

Theodidaktos *Taught by God*

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Gehenna

**The History, Development and Usage
of a Common Image for Hell**

ALSO INSIDE:

**Fitting In: Unexpected Barriers
that Invite Questions**

**What Would Bonhoeffer Say to
the EMC?**

How Does One Measure Success?

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Editorial

Are There Wolves Among Us?

EVERYONE IS FAMILIAR WITH THE term “a wolf in sheep’s clothing.” Even those in the business or military world recognize the phrase as referring to an enemy in the camp. The wolf in sheep’s clothing has donned the persona and appearance of one who belongs and yet comes to spy or destroy.

It would appear that the world stands more cautiously in regards to infiltrators than does the Church. We want to stand with arms wide open ready to welcome all into the fellowship of the body of Christ. More and more the Church has moved toward an attitude of openness to ideas, dialogue, and challenges to our core values. And in some respects this expresses humility in that we do not have all the answers, that the newcomer or the new believer might have something to add. That is not all bad.

But did Jesus say, “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves”? That’s right, Jesus said that (Matt. 7:15). What did he mean by “wolves in sheep’s clothing”? Obviously, as the context infers, they are false prophets. In the Old Testament there are a handful of references to “evening wolves” (Hab. 1:8; Zeph. 3:3) who seem to destroy all through night, leaving nothing in the morning. They work in the dark when their prey cannot see them. Jesus’ concern for the Church was that they know that they will come, they will infiltrate the Church, they will be hard to identify, and they will try to destroy the fellowship.



Dr. Darryl G.
Klassen

The pendulum has become fixed on the side of tolerance for so long that we scarcely know what to do with the wolf even when we find the predator.

Even so, Jesus taught, you will recognize them by one feature: “You will recognize them by their fruits” (Matt. 7:16). When it comes to appearances, they will look like us; when it comes to the fruit of Christian living, they will reveal themselves by the contradiction of their faith and life. This should make it easier, but it doesn’t.


We in the Church are loathe to judge a person, let alone call them a wolf. “Judge not, that you not be

judged” (Matt. 7:1) has been trumpeted by all manner of voices inside and outside the Church. Ironically, this phrase precedes the one about identifying wolves. So while we are to reserve our judgment, somehow the Christian must also discern the wolf in the sheep pen. Well, the pendulum has become fixed on the side of tolerance for so long that we scarcely know what to do with the wolf even when we find the predator.

Felix Manz wrote a letter from prison prior to his execution in 1527. Perhaps he had nothing to lose. Or perhaps 16th century writers had no reservation or “filter” as we like to say nowadays. Nevertheless, he was frank:

Without (Christ’s) righteousness, nothing can help or endure. That is why so many people who do not have this are deceived by various empty opinions. Unfortunately, we find many people these days who exult in the gospel and teach, speak and preach much about it, yet are full of hatred and envy. They do not have the love of God in them, and their deceptions are known to everyone. For as we have experienced in these last days, there are those who have come to us in sheep’s clothing, yet are ravaging wolves who hate the pious ones of this world and thwart their way of life and the true fold. This is what false prophets and hypocrites of this world do. These are the ones who both curse and pray with the same mouth and live unruly lives. These are the ones who call upon the government leaders to murder us, destroying the very substance of Christ. But I will praise Christ the Lord for his great patience with us. He teaches us with divine grace and shows love to all people, which is the nature of God his heavenly Father. No false prophet could do this.¹

What this letter impresses upon me is the direct insinuation of Manz’s words. He points unquestioningly at Ulrich Zwingli and his council as the “wolf.” We would never dare to do that in our context or culture.

Yet there are wolves among us. They are destroying the fellowship of the Church. And we let them. You know who they are and what they are doing. If I am wrong about this, then you must also say that Christ is wrong in what he says. He warned us. He gave us the means to identify them. The question remains: What are we going to do about the wolves in our midst? 

¹ Daniel Liechty, ed. *Early Anabaptist Spirituality: Selected Writings*. New York: Paulist Press, 1994, 18.

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Gehenna: The History, Development and Usage of a Common Image for Hell



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OF THE FOUR WORDS that are often translated “hell,” *Gehenna* is the only term used in our Scriptures to describe the final fate of the wicked.¹ It is used primarily by Jesus in the gospels, once by James and is

entirely absent in the writings of Paul. The purpose of this paper is to examine the origin, history and development of *Gehenna* from the Old Testament (OT) to New Testament (NT), comparing the external evidence seen in the historical

rabbinical ideas of *Gehenna* with the internal evidence seen in exclusively biblical development.

The following questions will be considered: Is there any biblical or historical warrant for accepting the popular idea of *Gehenna* as a “garbage dump” just south of Jerusalem into which the city garbage, and dead bodies of animals and criminals, were thrown

¹ See also: OT Sheol (63x), NT Hades (11x) and Tartarus (1x). It is important to note that all men (wicked and righteous) go to Sheol and Hades upon death, but only the wicked are finally destroyed in Gehenna after the final Resurrection.

to be incinerated? Is *Gehenna* primarily a geographical term giving rise to eschatology cast in spatial language, or is there development that takes us beyond the basic geographical meaning? What this paper hopes to accomplish is to give clarity to the meaning of *Gehenna* in its historical context, which will help us discern its overall usage throughout the NT.

