aren't familiar with the Bible and its cultures.

The idea of the Bible as a library with many voices in conversation - and sometimes, in argument - will come as a surprise to some. But I am confident that we must read it more in this way as we move forward on the road of faith. And I hope that readers feel this is a conversation that includes us today.

## Chapter 13. The Great Conversation

The overview of biblical history continues in this chapter, and I return to the theme of how thinking matures over time through the give and take of voices in conversation. Here I introduce the key concept of five voices in the Bible: the priests, prophets, poets, sages, and storytellers.

Walter Brueggemann's work most helped me find a way beyond the old conservative-liberal impasse, with stereotypical conservatives reading the Bible as a flat, univocal text and stereotypical liberals ostensibly reading it as a collection of ancient fables and myths. Brueggemann surfaced (for me) the primal tension between priests, keepers of order and preservers of the status quo, and prophets, agents of change.

Since most religious institutions, Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, or whatever, are curated by priestly types, of course it's predictable that the message of the prophets would be domesticated and reduced to footnotes or enhancements to the priestly viewpoint. Doing so ensures ongoing priestly order, but also leads to stagnation ... a regular feature of religious institutions.

Once one sees this, the temptation is to switch sides and favor the prophets over the priests. But I think a wiser approach is to see their primal tension - really, the creative version of conservative/liberal dynamic - as essential to the health of a community. Just as our bodies have cells that regularly deconstruct our bones, and others that regularly reconstruct them, the prophetic and priestly together keep us in a constant and renewing state.

My shorthand for this (you can read more about it in *The Great Spiritual Migration*) is to say that priestly institutions conserve the gains proposed by previous prophetic movements, and prophetic movements propose further gains to existing priestly institutions. Priestly institutions thus have a vital function in service of communities of the present, and prophetic movements have a vital function in service of communities of the future.

I'm sure that poets, sages, and storytellers play an essential role in keeping that creative tension alive. And I'm sure each of us in the interpretive community also have a role. I hope this first quarter of *We Make the Road by Walking* can contribute in some small way to that vital work.

## **First Quarter Queries**

Traditional catechesis gives answers that require memorization and recitation. My hope here is that people will reflect on the biblical texts and reflections of the first thirteen chapters and be able to express the convictions, understandings, and meanings that have come to life within them. I believe the Spirit of God is present to guide and enrich this process, which is one part of ongoing, comprehensive creative process that includes the original composition of the text and all that has happened since.

The catechist who would work with this kind of process would function less in the role of inquisitor and more in the role of spiritual director. His or her evaluation would be formative rather than merely summative, more in the role of midwife than of inspector or inquisitor.

## **Part 2. Alive in the Adventure of Jesus**

To correspond with the seasons of Advent and Epiphany, I had an easy choice. For Advent, I would focus on the birth of Jesus, and especially on locating his birth in his Jewish context. For Epiphany, I would try to give an overview of Jesus' life - what he did from childhood to adulthood, leading up to the climactic week at the end of his life.

The essence of his teaching and the drama of Passion Week would then be covered in Part 3, thus devoting half the year to Jesus' birth, life, teaching, death, and resurrection.

The big picture, then, is a quarter to set the stage for the coming of Jesus by giving a respectful and responsible overview of the Hebrew Scriptures, two quarters to focus on Jesus himself, and a final quarter to explore Jesus' impact in the lives of the apostles and their successors.



## **Chapter 14. Promised Land, Promised Time**

In this chapter, I try to introduce the idea that some documents today attributed to one author in all likelihood are the work of several authors that were later compiled. But I also try to show how multiple voices harmonize in one purpose, as “custodians of the best hopes, dreams, and desires of a society.”

Jesus clearly comes into this prophetic tradition, and so this first Sunday of Advent celebrates what that means.

## Chapter 15. Women on the Edge

In this chapter I present the repeating theme of God's subversion of our deepest fear, that "it's too late" to hope. The story of Sarah and Abraham's late conception of Isaac embodies this theme, which the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah clearly echoes.

But there's a counterpart to the "it's too late theme." That's the "it's too soon" theme. The former makes us give up hope in one way, and the latter in another. The former says, "We missed our chance," and the latter says, "It's unrealistic to hope something this good could happen now."

And the image of a virgin conceiving powerfully embodies that second theme. I wasn't able in the text to talk about the fact that the original text of Isaiah didn't speak of a virgin conceiving; it merely spoke of a young woman conceiving. The surprise wasn't the mode of conception, but the name given to the young boy, namely, "Immanuel," or God with us. When the ancient text was translated into Greek, "young woman" became "virgin," which Luke works with in his telling of the story.

I hope that learning circles will make room for people who interpret the virgin birth story literally (or factually) and those who interpret it more poetically or symbolically. Either way, the point is the rich and multiple meanings of the story, which this chapter tries to celebrate, including messages about patriarchy, feminism, empire, and economic inequality.

This second Sunday of Advent, it turns out, has one of the most meaning-packed chapters in the whole book.

## Chapter 16. Keep Herod in Christmas

I first heard the words “Keep Herod in Christmas” from a sermon preached by Joy Carol Wallis, wife of Christian activist Jim Wallis and model for the *Vicar of Dibley* TV show. It was one of the finest sermons I’ve ever heard.

Herod embodies the themes of violence and empire, and the story again pits masculine violence against motherly love. The Christmas story - and the Christian story - puts its faith in the latter rather than the former. If the previous chapter is one of the most meaning-packed, this is one of the chapters with most social, political, and spiritual import.

## **Chapter 17. Surprising People**

This third week of Advent addresses a key issue in our world: the status of the poor and marginalized, and God's solidarity with them. It presents the idea of "grace roots grace" rather than "trickle-down grace."

I briefly mention Deuteronomy 15, which Jesus quotes when he says, "The poor will be with you always." Ironically, some people often quote Jesus to legitimize the existence of an underclass and, by implication, an exploitive economic and political system that puts people there. Anyone who reads the whole chapter realizes what a tragic misappropriation of Jesus' words, and Deuteronomy's words, these people perpetuate.