Origin of Gehenna

The Greek *Gehenna* is a transliteration of the Hebrew phrase *Ge-hinnom* which, in a handful of variations throughout the OT, functions primarily as a toponym or “place-name.”² It is a reference to the valley just outside of Jerusalem “variously designated in

the Hebrew text as the valley ‘of the sons of Hinnom’ (2 Kgs 23:10), ‘of the son of Hinnom’ (Jer. 19:2), or simply ‘of Hinnom’ (Neh. 11:30).³ Geographically, this “valley was located south-southwest of Jerusalem, and it adjoined the Kidron valley which lay to the south-southeast of the city.”⁴ In Jerusalem today, it is known as “Wadi er-Rababi.”⁵

Ge-hinnom is used a total of thirteen times in our Hebrew Bible: five times it serves “as a purely geographical term” (Josh. 15:8; 18:16; Neh. 11:30); narratively, it is used three times when describing

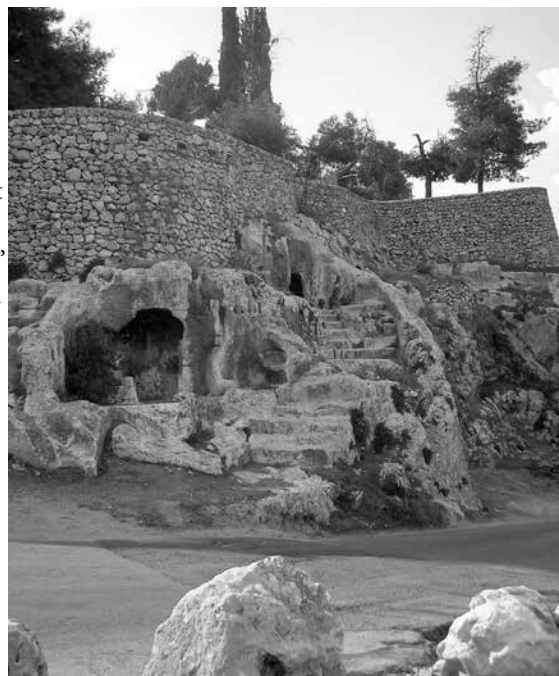
“historical events that happened in the valley and its environs” (2 Kgs. 23:10; 2 Chr. 28:3; 33:6; Jer. 32:35); and the five remaining occurrences are within the Jeremaic text as prophecies “about a war in the valley in which God will punish the apostates of Judah” (Jer. 7:31, 32; 19:2, 6).⁶ In addition to these, there are several other

Is there any biblical or historical warrant for accepting the popular idea of *Gehenna* as a “garbage dump” just south of Jerusalem?

OT texts in which the language and imagery of judgment in a valley are used without using the actual term *Ge-hinnom* (e.g., Isa. 66:24). Aside from the plain geographical usage, each of the above categories will be examined in turn.

History of *Ge-hinnom*

The valley of Hinnom is “the scene of one of Israel’s most terrible lapses into pagan customs” in the history of Judah.⁷ During the reign of King Ahaz and King Manasseh, fire worship was instituted, and in this valley children were burned



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Tombs in the Valley of Hinnom, 2007

alive in the fire as a sacrifice to the god Molech.⁸ Jeremiah 32:35 tells us that “they built high places for Baal in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to sacrifice their sons and daughters to Molech,” something the Lord “never commanded, nor did it enter [His] mind, that they should do such a detestable thing and so make Judah sin.” This demonic act of sacrificial slaughter “filled Jerusalem from end to end” with the blood of innocent children, and provoked the Lord to such anger that he said, “I am going to bring such disaster on Jerusalem and Judah that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle” (2 Kgs 21:12, 16).

Manasseh’s grandson Josiah later took the throne, and we read of his sweeping reforms in 2 Kings 23:1–25. He led the nation in her reformation, and “desecrated Topheth [the ‘fire altar’], which was in the Valley of Ben Hinnom, so no one could use it to sacrifice his son or daughter in the fire to Molech” (v. 10).⁹ The author of 2 Chronicles also records these events and adds that Josiah took the bones of the dead pagan priests and burned them “on their altars, and

2 See Josh. 15:8; 18:16; 2 Kgs. 23:10; 2 Chr. 28:3; 33:6; Neh. 11:30; Jer. 7:31,32; 19:2,6; 32:35.

3 Kim Papaioannou, *The Geography of Hell in the Teaching of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), 3–4.

4 Papaioannou, 4.

5 Moisés Silva, “*γέεννα*,” in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* (NIDNTTE), eds. Moisés Silva, vol.1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 548.

6 Papaioannou, 4.

7 William Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Mark* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 268–269.

8 See 2 Chronicles 28:3; 2 Kings 16:3; 21:6; 33:6.

9 Papaioannou, 5n8. Kim Papaioannou further suggests that “Topheth (תֹּפֶת) etymologically probably means ‘hearth,’ ‘fireplace’ or ‘fire altar.’” See Jeremiah 7:31.

so he purged Judah and Jerusalem” of their sin (34:1–7). Even after Josiah’s radical reformation, the Lord promised destruction to befall Judah and his anger “will not be quenched” (2 Chr. 34:25) because of the sins of Ahaz and Manasseh.

Development of *Ge-hinnom*

Aside from the history briefly surveyed, the term *Ge-hinnom* shows up in Jeremiah where it is portrayed as a place where the apostate Jews will be completely destroyed by God. Jeremiah was likely “a younger contemporary of Josiah,” and was involved in Josiah’s sweeping reforms as a young prophet.¹⁰ Based on what we know from Jeremiah 1:1–8, “the prophet received his prophetic call during Josiah’s thirteenth year, just as the latter had commenced his reform program [2 Chr. 34:3]. Jeremiah was quite young at the time of his call, which could mean that Josiah’s desecrations of *Ge-hinnom* would have been deeply impressed upon the young prophet.”¹¹

The first instance is in Jeremiah 7:29–34 where the Lord tells Josiah of his anger that burns against Judah. He is provoked to anger because “the people of Judah... have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire” (7:30–31). In language of terror and dread, the Lord tells Josiah about the horrible destruction soon to befall Judah. The language of

merciless slaughter, and masses of unburied corpses give us the imagery of a bloody “battle scene... and one of utmost desolation.”¹²

This language of *Ge-hinnom* is picked up again in Jeremiah 19:1–15, when Jeremiah goes out to the *Ge-hinnom* valley and prophesies directly towards the “kings of Judah and the people of Jerusalem” what he heard from the Lord (19:3a). Jeremiah said that the “days are coming...when the people will no longer call this place Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but a Valley of Slaughter” (19:6).

The place where the Israelites killed their innocent children is where they themselves will be slaughtered by their enemies’ swords.¹³ Much life will be lost; many will be left unburied as food for the birds and wild animals (19:7). Additionally, “during the stress of the siege imposed on them” the people will turn on each other in cannibalistic fashion (19:9). The impending destruction will be so horrible that the city will be left irreparable (19:11–13).

In light of this background, it is quite likely that the grotesque imagery of a valley filled with dead bodies in Jeremiah 7:29–34 and 19:1–15 would have had a deep impact on the people of Judah who

The prophecy was a call to repentance or else they and the entire populace of Jerusalem “will become as deserted, desecrated and abominable as the valley of Hinnom after the reforms of Josiah”—a valley of slaughter.

had just recently been a part of Josiah’s radical reformation. The prophecy was a call to repentance or else they and the entire populace of Jerusalem “will become as deserted, desecrated and abominable as the valley of Hinnom after the reforms of Josiah”—a valley of slaughter.¹⁴ We know from history recorded outside of Scripture and in 2 Kings 25 and 2 Chronicles 36:15–23 that shortly after Josiah’s death, “Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians and the people of Judah were taken into exile.”¹⁵

An Eschatological Battle

By far the clearest allusion to the Valley of *Ge-hinnom* outside of Jeremiah is Isaiah 66:24, which happens to be the *Ge-hinnom* text most alluded to in the teachings of Jesus in the gospels. Contextually, Isaiah 66:1–24 is describing an eschatological battle scene outside of Jerusalem.¹⁶ The Lord protects the righteous within the city while utterly slaying the wicked, who rebel against Him, by divine fire and sword.

Then Isaiah says that the righteous “will go out and look upon the *dead bodies*” of the wicked, lying just outside of Jerusalem, where “their worm does not die” and the “fire is not quenched” (Isa. 66:24, emphasis mine). The *Ge-hinnom* Valley is not mentioned in this text, but the imagery has unmistakably strong ties with Jeremiah: a great battle resulting in massive loss of life where the dead are left unburied and left to the irresistible consumption by scavengers.

There are other allusions to destruction in a valley within OT texts

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 8n22.

12 Papaioannou, 7.

13 W. R. Domesis, “הִינְנוֹם” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (NIDOTTE), ed. William A. VanGemeren, vol.1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 1056.

14 Papaioannou, 9.

15 Papaioanno, 8.

16 Daniel I. Block, “The Old Testament on Hell,” in *Hell under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment*, eds. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 60–61.

such as Isaiah 30:33, Ezekiel 39:11–16 and Joel 3:1–21, but in each of these cases (as we saw with Isaiah 66:24), they do not mention *Ge-hinnom* by name. “This can only mean that the word *Ge-hinnom* had not yet developed into a byword for the punishment that God would inflict on the wicked in the eschatological future.”¹⁷ It seems to be the case, then, that *Ge-hinnom* in the OT was a term only used in pre-exilic texts. Subsequent to Jeremiah, we do not hear of *Ge-hinnom* again in the rest of the OT.

The Silence of Gehenna

Interestingly, the Septuagint “does not have *Gehenna* and Josephus mentions neither the term nor the matter.”¹⁸ Within the Second Temple literature leading up to the time of Christ, it is questionable that *Gehenna* was ever used as a toponym for final punishment. Papaioannou suggests that the relevant mentions of *Gehenna* in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha are found in the later

Jeremiah seems to envision annihilation in *Gehenna* as the fate of the wicked, whereas later Jewish writings show evidence for prolonged or even eternal torment as the punishment in *Gehenna*. It is difficult to reconcile or harmonize these ideas.

writings of *4 Ezra*, *2 Baruch*, *Apocalypse of Abraham*, and the *Sibylline Oracles*.

All of these, he says, “are dated after AD 70, toward the end of the [first] century or even later.”¹⁹ The same can be said of the Mishnah and Babylonian Talmud. In these writings, “the word *Gehenna* appears well over fifty times,” with a few rabbis being the earliest attributions in the later part of the first century AD.²⁰ But in most cases, “they are attributed to Rabbis of the third and fourth centuries.”²¹

There exists a large gap between the *Ge-hinnom* of Jeremaic origin and the *Gehenna* of the later first century AD. *Ge-hinnom*, according to Jeremiah, was a valley where the wicked were

slaughtered in battle and the dead bodies were left unburied. According to later Jewish writings, *Gehenna* became an eschatological term referring to an other-worldly place where “the wicked, sometimes in their bodies, sometimes only as disembodied souls, are sometimes annihilated, but often anguish in fire forever without end.”²²

In other words, Jeremiah seems to envision annihilation in *Gehenna* as the fate of the wicked, whereas later Jewish writings show evidence for prolonged or even eternal torment as the punishment in *Gehenna*. It is difficult to reconcile or harmonize these ideas when there is such a large historical gap with no evidence showing “a coherent, gradual development of the theme beginning with Jeremiah and continuing down the centuries.”²³

This is not to dismiss the fact that there were some texts in the intertestamental period, albeit few and in embryonic form, that warn of eternal torment. But they were not in connection with the geographical *Gehenna*. Rather, they appear to have sprung forth from non-Jewish philosophy. Based on the evidence that we have, it seems likely that Jesus, in his teaching on *Gehenna*, continues the *Gehenna* motif of Jeremiah.²⁴ It is here that we must turn to Jesus and the NT.

Advent of Gehenna

Throughout the NT, *Gehenna* is mentioned a total of twelve times, eleven from the lips of Jesus. “Twice he addresses the Pharisees. All else that Jesus says about hell is directed to his own disciples.”²⁵ Within the gospels, Matthew refers to it a total of eight times, Mark

17 Papaioannou, 12.

18 Joachim Jeremias, “γέεννα,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (TDNT), eds. Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), Vol. 1: 657–658.