## **Chapter 17A. The Light Has Come**

This chapter gives a kind of guided tour of John's gospel, following the themes of light and aliveness. The chapter title nods toward Lesslie Newbigin, whose commentary on the Gospel of John under this title is one of my favorites.

Recent scholarship has focused on the stark differences between the ways different gospel writers tell the birth story of Jesus (and other stories from his life as well). Sensitized to those differences, preachers and teachers struggle to know how to integrate them - or even whether to integrate them. Normally I would let each author tell the story in his own way, but here my choice was to focus on resonances between John's story and Luke's story.

## Chapter 18. Sharing Gifts

This is the chapter in the book where I most directly address the issue of religious pluralism, the existence of multiple religions in the world. This issue is deeply important to me, and I wrote an entire book on the subject: *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road? (Christian Identity in a Multi-Faith World)* (Jerich/Hachette and Hodder & Stoughton, 2012). In that book I talk about two common responses to the reality of religious pluralism: the strong-hostile response and the weak-tolerant response. I argue for a third alternative: a strong-benevolent response. In this chapter, I try to model that third alternative.

I apply the Christmas tradition of gift-giving to the reality of religious difference. Our differences don't have to lead to conflict, hatred, fear, or violence. They can, if we are wise, create the conditions for a sharing of gifts.

## **Chapter 19. Jesus Coming of Age**

After writing this chapter, I wondered if the 3-day disappearance/rediscovery of Jesus was intended to echo the death and resurrection. If that's the case, where is Jesus to be found today? The answer would surely be ... questioning and challenging religious leaders in the centers of power, just as he was at age 12.

I place Jesus' coming of age alongside that of John. Baptism is the point at which the two young men's lives converge - and this is the chapter that gives an account of the contextual meaning of baptism. It's strange how disconnected from history most people's understanding of baptism is today, and it's also strange how John the Baptist is so important in the gospels, but so marginal to most Christians today.

In both the chapter and the Engage questions, I hope readers and learning circle participants will begin to feel how the public and personal, the political and "spiritual" are not two separate things needing to be integrated, but rather are facets of one beautiful and pregnant whole needing to be experienced and lived.

## **Chapter 20. Join the Adventure**

Again, in this chapter I try to open up the possibility of taking the biblical character known as the devil or the Satan seriously without taking him/it literally. Learning circle leaders will want to be sure that space is kept safe for people who take the literalist approach and those who don't.

Deeper than that difference of opinion is the reality of temptation, which we all face. Sadly, we often become so preoccupied with superficial differences of opinion that we stumble blindly into the temptations of pleasure, power, and prestige that Jesus boldly faces and overcomes in Luke's gospel.

The "Nazareth Manifesto" is one of the most pregnant and important passages in the New Testament. I use it to introduce the call to discipleship. There are several "altar call" chapters in this book, and this is one of them.



## Chapter 21. Significant and Wonderful

This chapter on miracles returns to a theme raised in Chapter 12. I think many conservative Christians seize on supernatural miracles as their “last stand” against a kind of atheistic, rationalistic, totalitarian naturalism. Their counterparts seize on supernatural miracles as a kind of embarrassing, childish magic that keeps religion in the “dark ages” and makes it unacceptable to modern people. They’d prefer the tack taken by Thomas Jefferson - to cut out all the miraculous nonsense and work with the remaining sensible material.

I take a different approach. Just as I think fairy tales and stories of magical powers play a huge role in the kindling of a child’s imagination, I think miracle stories play a huge role in the kindling of religious imagination. I’m not embarrassed by them, but neither do I think that they must be taken as factual and historical to be considered important.

Christians aren’t the only ones who have to deal with the problem of literalism. I remember a Hindu friend telling me that he once asked his mother if Krishna was a literal figure and if he really had blue skin. With all the fervor and sincerity of a Christian fundamentalist, his mother told him to believe what the Hindu Scriptures said, and to stop doubting. “Things were different back then,” she explained. “Gods walked among us and they had blue skin.” In fact, when I just googled the question, “Why is Krishna blue?” I found websites where the subject is debated with passionate and sincere fervor.

I use the first miracle stories in John and Mark to exemplify the power of these stories, and the loss when we either discard them as embarrassments or reduce them to “proofs” of supernatural power.

The whole natural-supernatural dichotomy is, of course, a construct that would have made little sense in the premodern world, and is of limited use in the postmodern world. In the ancient world, miracles were almost universally accepted as part of life, whatever one’s religion. The question wasn’t whether they happened or could happen, but what they meant.

The natural-supernatural dichotomy is deeply connected to the image of God as clock-maker and the universe as a clock. That analogy was used by both Isaac Newton and Rene Descartes, and reached its zenith in William Paley. After creating the world and winding it up, so to speak, God sits outside. He (the assumption in the paradigm was that God was masculine) might occasionally reach in to tinker, change, or fix something in the machinery of the clock, yielding what would appear to us as a miracle.

That analogy worked very well in the universe of Sir Isaac Newton and company. But in the universe of Einstein and his successors, mechanical models yield to systems models, and so God and universe are easily conceived as one larger system. In this system, God’s agency must be conceived of very differently. How we do so is the creative edge of contemporary theology, but

relying on Bronze Age metaphors (God rules the universe like a king) or Enlightenment Age metaphors (God winds up the universe like a clock) will not satisfy thinking people raised in our “new universe.” We need new metaphors, and we need ways of appreciating the old metaphors too, as the new ones are articulated. Again, I hope this book in some small way contributes to that ongoing process. It certainly won’t be the last word!

Interestingly, the idea of a single unified system that includes both God and the universe will be introduced in the next chapter.

## Chapter 22. Jesus the Teacher

In this pivotal chapter, I introduce Jesus' pregnant term "kingdom of God." I recount in Chapter 11 of *Secret Message of Jesus* and Chapter 5 of *A New Kind of Christianity* how a fresh understanding of this familiar term transformed my theology, and my ministry and life.

I wish I could have had more time to address the subject of parables. In recent years, some scholars are raising fascinating questions about conventional interpretations of parables, especially parables that ostensibly compare God to a violent ruler and ostensibly compare sinners to people who are banished and tortured. Scholars like William Herzog in *Parables as Subversive Speech* argue that in those parables, Jesus is the one being banished and tortured, and the one ordering his torture is not God but Caesar or his minions.

Even very familiar parables are being given a second thought in light of the socio-economic realities of the times. For example, the Parable of the Talents seems to reward people who achieve exorbitant profits ... the kinds of profits that could only be achieved through extortion and corruption. Might Jesus be represented by the one servant who refuses to play the game and who is banished and punished?

These are such exciting times to read the Bible - exciting, that is, if you are open to new ways of seeing things.

## Chapter 23. Jesus and the Multitudes

It can be said that capitalism rules the world. It has no serious competitor (except the threat of impending breakdown of the entire planet's ecology, caused by capitalism without sufficient foresight and conscience). Unless there are voices willing to critique capitalism and call it to values above the sole bottom line of corporate profit measured in dollars, it will surely rule as a cruel and destructive dictator. That's why this chapter uses powerful insights from the Gospels to enter into dialogue with capitalism, calling its defenders to acknowledge that capitalist ideology can too easily become an idolatry.

Many of us were so well trained to read the Gospels only looking for one or two themes (hell and heaven, sin and salvation, law and grace, for example) that we missed what is starkly obvious to anyone who reads with open eyes: the Gospels have a lot to say about money, power, privilege, and poverty. This is the chapter where I try to address these subjects head on. Rather than name capitalism, I use the term "pyramid economy," a more general term that includes many financial arrangements, including capitalism in its current form. (I address this subject in much more detail in my book *Everything Must Change*.)

I introduce the Pharisees in this chapter as religious advocates of the elites. I have come to understand a bit more deeply how the Pharisees have been scapegoated and misrepresented by many Christians (including myself in my earlier books). I'll fill their portrait out in more detail and with more balance in the next chapter.

For more on a theology of the multitude, see *Occupy Religion* by Joerg Rieger and Pui-lan Kwok.

## Chapter 24. Jesus and Hell

This chapter reworks ideas I developed in *Secret Message of Jesus* and *The Last Word and the Word After That*. Along the way, I try to offer a more balanced view of the Pharisees.

The origin of the name Pharisee is contested. Some believe it derives from Farsi or Persian, and others believe it is related to a Hebrew word meaning separation, similar to our term “Separatist,” which isn’t far from the term “Elitist,” meaning separated from the multitudes (see previous chapter). Even if the latter is the case, the Pharisees do appear to embody the influence of Persian or Zoroastrian thought upon Jewish thought.

As I’ve grappled with the subject of hell over many years, I’ve become more and more convinced that the deeper issue isn’t about the afterlife; it’s about our vision of God. Whatever Jesus does or speaks about in the gospels, I think the undercurrent is this: he challenges us to rethink our assumptions about God and see God in a radical new light.

## Chapter 25. Jesus, Violence, and Power

So often, familiar terms like “Christ” and “Son of God” are as vague as they are familiar. Or we have confidence that we understand them based on traditional teaching, but our understanding can be quite out of sync with their meanings in their original contexts. I originally started grappling with these terms when my friend Chris Seay asked me to paraphrase/translate Luke and Acts for *The Voice Bible* project ([www.hearthevoice.com](http://www.hearthevoice.com)). Terms like *Son of Man*, *baptize*, *Christ*, *Son of God*, *eternal life*, and *died for our sins* have taken on rich new meaning for me since that project, and I hope I convey some of that richness in this chapter.

## **Chapter 26. Making It Real**

I wanted to conclude this second quarter with an “altar call” chapter - an invitation to people to commit themselves to Christ as disciples. I created a fictional dialogue with Mary Magdalene to help readers/hearers enter the drama of Jesus’ life and times so they could make that choice - less as affiliation with a contemporary religion, and more as a personal act of faith, repentance, and trust in Christ as a person.

As I was working on this chapter, I wondered if we might need a fresh definition of faith. As it stands, faith often means conviction that some things happened in the past. I wonder if faith is even more truly a conviction that something can, must, and will happen in the future, and by its very existence, it helps those things come to be.

## **Second Quarter Queries**

I envisioned these queries as a preparation for baptism. I will be interested to see what transpires if some pastors, spiritual directors, catechists, and others use them in this way. In fact, this book could be read and discussed as preparation for baptism by youth and adults in traditions that practice “believers’ baptism” ... and perhaps by parents in traditions that baptize infants.



## **Part 3. Alive in a Global Uprising**

I faced the challenge of integrating a comprehensive and coherent introduction to the Christian faith with the rhythms and constraints of the traditional Christian year. I felt from the beginning that the Sermon on the Mount deserved primary focus, so I decided to make it the curriculum for Lent. Holy Week would follow, culminating in Easter.

I decided to let the Easter event frame the way I would introduce the formation and growth of the early church. I present the early church as a peaceful uprising against injustice in the status quo.

The linking of resurrection and uprising (or insurrection) has been explored by Erwin McManus and Peter Rollins in recent years. Before them, Karl Barth famously said, “To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.” I might modify his statement to say, “To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the unjust order of the world.”

I build my overview of the early church around the words fellowship, discipleship, worship, partnership, stewardship, and hardship. If Part 2 could be seen as a preparation for baptism, those six chapters could be used as a preparation for church membership.

Just as candles were lit during the Advent season, during the Easter season, I imagine learning circles raising a toast to celebrate the risen Lord and his ongoing uprising in and through us.

I ended Part 2 with a chapter inviting readers/hearers to imagine themselves being present in the Gospels stories, and that pattern continues in Part 3. By imaginatively entering the time and place of the stories, I believe we can better prepare ourselves to re-enter our own world transformed by their meaning.

## Chapter 27. A New Identity

This is one of my favorite chapters in the book. I have come to love the Beatitudes as one of the most radical and beautiful compositions in human literature. The more I work with this compact, revolutionary, and brilliant statement of values, the more it radiates hope and wisdom and challenge.