19 Papaioannou, 19.

20 Ibid., 21. Kim lists the rabbis as: Akiba ben Joseph, Johanan ben Zakkai, and the School of Shammai.

21 Ibid. For an excellent survey of later Jewish writings and their influence on the doctrine of final punishment, see Glenn Peoples, “Worms and Fire: The Rabbis or Isaiah?” in *Rethinking Hell: Exploring Evangelical Conditionalism*. August 17, 2012. Accessed December 4, 2017. http://www.rethinkinghell.com/2012/08/worms-and-fire-the-rabbis-or-isaiah/#identifier_9_1348. See also, David Instone-Brewer, “Eternal Punishment in First-Century Jewish Thought,” in *A Consuming Passion: Essays on Hell and Immortality in Honor of Edward Fudge*, eds. Christopher M. Date and Ron Highfield. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015.

22 Ibid., 22.

23 Papaioannou, 21. Kim goes on to say, “It simply does not make sense to assume that the tradition developed from the simple battle-language of the Hebrew Scriptures to the otherworldly hell of bodies and/or, more often, souls of the ‘Apocrypha’ and ‘Pseudepigrapha,’ all at once” (22).

24 Papaioannou suggests “the first to revive *Ge-hinnom* out of its resting place was Jesus who used the term extensively in his preaching” (25).

25 Edward Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, Third ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 286.

uses it three times all in the span of five verses in chapter nine, and Luke uses it only once.²⁶ The only other occurrence of *Gehenna* is in James 3:6.

The understanding of *Gehenna* in the NT is that it is the location where the wicked are punished after the final resurrection. Time and space do not permit a detailed exegesis of each of these *Gehenna* texts, but several general observations are in order.

Among the *Gehenna* references in the Gospels, it is important to recognize that there is a unique emphasis on the body. In Matthew 5:22, Jesus draws on the OT context of a murderer receiving a death sentence in court when he speaks of the wicked being “in danger of the fire of *Gehenna*.”

Continuing on, the even more explicit language in Matthew 5:29–30, 18:9, and Mark 9:43–48 speaks of mutilated body parts with *Gehenna* as the context. For example, Mark 9:43 says, “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into *Gehenna*.”

Jesus repeats this phrase twice when he speaks similarly of feet and eyes (vv. 45–46). As a parallel between a partial loss and a total loss, Jesus seems to be pointing

out that to enter life mutilated is better than being a dead corpse thrown into *Gehenna*.²⁷ What is more, almost akin to spiritual gangrene, if action is not taken to get rid of sin, it will eventually consume and kill the whole body.²⁸ Thus, it seems a comparison is drawn between the severed limb and the lifeless body in *Gehenna*.

A corpse thrown into *Gehenna* is reminiscent of the dead bodies in Jeremiah’s Valley of Slaughter and Isaiah’s scene of massacre. Here we notice that Jesus, a Jewish rabbi immersed in the Hebrew Scriptures (OT), quotes directly from Isaiah 66:24; and by inserting *Gehenna* in his quotation, he brings the imagery of Jeremiah’s Valley of Slaughter (Jer. 7:29–34; 19:1–14) into focus. It is not hard to see how the images complement each other. All of these “depict [gruesome] battle scenes that result in a devastation of mutilated and *dead* bodies.”²⁹

Additionally, Isaiah’s imagery of the unquenchable fire and undying worm points to the completeness and finality

Isaiah’s imagery of the unquenchable fire and undying worm points to the completeness and finality of destruction.

of destruction. By using Scripture to interpret Scripture, it can be pointed out that an unquenchable fire “does not mean ever-burning, but irresistible. Because it cannot be thwarted in its intended purpose, or stopped short of accomplishing its goal, ‘unquenchable’ fire (‘irresistible fire’) fully consumes (Ezek. 20:47–48), reduces to nothing (Amos 5:5–6) or burns up what is put into it (Matt. 3:12).”³⁰ Similarly, the worms (or maggots) chewing on the flesh of the dead bodies “do not die, at least not until they finish their consumptive task.”³¹

Luke 12:4–5 continues this focus on the body when Jesus suggests that “what is thrown in *Gehenna* [are] the corpses of those whom God has killed [which] remind us of the motif in Isaiah 66:24.”³² Luke’s parallel is Matthew 10:28, which has its difficulties in translation. There the distinction is drawn between the “body” (*sōma*) and the *psuchē* which is most often translated as “soul.” Given Matthew’s Hebraic background, and the fact that Luke avoids this distinction

all together, it is doubtful that Matthew is creating a dichotomy between two separate anthropological entities, that is, the body and the soul. In most cases, *psuchē* is best understood as “life.” It is likely that Jesus’

emphasis is that God is sovereign “over life and death. Men can kill you, but it is God, the one in whom we hope, who can end you forever, not just killing the body temporarily as men can, but ultimately ending your life.”³³

Gehenna and Geography

In addition to the emphasis on the body in the gospels is the “geographical dimension in the development of the *Gehenna* motif.”³⁴ Within the synoptic gospels, Matthew uses *Gehenna* most generously, which is unsurprising given the fact that his synoptic is “recognized as the most Palestinian of the Gospels.”³⁵

26 See Matt. 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5.

27 My thanks to William Tanksley, Chris Date, Darryl Klassen and Peter Grice for comments on my original draft of this article, which has helped clarify my thinking on how to articulate what some might refer to as a “escalating parallel.”

28 See Matthew 5:27–30. While Mark emphasizes the “cutting off the hand” (9:43), with no further explanation, Matthew goes further by saying, “...and throw it away” (5:29–30).

29 Papaioannou, 22.

30 Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes*, 77.