In an earlier version of my paraphrase of the beatitudes, I suggested that “blessed are they who mourn” relates directly to those whose relatives had been killed by the Romans and their allies. Mourning, after all, doesn’t normally refer to generic sadness, but to sadness after death. Taken in this light, and taken together with “blessed are the meek” or nonviolent, this is Jesus’ way of saying, “It is better to be one of the nonviolent survivors and victims of violence than one of its perpetrators.” Some friends who read the text felt that was a bit of a stretch, so I pulled that back, but I still suspect something like that is going on. My friend John Dear, SJ, writes brilliantly about Jesus and nonviolence in his books *Jesus the Rebel* and *Put Down Your Sword*, and all his other books, too.

## Chapter 28. A New Path to Aliveness

In some ways, this chapter near the middle of the book gets to the heart of the meaning of the title, and to the core message of the book.

My reading of the Sermon on the Mount in this chapter shows how much I have been helped by the writings of Walter Wink. *The Powers that Be* is a good introduction to his work.

In my commentary on Chapter 25, I mentioned the need to consider new definitions for old, familiar words. That's the case with the word "perfect" in this chapter.

Many of us see God behind us, as the prime mover who got the big bang going. Or we see God above us, looking down like Santa Claus, "making a list, checking it twice." A number of theologians, from Wolfhart Pannenberg to Ted Peters, have argued that we should put God out ahead of us, calling us forward to progress toward "perfection" in the sense of full maturity. Stan Grenz was the first person to introduce me to this concept, and it has helped me a great deal.

"God behind us" is a conservative God who wants us to stay put, toe the line, maybe even go back to good old days closer to the lost perfection of the past. "God above us" is a critical God who is ready to zap us if we step out of line. "God before us" is a progressive God who beckons us to growth, risk, change, and development. In this light, the God who "was, and is, and is to come" takes on new meaning.

## Chapter 29. Your Secret Life

This chapter hits a theme my Franciscan friend Richard Rohr explains in terms of the name of the community he founded in New Mexico: *Center for Action and Contemplation*. The most important word in the name, he says, is “and.”

We have activists who pursue public doing look down their nose at contemplatives who emphasize private being. And we have contemplatives who do the opposite. What is needed, Richard says, is the “and” to say that contemplation and action are mutually essential, not mutually exclusive.

This chapter also introduces the idea of practices. “Practice” has become an important term in contemporary thought, largely due to the work of Alisdair MacIntyre. It has become equally important in contemporary church life, largely through the work of Diana Butler Bass, Dallas Willard, Tony Jones, Richard Foster, and Phyllis Tickle, who edited a series of books called “Return of the Ancient Practices.” I contributed the first volume to that series, called “Finding Our Way Again.” As the first chapter of that book makes clear, I was also greatly helped in my understanding of practice through the work of Michael Polanyi in his book *Personal Knowledge*.

This is the chapter where I offer a brief interpretation of the Lord’s prayer, which, like the Beatitudes, continues to inspire and amaze me with new depths of meaning.

The core idea of this chapter was captured in a talk by my friend Chuck Smith, Jr., who said that one of the most important questions we can ever ask is this: *do we want to be more holy than we appear, or appear more holy than we are?*

## Chapter 30. Why We Worry, Why We Judge

The more I've worked with the Sermon on the Mount over the years, the more I've sensed its current and structure. The inward turn ("in secret") of the previous chapter continues here.

The anxiety Jesus addresses here is further described by Rene Girard and others as the condition of rivalry, where we fear the nightmare of "all against all" violence, complete social disintegration.

The "Golden Rule" has attracted increased attention in recent years through the work of Karen Armstrong and others who are emphasizing the importance of compassion, which affirms "we are all connected ... all precious and beloved."

I find a lot of beauty in that last line ... "unworried, unhurried, unpressured aliveness."

The third Engage question is an important one. After working on this project, I sense that patriarchy was an important survival strategy at one point in human history, but then, over time, it "worked" so effectively that it changed the conditions that made it necessary. At that point, patriarchy became increasingly problematic and eventually needed to be overcome. When Jesus says to "call no man father, for you have only one father in heaven," I think he is taking a step toward deconstructing patriarchy - removing it from humans and lodging it in God, who is frequently identified as King and Father. But I think Jesus even nods towards deconstructing traditional concepts of divine patriarchy in his way of interacting with others, and especially in his death. This theme will be further explored in Chapters 32 and 46.

## **Chapter 31. The Choice is Yours**

The series of paired elements that end the Sermon have traditionally been used to point to heaven or hell, salvation or perdition. Take that assumption away, and they point instead to our choice between self-destruction and aliveness.

One of the more helpful things in this book, I hope, is the brief summary of the Sermon's teaching, found in this chapter. This is a reworking of material I originally addressed in *The Secret Message of Jesus*. Thanks to David Moberg of Thomas Nelson, Inc., for permission to rework this material.

This chapter ends with another "altar call" moment, a moment of decision and commitment.

## Chapter 32. Peace March

Palm Sunday, I'm convinced, is the day on which Christians should commit themselves to public demonstration and civil disobedience in the cause of peace and justice.

For more on the march to Jerusalem as a political demonstration, see Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan's *The Last Week*.

I'm involved with a fledgling network called the Cana Initiative ([www.canainitiative.org](http://www.canainitiative.org)), and one of the things I'm hoping Cana will be able to initiate is a series of nationwide public demonstrations for peace and justice on Palm Sundays ... echoing the march into Jerusalem and Jesus' nonviolent civil disobedience in the Temple.

## **Chapter 32A. A Table. A Basin. Some Food. Some Friends.**

Because I've set the chapter in the setting of the original last supper, I can't reflect on the ironic, tragic way that the meaning and protocols of the eucharist have been the source of endless debate and division in the Christian community over the centuries. But when one ponders the original meaning of the supper in contrast to the way it has become "the church's food fight," one can only mourn.

The suggestions at the end of the chapter reflect my belief that Maundy Thursday, as it is called, should be a more important night in the life of the Christian community.

If you are using this chapter in a group, I think you will find it meaningful to have participants read the quotes one by one around the circle, with a bell or some other sound struck in between. Do so at a good pace (not slowly or morbidly), and I think you will find the experience deeply meaningful.



## **Chapter 32B. Everything Must Change**

The title of this chapter, which was the title of one of my books, has an interesting story behind it, which I tell in the book that bears that title. I think those three words are a good translation for the meaning of the word “repent.” Repent means so much more than merely feeling ashamed for one’s personal sins. It means seeing one’s personal sins as symptoms of a much larger system or storm or epidemic that is ravaging all humanity, and through humanity, the whole earth.

This chapter is full of questions - the kinds of questions that are intended to stimulate thinking and rethinking, which is another good definition of repentance.

In an understated way, this chapter reflects on the meaning of the crucifixion. It is important to read it in connection with the discussion of sacrifice back in Chapter 7.

## **Chapter 32C. Doubt. Darkness. Despair.**

Doubt, despair, disillusionment, and devastation are part of our lives. They are acknowledged openly in the Bible. But they too seldom find expression in our public liturgical lives. That's why I believe that Holy Saturday is an appropriate day to stare doubt, despair, disillusionment, and devastation in the face, so to speak, without blinking.

The chapter offers additional reflections on the meaning of the cross and crucifixion, and it prepares a vacuum that only Easter Sunday can fulfill.

## Chapter 33. The Uprising Begins

The retelling of the Hebrew Scriptures in this chapter reflects insights from mimetic theory.

My favorite line in the chapter is, “Ha! Death has lost its sting!” The phrase (without the “Ha!”) actually appears in Paul’s first Corinthian epistle (15:54-57).

I try in this chapter to show that the resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection of aliveness and hope in his community are not two separate things, but two aspects of the same thing. And I also suggest that the eucharist is intended to be not only a remembering of Christ, but a re-remembering or reuniting of his blood and body, so that we come to understand ourselves as “the body (or embodiment) of Christ” reconstituted and risen from the dead. I don’t want to set that idea of corporate resurrection apart from or over against the idea of Jesus’ individual resurrection as if they are two separate things, and one is more important or essential than the other. (They are two kinds of *physical* resurrections, by the way.) I am coming to see them as aspects of the same thing. It seems to me that Luke’s mysterious description invites us to do so.

## Chapter 34. The Uprising of Fellowship

I know that some readers will feel uneasy about the acknowledgement of differences between the resurrection accounts. But I hope they will see that there is an alternative to denying they exist on the one hand, or dismissing them as contradictions on the other. I think the way forward involves realizing that ancient storytellers worked with a different set of rules than modern journalists, scientists, or historians. That “literary” approach helps us not be scandalized by the differences, but fascinated by them. It invites us to be less focused on the details of objective factuality (modern concerns) and more curious about the message and meaning the stories in their rich detail were trying to convey (which were more the concerns of ancient storytellers).

For example, to have the resurrection appearances take place in Galilee would say that the risen Christ continues to work at the margins of society. To have them take place in Jerusalem would say that the risen Christ dares to infiltrate the very centers of power. To have them take place in both places would mean that the risen Christ is moving everywhere.

With that in mind, in Chapters 34 and 35, I let John’s framing set the stage, first in Jerusalem, then in Galilee.

My decision to begin this post-Easter series of chapters with fellowship reflects insights from two of my favorite theologians. Lesslie Newbigin frequently said that Jesus didn’t write a book, but instead created a community. And James William McClendon began his three-volume systematic theology with *Ethics* because, he said, if we don’t have a group of people who can live and work together, we will never have the conditions in which *doctrine* and *witness* (his second and third volumes) can be practiced.

When I was a pastor in the DC area ([www.crc.org](http://www.crc.org)), we developed a membership class around the six practices named in this post-Easter series of chapters. I could imagine a congregation adapting these six chapters for its membership induction process.

## **Chapter 35. The Uprising of Discipleship**

The idea of discipleship as serious spiritual, theological, and practical schooling or education for all, I think, is not as striking to us today as it should be. But I try to convey the power of this idea in this chapter.

I mentioned in the introduction the idea of catechesis as an each-one-teach one process of movement building. I hope that readers of this book who form learning circles can rediscover the power of that idea.

Sadly, catechesis has typically meant indoctrination. But here, I hope people can see it as far more - equipping people with a way of seeing, a way of being, and a way of serving and acting as God's change agents in the world.

## Chapter 36. The Uprising of Worship

I make brief mention of Ascension in this chapter, with a meaning that I think deserves attention: “Jesus is enthroned in heaven, so it’s now time to get to work as his embodiment on earth.”

I also deal in this chapter with the familiar words, “Jesus died for our sins.” I try to give an account of those words that is not merely a code for an atonement theory that was never articulated until a thousand years after the New Testament was being written. I am reminded of Eastern Orthodox friends who say, “In the West, you see sin as an infraction, a legal problem needing a legal solution. In the East, we see sin as an infection, a spiritual problem needing healing.” In that light, this account is not new or unorthodox; it’s merely more Eastern than Western.

This is the chapter where I deal with liturgy or the practices of Christians who gather for worship. I am a firm believer in the potential value of gathered worship, although I’m also aware of how far short the actual fulfillment of that potential often falls. I hope a chapter like this can inspire people to fresh imagination so they will more fully seize the potential of gathering together in an uprising of worship.

When we think of the ways political regimes and economic ideologies claim godlike power in today’s world (creating their own liturgies and promising miracles that will be achieved by an invisible hand), the word “uprising” seems all the more fitting. To declare that the God manifest in Christ is above them all, calling them all to repentance, is a political act indeed.

For those interested in other thoughts I’ve written on this subject, the best place to go is *Finding Our Way Again*.

## Chapter 37. The Uprising of Partnership

I'm using the word partnership instead of the more familiar word mission for a variety of reasons. First, it suggests a partnership between leaders/apostles and their team members. Second, it suggests a partnership for justice, liberation, and peace into which all are invited. And third, it suggests a transcultural, transnational, and in our day, trans-denominational partnership that transcends normal boundaries.