31 Fudge, 76.

32 Papaioannou, 23.

33 Glenn Peoples, “Matthew 10:28 and Dualism: Is the Soul Immortal?” in *Afterlife*. July 14, 2013. Accessed Dec. 6, 2017. http://www.afterlife.co.nz/2013/theology/body-and_soul/matthew-1028-and-dualism-is-the-soul-immortal/.

34 Papaioannou, 23.

35 *Ibid.* Even though James mentions *Gehenna* only once, it is well recognized that his audience was Jewish.

Not only is *Gehenna* a geographical term (also known as “the Valley of Hinnom”), it is a thoroughly Jewish term, one that Jews in Jesus’ day would have understood as part of their history. Mark and Luke use the term sparingly, which is explained by their majority Gentile audience. James, like Matthew, was addressing a primarily Jewish readership. When we look beyond the gospels and James, we do not find a reference to the geographical *Gehenna* in any of the other NT books. Understandably, to a Gentile who was unfamiliar with the geography and history of Jerusalem, the teachings of Jesus and the Hebrew Scriptures, the term *Gehenna* would have made very little sense.³⁶

This explains the complete absence of *Gehenna* in the writings of Paul. He does not speak of the fate of the wicked in geographical language akin to Jesus or the other apostles. It would not have made sense for him to do so, since he was writing to a mixed audience in Asia Minor who would not have understood such geography.³⁷

Instead of geography, Paul uses language of teleology. In other words, Paul is interested in the decisive or punctiliar act of destruction as the end (*telos*) of the wicked. For example, in his letter to the Philippians, Paul encourages believers that the persecution they are experiencing is a “sign to them of [the persecutors’] destruction,” but for the believer it is a sign of salvation (Phil. 1:28). Later he says that those who live as “enemies of the cross” will find “their end (*telos*) is destruction” (Phil. 3:18–19).

In contrast to the “vessels of mercy,” Paul talks about “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction” (Rom. 9:22–24). In 2 Thessalonians 1:8–9, he describes what will happen on the Day of the Lord when the wicked will be punished “with eternal destruction from the presence of the Lord.”³⁸ Paul warns the person “desiring to be rich” that greed “plunges

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people into ruin and destruction” (1 Tim. 6:9), and he warns that “the one who sows according to the flesh will reap destruction” (Gal. 6:8).³⁹ Other examples could be explored, but, as already mentioned, Paul repeatedly uses non-geographical language whenever he speaks of the fate of the wicked.⁴⁰

A Summary

To sum up the evidence of *Gehenna* language in the NT, it seems clear that Jesus stands much “closer to the original source of the *Gehenna* tradition—Jeremiah—with [his] strong emphasis on the body,” and that his references to *Gehenna* “have a coherence that reflects a unified source.”⁴¹ In other words, Jesus is very closely tied to the *Gehenna* of Jeremiaic origin. But, as we move further away from Jesus into the later Jewish writings, we see a tendency to move further away from “the body towards an interest in disembodied souls,” which reveals a lack of unity on the consensus of *Gehenna*.⁴²

Gehenna as a Garbage Dump?

Chief among the modern ideas surrounding *Gehenna* is that of a smouldering garbage dump south of Jerusalem where perpetual fires consumed the city waste and the dead bodies of criminals thrown into it. Many prominent scholars appeal to this idea, and often without evidence or explanation.⁴³ The most common route by which this idea is adopted is from the suggestion that during Josiah’s sweeping reformation when he declared the valley

36 Papaioannou, 23.

37 In an email conversation, Richard Middleton pointed out to me that “different contexts (and conceptual training, etc.) lead different people to use different ideas/images, etc., to communicate the same basic idea.”

38 See <http://www.rethinkinghell.com/2016/11/annihilation-in-2-thessalonians-19-part-1-destroyed-by-the-glory-of-his-manifest-presence>; and <http://www.rethinkinghell.com/2016/12/annihilation-in-2-thess-1-9-part-2-separation-or-obliteration/>. See also Charles L. Quarles, “The *ἀπό* of 2 Thess. 1:9 and the Nature of Eternal Punishment,” WTJ 59 [1997], 201–211.

39 Nicholas Rudolph Quiet, “Paul and the Annihilation of Death,” in *A Consuming Passion: Essays on Hell and Immortality in Honor of Edward Fudge*, Christopher M. Date and Ron Highfield, eds. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015), 99.

40 For an excellent study on Paul’s language of destruction as dependent upon the LXX, see Nicholas Rudolph Quiet, “Destruction from the Presence of the Lord: Paul’s Intertextual Use of the LXX in 2 Thess. 1:9” (paper presented at the Rethinking Hell Conference in London, UK, October 7–8, 2016), 1–24. See also, Daniel G. Reid, “2 Thessalonians 1:9: ‘Separated from’ or ‘Destruction from’ the Presence of the Lord?” (a paper presented at the ETS Pauline Studies Group in Colorado Springs, CO, November 16, 2001), 1–18.

41 Papaioannou, 24.

42 Ibid.

43 Some examples: N. T. Wright, *Matthew For Everyone: Part 1* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 211–12 (see also his commentaries on Part 2 of Matthew, Mark, Luke, 1st and 2nd Corinthians, The Early Christian Letters, and Revelation); and Robert A. Morey, *Death and the Afterlife* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1984), 87–88.

unclean, it “was subsequently set apart as a place where refuse was discarded and burnt.”⁴⁴

William Barclay suggests that, consequently, “it was a foul, unclean place where loathsome worms bred on the refuse, and which smoked and smouldered at all times like some vast incinerator.”⁴⁵ Supposedly, this usage of the valley continued into Jesus’ day where the “sight and smell of the place” would have been familiar to the contemporary Jew.⁴⁶ John Stackhouse, while questioning this garbage dump motif, says “given Jesus’ description of Gehenna as a place of removal, burning, and maggots, a garbage dump readily came to mind (i.e. Mark 9:43–49).”⁴⁷