For many years, I've loved the term "integral mission" to describe this partnership which brings together what used to be called evangelism or proclamation with what used to be called social action. I was first introduced to this concept through the Lausanne Covenant, which was influenced in this direction behind the scenes by the brilliant Latin American theologian Rene Padilla, a man who also profoundly influenced me and my work.

I still love and use the term, but some of my Latin American friends recently told me they are using the term less now, because by using the word *integral*, they keep alive the idea that evangelism and social action are two separate things that need to be integrated, and by using the word *mission*, they keep alive associations with colonialism. In other words, the term has helped them integrate things so well, that, we might say, "bread" now means "whole wheat bread," and if they want to talk about "unintegrated bread," they say, "White bread." Whatever terms we use, I think the story of the apostles in Philippi presents a beautiful, integral vision of what we are in partnership to do.

Sadly, preachers almost never tell all the episodes in the story together. By not integrating those episodes, they reinforce a disintegrated sense of mission. That's why I take so much time in this chapter simply to tell the story with all its constituent episodes.

This is the first chapter in which Paul figures prominently. We'll come back to his conversion story in Chapter 39.

## **38. The Uprising of Stewardship**

We've addressed the topic of money in several chapters, and will continue to do so because it is an important theme in the Bible, but this chapter addresses money, its dangers, and its uses most directly.

For a long time, like a lot of preachers, I used to apologize whenever I talked about money. I wish someone had told me what I now know: talking about money isn't a burden; it's a profoundly important prophetic responsibility. It's not about fund-raising for the religious-industrial complex; it's about helping people break free from the consumptive-military-industrial complex. It's not just about the management of funds; it's about the stewardship of our lives, energies, and passions.

The "what's yours is mine" line I first heard from John Maxwell, a former pastor who now trains people in leadership, and one of the most gifted communicators on the planet.

The practical advice in this chapter echoes the wisdom of John Wesley, who said we should earn all we can, save all we can, and give all we can.

I suppose this is the sermon on money I wish I could go back and preach instead of all the ones I began with an apology.



## **Chapter 39. Whatever the Hardship, Keep Rising Up!**

In this chapter I give an overview of Paul's life, including his conversion story which is repeated so often in Acts. I use his life to highlight resilience and endurance in hardship, a crucial theme in the New Testament and a critical issue for disciple-formation or catechesis.

Richard Rohr talks about how we find God, not at the top of the ladder of success, but at the bottom, when we seem to fall through the floor of our lives and find ourselves not falling away from God but into God. That is certainly one of the key lessons of this chapter, along with the other benefits that come from hardship in our lives.

I addressed in more detail the lessons learned in hardship in my book *Naked Spirituality*, in the season or stage I called Perplexity, focusing on the simple words *when?*, *no!*, and *why?*

## **Third Quarter Queries**

I could imagine the first three questions in this exercise as excellent preparation for baptism, and the following three for church affiliation or membership.

I hope that this book will be a resource for many new faith communities to form. If such communities are looking for connections, I recommend they check out the Cana Initiative (<http://www.canainitiative.org>) and Center for Progressive Renewal (<http://progressiverenewal.org>).

## **Part IV. Alive in the Spirit of God**

The idea of movement is critical to this last section of the book. Again, I recommend the Mesa Document (available at [mesa-friends.org](http://mesa-friends.org)) for more on this subject, along with Greg Leffel's excellent book, *Faith Seeking Action*.

If the Part 1 focused on God the Father, and Parts 2 and 3 on Jesus, Part 4 completes the Trinitarian framework by focusing on the Holy Spirit. We now leave the “imagine you are there” framing of Parts 2 and 3, to face our world today, here and now.

## Chapter 40. The Spirit is Moving

To me it's so sad that Paul has a bad reputation. His so-called friends have quoted him so often and in such a way that people think he was something of a stern, angry, quick-to-judge, highly opinionated fundamentalist, like them. But put in his context and read comprehensively (rather than as a source for zinger quotes), Paul emerges as a man of the Spirit, a mystical activist who wants to put the radical message of Jesus to work in changing the world.

The *letting go*, *letting be*, and *letting come* language comes from organizational theorist and strategist Otto Scharmer (see [ottoscharmer.com](http://ottoscharmer.com)) and others who use "Theory U." But I think it works so well because it communicates what theologian Michael Gorman calls "cruciformity." For Paul, Gorman explains, the death-burial-resurrection pattern of the cross becomes the window through which Paul sees all of life - and God - in a new light.

This is another "altar call" chapter, which invites us to not just think about the Spirit, but to open our hearts and lives to be - experientially, subjectively, personally - filled with the Spirit. Of the many lessons we can learn from Pentecostalism, this is one of the most important: people need to be invited to enter the realm of the Spirit, because faith is more than institutional participation and conceptual assent. It's an existential encounter, an evolving experience, a mysterious participation.

## **Chapter 41. Moving with the Spirit**

I spent several years as an active participant in the charismatic/Pentecostal world, and one of the things I appreciated about that world was the constant call to ask for the filling of the Spirit, the note upon which the previous chapter ended. The problem for filled people, I remember a Pentecostal preacher saying, was that “we leak.” In the charismatic/Pentecostal movements, for many years we lacked training on the ongoing personal disciplines to “stay filled” after we had “been filled” with the Spirit. That’s the focus of this chapter.

This chapter brings together a number of simple spiritual practices that help us “practice the presence of God.” Obviously, the image of walking is central to this chapter, as it is to the whole book. How sad that many English translations remove the language and imagery of walking that is so common in the New Testament. I recommend we keep it. We might say that the essence of the spiritual life is first and foremost about breathing (receiving, releasing) and walking (taking the next step in the right direction from wherever we are now.)

## **Chapter 42. Spirit of Love: Loving God**

Sadly, in the charismatic movement we often focused on “speaking in tongues” as the primary evidence for being filled with the Holy Spirit. In fact, the primary evidence is love, beginning with love for God.