However, the whole idea of *Gehenna* as a municipal garbage dump is based on very thin evidence. Among the scholars who question this theory, Francis Chan and Preston Sprinkle are quite helpful in pointing out that “just because Jesus’ description of hell may have been inspired by the image of a burning garbage dump (if it was), doesn’t mean that He is referring to the actual garbage dump when he uses the word *Gehenna*.”⁴⁸ To suggest that Jesus is referring to an



actual garbage dump in geographic terms is to misunderstand the way language works. Chan and Sprinkle illustrate this misunderstanding:

I’ve often heard people refer to a gridlocked freeway as a parking lot. The

To suggest that Jesus is referring to an actual garbage dump in geographic terms is to misunderstand the way language works.

statement is inspired by a literal parking lot, but nobody is claiming that people drive to the freeway, stop, lock their cars, and then go about their business. That’s just the way imagery works.⁴⁹

Within linguistic studies, D. A. Carson refers to this as confusing the “referent with the sense.”⁵⁰ Papaioannou helpfully points out that the garbage dump motif is in awkward tension with Luke 12:4–5 which draws a contrast between “humans who can kill and then do nothing more [and] God who can kill and then cast into Gehenna. If indeed there was a fire burning in the literal valley of *Ge-hinnom*, the contrast loses its power—not only

44 Larry Dixon, *The Other Side of the Good News: Confronting The Contemporary Challenges To Jesus’ Teaching On Hell* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1992), 122–123. See also, William V. Crockett, “The Metaphorical View,” in *Four Views on Hell*, ed. William Crockett (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 58.

45 Barclay, 268–269.

46 Block, 60–61.

47 John Stackhouse, “Terminal Punishment,” in *Four Views on Hell*, 2nd Edition, ed. Preston Sprinkle (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 63. Other scholars who express hesitance with the garbage dump motif are: R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007), 202; Robert W. Yarbrough, “Jesus on Hell,” in *Hell under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment*, eds. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 79; Christopher W. Morgan, “Biblical Theology: Three Pictures of Hell,” in *Hell under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment*, eds. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 146n17; and Denny Burk, “Eternal Conscious Torment,” in *Four Views on Hell*, 2nd Edition, ed. Preston Sprinkle (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 22–23.

48 Francis Chan and Preston M. Sprinkle, *Erasing Hell: What God Said about Eternity and the Things We Made Up* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2011), 59.

49 *Ibid.*, 59.

50 D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 63–64.

God, but humans can also cast into *Gehenna*.”⁵¹

A Medieval Rabbi

Even when we set aside the functionality of languages, G. R. Beasley-Murray says, “The notion...that the city’s rubbish was burned in this valley, has no further basis than a statement by the Jewish scholar [David] Kimhi (sic) made about A.D. 1200; it is not attested in any ancient source.”⁵²

David Kimhi, a medieval rabbi, wrote in his commentary on Psalm 27: “Gehenna is a repugnant place, into which filth and cadavers are thrown, and in which fires perpetually burn in order to consume the filth and bones, on which account, by analogy, the judgment of the wicked is called ‘Gehenna.’”⁵³ Somewhat ironic is the earliest source of this garbage dump allusion when we notice that Kimhi, who was writing “from Europe, by the way, not Israel,” himself only saw it as an “*analogy*” for “the judgment of the wicked.”⁵⁴

Peter Head is even more terse when he says that, within the primary sources and ancient texts, the evidence for the existence of *Gehenna* as a “fiery rubbish dump in this location” is nonexistent, but “in any case, a thorough investigation would be appreciated.”⁵⁵ Furthermore, as an archeologist, Bailey points out that there is no evidence for *Gehenna* as a garbage dump in the “archeological data from the intertestamental or rabbinic periods.”⁵⁶ If *Gehenna* was a fiery garbage dump just south of Jerusalem, we would “be able to dig around and find evidence.”⁵⁷

But there is none. *Gehenna* did not become “infamous as a flaming heap of garbage”; rather, it is an explicit reference to the Jeremiaic Valley of Slaughter where God severely judged the nation of Judah.⁵⁸ How is it that the majority of the Christian churches have bought into an idea of *Gehenna* that has no evidence earlier than AD 1200, hundreds and hundreds of years after Jesus’ earthly ministry?

Conclusion

The toponym *Gehenna* has an unavoidable relationship to the *Ge-hinnom* of Jeremiah where the apostate Jews were utterly slaughtered and left unburied and exposed to the elements and scavengers. Beyond Jeremiah’s usage of *Ge-hinnom*, it does not appear anywhere else in the OT until Jesus incorporates it into his teaching of the fate of the wicked. Jesus seems to continue the *Gehenna* motif of Jeremiah by focusing on the body and bringing in the imagery of Isaiah 66:24, thereby giving a stark image of appalling destruction where the wicked are completely destroyed.

The questions that need to be wrestled with are: How does the geographic *Gehenna* of Jesus point us to the eschatological fate of the wicked? Does Jesus continue the geographic language as though the *location* of final destruction were important?

To be sure, the Jewish hearer would have understood Jesus in a straightforward manner and knew the valley of which Jesus was speaking. But what is helpful to note is that *Gehenna* can be considered a partial vision, a type, of the fuller judgment anticipated for the whole world and, indeed, the entire cosmos.

In other words, what is true of the Jewish *Gehenna* in its geographical sense is true of the cosmos when God finally comes to destroy all evil. Locality is always part of a punctiliar act of destruction, but what is the focus of Jesus and Paul, and the other NT writers? It seems to be the case, given their particular contexts and environs from which they wrote, that stress is placed on the *act* rather than the *location* of destruction. Thus, Hell is not merely a place one goes to, but, most importantly, it is the act of being completely destroyed by God when the offer of life is forever removed from their reach. ☉

How is it that the majority of the Christian churches have bought into an idea of *Gehenna* that has no evidence earlier than 1200 AD, hundreds and hundreds of years after Jesus’ earthly ministry?

51 Papaioannou, 6n13.

52 G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 376–77n.92.

53 As cited in Bailey, “Gehenna: The Topography of Hell,” 188.

54 Chan and Sprinkle, 60, italics mine.

55 Peter M. Head, “The Duration of Divine Judgment in the New Testament,” in *Eschatology in Bible & Theology: Evangelical Essays at the Dawn of a New Millennium*, eds. Kent E. Brower and Mark W. Elliott (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1997), 223.

56 Bailey, 189. See also, “The Myth of the Burning Garbage Dump of Gehenna,” *BiblePlaces.com blog: News and analysis related to biblical geography, history and archeology*. April 7, 2011. Accessed November 25, 2017. <http://blog.bibleplaces.com/2011/04/myth-of-burning-garbage-dump-of-gehenna.html>.

57 Chan and Sprinkle, 59.

58 Burk, 22–23.

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Fitting In: Unexpected Barriers That Invite Questions



Ray Hill

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RANDY AND LISA WELLS and their two teenage sons were welcomed warmly at the door of the Rosedale EMC. They had connected with Allen, the contractor for Randy's shop expansion. When Allen mentioned that some of their neighbours also attended his church, they decided to give it a try.

They were relieved to see some familiar faces in the foyer and were bemused when they got a few "Why are you here?" looks. No matter. The singing was good and, though the liturgy they were used to was missing, the service was relaxed and several people later said that they would like to have them over

for coffee. When Allen asked what they thought, Lisa chuckled that where she grew up the Mennonites had hitching posts for their buggies. But they liked what they saw and would be back.

They especially enjoyed the church potlucks in spite of finding the *verenikje* (perogies), *kielke* (noodles), and *schmaunt fat* (cream gravy) a bit bland. Within a few months they decided to join the church and were happily accepted by the congregation. Randy was elected as an usher at the annual elections and Lisa found a place on the decorating committee.

As time went on, they became more aware of the underlying culture (Dutch,



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German, Russian); learning some of the language helped them to feel a part of it. There were still no invites to homes of those who said they would like to have them over. In some nondescript way it felt a little “closed” to non-EMCers.

They discussed their feelings with some church friends and the misconceptions they had had about Mennonites and asked if changing their name from Rosedale EMC to something more generic like Rosedale Community Church might encourage others like them to attend, fit in, and perhaps open the church to more diversity. Allen thought it was worth pursuing.

An Odd Nodding

At the next congregational meeting the chairperson introduced the topic and asked Randy and Lisa to explain the idea and give their reasons. There was discussion until an older member asked them why new people like them thought they had the right to start making changes to fundamental, long-standing traditions. Several nodded their heads in agreement. After that, silence.

A vote was held and the idea died quickly and mercifully. It was not the defeat of their proposal that hurt so much as the way they were dismissed as second class members. They felt crushed and alienated. Within two months they stopped attending.

What was odd about the whole situation was that the congregation had discussed reaching out to non-Mennonite neighbours. They already had some long-standing *anglo* members and were confused that the several families who had recently begun attending rarely stayed more than a year or so. They saw themselves as a friendly church and felt a responsibility to evangelism. What went wrong?

Some misunderstandings by Randy and Lisa and the church led to a “tragic”

outcome—tragic in the sense that Randy and Lisa will probably never attend another EMC church and that the congregation was left with questions but few answers.

Church As Inclusion

There had been an assumption that if Randy and Lisa would politely come at least part way to learn some Mennonite (DRG) culture that they would feel more comfortable together. What wasn’t taken into account is that there are levels of acceptance. A new member does not have the same status and political clout as a “pillar of the church.” Also, church friendships run the gamut from “Sunday acquaintance” to “part of the family.”

Rosedale felt it was ready to accept “outsiders,” but increased diversity can destabilize a church and reduce its sense of security so there were unexpressed reservations. Cultural readiness plays a big part in the level of acceptance. Openness to diversity in a congregation can be measured on a scale: 1- Uniformity, 2- Assimilation, 3- Openness, 4- Partnership.¹

In a community where everyone is of the same culture (a small prairie or Ontario town) the church can expect Uniform culture. If outsiders join the congregation, the expectation is that they will adopt the homogeneous culture and learn to pick up the subtle signals and attitudes. This is not the same as growing up in the culture, and efforts to “fit in” would always be seen as a cultural veneer. This is where Rosedale was—Assimilation.

Some (usually city) churches are able to safely tolerate other cultures within their body—Openness. Others find ways to actually integrate diverse cultures into their community and

It was not the defeat of their proposal that hurt so much as the way they were dismissed as second class members. They felt crushed and alienated.

worship—Partnership. This is no easy task, requiring time, open discussion, and a will toward inclusion.

The leadership of the Rosedale Church was partly at fault in that it also needed to find a less blunt instrument for discussing the name change proposal. They seemed to be out of touch with the attitudes lurking beneath the surface as well as the locations of the political power within the congregation.

Within the congregation itself, there seemed to be a sense that the leadership was pushing a change to a non-negotiable tradition of the church—the name Mennonite—which for many was at the root of who they were. Along with that anxiety over change, unfortunately, spilled out the mistrust of “outsiders.” The congregation may not have agreed with the one expressing it, but deferred to his protective stance. Politics and tradition trumped relationship and empathy.

Randy and Lisa made themselves vulnerable without understanding the real risks involved. They were willing to make changes, but in the end were not fully accepted and became the target of some insensitive, hidden feelings. The congregation thought it was friendly and open, but in fact was ill-prepared for what was brought to the table. It was simply not ready to accept Randy and Lisa as full members with a free and equal voice with full community status.

How can we untangle the threads in the impasse at Rosedale? Their desire is to be inclusive but there are real issues that block the road. The problem goes deeper than surface breaks that can be easily and quickly repaired. We need to look at the

¹ C. Michael Hawn, *One Bread, One Body*, 188

root causes of their situation, the cultural/language issues as well as beyond to church theology, its politics and its institutional nature.