I’ve been struck through the years with how little that phrase “loving God” is unpacked and made practical, which is what this chapter tries to do, and what I was trying to do in my book *Naked Spirituality*.

This chapter also gave me the chance to mention how problematized the word “God” has become. That may be the subject of one of my future writing projects. It certainly is a subject I think about a lot, and speak with others about frequently.

## Chapter 43. Spirit of Love: Loving Neighbor

Again, we frequently hear that we ought to love our neighbors, but precious little help is given us in learning how to do that consistently and well. The list of “one-anothers” in this chapter tries to translate the ethereal word *love* into down-to-earth action.

Because of the importance of neighbor-love, I hope that songwriters will find ways to capture these one-another statements in more songs that we can sing when we gather. The movements of *one-anothering* should be understood as core elements of all meaningful discipleship, and the community of faith should be seen as the dance studio where we develop grace and strength to choreograph these movements into our daily lives.

If you’re reading this chapter aloud in a group, you might consider reading the one-another’s aloud, in unison. In groups I’ve led, I’ve found it quite moving to do so.

## **Chapter 44. Spirit of Love: Loving Self**

There is a big difference between selfishness and the kind of self-love necessary to love others. This chapter gave me the chance to deal with a number of very practical matters for people who walk the road of discipleship - pleasure, addiction, rules, wisdom, and self-care.

I encourage people to use tools like the Myers-Briggs Indicator and the Enneagram as ways to understand - and love - themselves more wisely and well. Obviously, such tools can be abused, but without any tools, it's easy for us to simply aspire to "self-control" without translating our aspiration into action.



## Chapter 45. Spirit of Unity and Diversity

This chapter focuses on the Trinity. It falls in the calendar somewhere close to where Trinity Sunday is typically celebrated. Rather than dwelling on Greek terms like *homo-ousios* and distinctions between essence and substance, I felt I should apply the teaching of the Trinity to a problem that is terribly important in today's world: dealing with difference. In that way, this chapter builds on the previous three and could have been called, "Spirit of Love: Loving the Outsider, Stranger, Outcast, Enemy, and Other."

Obviously, this chapter resonates with my previous book on Christian identity in a multi-faith world, *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?*

The idea of God "infecting the world" with a "chronic case of regenerating health" echoes conversations with Eastern Orthodox friends, as mentioned in Chapter 36.

## Chapter 46. Spirit of Service

As the book comes to its conclusion, you can feel the chapters getting increasingly practical. Philippians 2:1-11 is one of the only passages that is repeated in the lectionary of this book (see Chapter 4), and that isn't an accident. If this is indeed a hymn from one of the earliest writings in the New Testament (as many scholars believe it to be), it deserves extra attention. It's fascinating that one of the most important "Christological" passages in the New Testament is put, in context, to a very practical use.

Here are several popular translations of Philippians 2:6:

NRSV: who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited ...

The Voice: Though He was in the form of God, he chose not to cling to equality with God ...

CEB: Though he was in the form of God, he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit

NIV: who, being in very nature God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped...

The first three use the word "though" or "although," but there is no word in the original Greek behind the English word inserted by the translators. In other words, they assumed "though" or "although" was an unspoken assumption in the mind of the author, so they made that unspoken assumption explicit.

Only the NIV avoids that interpretive move. And the difference is significant. "Though" and "although" suggest a reality contrary to expectations. In other words, we would expect someone who was in the form of God to grasp at that status. But contrary to those expectations, Jesus emptied himself.

Imagine if we inserted a different word: *because*: "Because he was in the form of God, he chose not to grasp at equality with God." That insertion makes a different assumption about God. "Although" implies, "We would expect God to be status-oriented." "Because" implies, "We would expect God to be service-oriented." I think the latter is a much more meaningful understanding, and it makes more sense in context.

This understanding is intensified if we understand the phrase translated *form of God* or *in very nature God* to echo the idea of *image of God* from the creation story. If the true nature of God is not status-oriented, but service-oriented, Adam was created to bear that humble image. Instead, he chose to grasp at equality with God, to "be like gods" by choosing rivalry and conflict over neighborliness and conviviality. In contrast, Christ truly reflected God's self-giving nature of servanthood, and we should have this attitude as well. Translation, it turns out, is art as well as science, and the line between translation and interpretation is fuzzier than many people realize.

## **Chapter 47. The Spirit Conspiracy**

Continuing the practical turn from the previous chapter, I needed to address all the “household duty” commands in the New Testament, together with the very down-to-earth moral instruction of James. My hope for this chapter is that it helps people see all of their lives as the domain of the Spirit, and all of their relationships as holy places in which the Spirit is at work.

I never directly addressed “the role of women” or “the homosexual issue” in the text. But I hope it’s clear that in my view, any use of the Bible to subordinate women or stigmatize gays is an irresponsible abuse of the Bible. Just as slavery was a social norm in the ancient world, so was male privilege and heterosexual privilege. The gospel was not intended to absolutize those cultural realities, but to sow the seeds of enlightenment and liberation.

## Chapter 48. Spirit of Power

I return in this chapter to the subject of demons, which was touched upon briefly in Chapter 20. And I also deal with the issue of suffering persecution, which plays so big a role in the New Testament and so small a role in our day (except when it is trivialized to the point of ridiculousness among those who resurrect “the war against Christmas” every year - God help us!).

The truth is, if we courageously followed the values we have explored in this book, we would confront the “pyramid economy” and seek to build a regenerative economy in its place. We would stand up to those who plunder and exploit the earth and we would develop a lifestyle of environmental stewardship instead. We would stand with “the multitudes” of the poor and marginalized with our voices and votes. We would expose the folly of the military-industrial complex and the wrong-headedness of those who proclaim that peace comes through multiplying swords, spears, assault rifles, and nuclear weapons rather than pruning hooks, plowshares, musical instruments, and neighborly relationships. We would dare to put the last first and the first last.

We would become nonconformists, not of the reactionary kind, but of the creative and prophetic kind.

In deep and sincere hope that exactly this will be the case, I have written this book.

If we dare to confront the love of power (which lies at the heart of all “unholy spirits”) with the power of love (which is the power of the Holy Spirit), we will understand why the New Testament emphasized suffering and persecution as much as it did.

This chapter ends with a sentence that provides a transition to the final four chapters of the book.

## Chapter 49. Spirit of Holiness

The final four chapters might be termed eschatological, meaning they deal with “last things” or “ultimate realities.” I use the concept of holiness (Holy Spirit) to address how God deals with “unholiness,” which allows me to offer a fresh understanding of *judgment*. I dealt with this issue in my book *The Last Word and the Word After That*.

Poetry lovers will recognize an echo of John Keats in the last line, and readers of the mystics will hear an echo of Julian of Norwich.

## Chapter 50. Spirit of Life

Since so much of traditional Christianity has been posed as a kind of life-after-death insurance policy, it's no surprise that death was heavily emphasized. People were warned to "turn or burn" and to "prepare to meet their Maker." Death was the threat, the literal deadline before which they needed to join the right religion and get their mortal sins squared away.

Those of us who have moved away from that framing of Christian faith could make the opposite mistake - failing to take death seriously. I write these words within days of two close friends dying and a few weeks of my father's death.

Among those who grieve, no book on the Christian faith and life would be complete if it didn't address the issue of death.

I explore the idea of the future taking up the past and present in *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, a fictional tale that is centered on the illness and death of a middle-aged woman.

The last section of the chapter is, admittedly, speculative. But it is what I hope to ponder when my own death approaches, and it is the comfort I tried to bring to others as a pastor - both to those who were dying, and those who were left to mourn. In fact, it is the vision that sustained me as I sat next to my father a few weeks ago, holding his hand and playing my guitar for him in his final hours.

As Ernest Becker has made so clear in his books, the reality of death plays a vital role all the days of our lives, for better or worse. I hope this chapter will help people face death "for better."

## Chapter 51. Spirit of Hope

This is the chapter set aside for the Book of Revelation, that source of so many profitable end-times books and so much religio-political hysteria.

I've been most influenced in my reading of Revelation by Allan Boesak's *Comfort and Protest*, and by the work of Juan Stam (which, unfortunately, hasn't yet been translated from Spanish into English. I hope it will be!). I was also influenced by a passage in Romano Guardini's *The Lord*, which I quoted in at least one of my earlier books. He was one of the first writers who pointed out the obvious fact that Revelation is dream language, and therefore should be interpreted as we would interpret a dream. (That's bad news for those who interpret it as a history of the future!)

As I wrote this chapter, I was deeply moved by the power of that echoing word "Come!" in Revelation's last chapter. What a way for the last book in the biblical library to end!

## Chapter 52. God in the End

As I worked on this book, I kept wondering what shape its final chapter would take. I really didn't know. I "walked the road" and trusted that when Chapter 52 came, the right ending would come clear.

Because I don't believe the Bible invites us to indulge in cosmic fortune-telling, and because I believe that we live in an open rather than predetermined universe, I didn't want to pick this or that Bible passage as the definitive description of the end of the world and the eternal state to follow. (In fact, I don't even believe in eternal states. Unending stories, yes, but eternal states ... no.)

So I decided to begin this final chapter not with prophets but with astronomers - whose ultimate predictions are about as comforting as that of any hell-fire doomsday prophet who shouts his warnings from pulpit or street corner.

Then, against that backdrop of predicted scientific gloom, I felt I should let Jesus have the final word. I was a little surprised when the parable of the prodigal son emerged as the best way to sum up the whole message of the book, and to see in it a vision of all of human history from beginning to end.

The "All the death that ever was" quote comes from Frederick Buechner, one of my favorite writers who has, through his work, been a kind of pastor to me. And the final lines echo a line from one of my favorite songwriters, Bruce Cockburn, "Closer to the Light," whose work has been a kind of soundtrack to my adult life.

What we need in the end, I think, is not a prediction. We need a promise. And that's what the biblical story invites us to believe, even against all odds.



## Fourth Quarter Queries

In some ways, these final questions are the most personal. Anyone who answers them can share with others “good news of great joy,” which I believe is a deeply important thing. That’s why there isn’t a chapter on “Evangelism” or “Testifying.” The Engage questions and Queries have helped people practice speaking of their faith and their experience with God, so doing so will be a natural and enjoyable experience. For more on the subject of evangelism, by the way, see my book *More Ready Than Your Realize*.

## Appendix 1: Liturgical Resources

I am a lover of liturgy. I think a few well-chosen words, repeated often, can take us much farther than many words spoken spontaneously.

But you may disagree and choose to use few if any of these resources. Those who dislike liturgy often do so for good reasons, especially if they've seen people read liturgy as if they were tired, bored, and nearly catatonic.

The solution, of course, is to read liturgy with energy, passion, emotion, verve ... *lustily*, as the old writers used to say it. (Not lustfully!)

For those who have trouble addressing God with any kind of direct address or name, I imagine that the prayers in this appendix could be adapted in some way, as John O'Donohue did in his beautiful masterpiece, *To Bless the Space Between Us*. But in the end, I think that even if using direct address and names for God stretches some of us, it will stretch us in a good direction.

## **A Final Word**

Thanks for your interest in this background information to the book. Let me know if you have suggestions or additional questions via [info@brianmclaren.net](mailto:info@brianmclaren.net), and I may be able to incorporate your suggestions into future editions.

I've written over a dozen books now, and each one becomes a bit like one's child. Its publication is a bit like sending off a teenager after graduation. The author, like a parent, does all she or he can while the child is under her or his roof. Then the child is sent off. The parent then knows that others - friends, teachers, employers, opponents, coworkers - will now influence the continuing development of their beloved offspring for better or worse.

As has been the case with my previous books, I know this one will have its share of opponents and critics. (Some of them had already written predictably negative online reviews before the book was available!) That makes me all the more grateful for people like you who will employ the book well and constructively.

If a road is made by walking, a book's full impact is made by those who read, discuss, and use it. The writing is only the first small steps, so we are walking and making the road together!