Culture and Censure

The New Testament Church was a “new creation” founded on inclusion of outsiders. “Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all” (Col. 3:11). This acceptance was and still is the yardstick for Christian love and compassion, peace and unity (Col. 3:12–15). In practice, however, this is a high and difficult standard.

North America is described as the “melting pot” of the world, but, in fact, is more like a cultural mosaic.² Because it is difficult for immigrants to fit into the overarching culture of North America, the church has become a refuge for cultural preservation—consider the German, Spanish and other ethnic language hymns that are sung from memory in the EMC churches. It is not easy to fit into the language and culture of a new country and more so for the many modern non-European/American immigrants from Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Preservation of culture and language becomes a priority. The question,



It is common to call the church “the family of God,” yet the New Testament never uses that phrase, rather assuming cultural, ethnic, and social diversity. Churches are instead called several times “the household of God (or faith),” including not only the family, but servants, slaves, hired help, and so on.

of course, is how to balance this against the need for inclusion and diversity.³

The DGR culture of the Rosedale Church was especially entrenched because it, unlike the Hispanic churches that are relatively new and may contain members from many countries, is monolithic in its history, traditions, and country of origin as well as language.

Language is a barrier in itself to inclusion. Many children have

experienced the older generation’s use of language to have “private” discussions. Not only is there a cloaking of meaning, but there is also a cultural mindset to each language that cannot be grasped unless one is a native speaker. There is a different worldview inherent in each language, if you like. Preservation of the language becomes preservation of that worldview. There is a cliquishness inherent that provides comfort and security for the speaker, but mistrust of and by the outsider. It excludes other worldviews, which is contrary to the gospel.⁴

Another locus of separation in my experience is the tight, well-defined family unit. The family’s role cannot be underestimated in community life. It is a place to feel safe, understood and free to be

ourselves because we are most at ease in our own culture. It enables us to come back together into the body re-energized.⁵ It should not, however, be a cloister from outsiders.

Though there be easy acceptance of “outsiders” into church life, it may become a struggle for them to breach the more personal lives of church members. It leads to the vague sense experienced by Randy and Lisa that the full life of the community was “closed to non-EMCers.” It is important not only to allow newcomers a place in the church, but also to actively make them feel at home. The most natural place to do this is around the supper table and by inclusion in family life.

It is also important for the church to recognize the nurturing influence of the individual family unit, but not to import its “insider” culture into the church body as the norm.⁶ It is common to call the church “the family of God,”⁷ yet the New

2 Ibid, 2–4

3 A broader question not addressed here is the legitimacy or even wisdom of the church’s role as cultural refuge. I know of no studies, but limiting full participation to indigenous members will certainly have a stultifying effect on broader community involvement, vision, growth and fuller implementation of the gospel. It is a trade off that the church needs to keep at the conscious level with a view to over time transitioning from refuge to halfway house to openness.

4 Ibid, 6–7

5 Eric F. H. Law, *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb*, 49–51.

6 The point of Acts 15.

7 For instance, the song by Bill and Gloria Gaither, “The Family of God.”

Testament never uses that phrase, rather assuming cultural, ethnic, and social diversity. Churches are instead called several times “the household of God (or faith),”⁸ including not only the family, but servants, slaves, hired help, and so on, each with their own culture trying by necessity to get along under one roof.

The cultural climate can, in some congregations I have observed, reveal itself in a more subtle way. Outsiders may feel welcomed in that they are given responsibility within the church often beyond what Randy and Lisa experienced—in the board or ministerial, for example. It can go well for years until there is a watershed issue perhaps impinging on heritage (the name change issue above) or family ties (church discipline). An outsider may suddenly sense that his voice carries no currency and that he has not been fully accepted.

It can be a shocking wake-up to someone who feels truly part of a family, making it difficult afterward to dialogue with the church body that has devalued him or her. The net result is that the causes and effects will remain veiled to the church and it will be free to “go and sin...again.”⁹

Politics and Legalism

There are several forms of leadership needed within the church: elected boards, ministers and elders, hired pastors (not here discussed), respected pillars of the church, and a less recognized group that I will refer to as “prophets.”¹⁰

Apart from cultural considerations, the congregation feels itself to be the ultimate voice of the church and will

be sensitive to any elected body usurping its authority. The Board will be free to lead and even to overstep its authority—for a time. The congregation may respond with passive-aggressive resistance, or there can be an unexpected escalation to active revolt over a seemingly innocuous issue like Randy’s and Lisa’s proposed name change.

At Rosedale there was underlying resentment not only of the couple’s proposal, but also of the board’s overstepping its boundaries. Communication and transparency matter. The congregation must be informed about and consulted on as many issues as privacy allows. A board can neither assume nor presume authority on any matter, especially in a congregationally-led church.

The second problem in the presentation of the issue by the board was the perceived (rightly or wrongly) urgency. The first reaction to a relaxing of established boundaries is legalistic (in the sense of following institutional principles/traditions).¹¹ When pressured and when answers are unclear, the congregation feels unsafe and becomes responsive to “Thou shalt” and “Thou shalt not” thinking. At that point, the congregation may look away from its official political leaders (board/chairperson) and turn for guidance to a trusted “gatekeeper,”¹² thus short circuiting the decision-making process.

One way to avoid this sudden political shift involves taking more time¹³ to introduce, discuss, examine, and research the question. There is a need-

If a congregationally led church is to work, then all must be engaged. When it comes to a healthy body, denial and apathy are killers.

for individuals to interact and relate to one another on the issue to see it less as a legalistic or political power issue and more as a caring-for-one-another-in-community issue.

Randy and Lisa cautiously, and unknowingly, took on the role of another type of congregational leader, the “prophet.” These voices commonly serve, in the great tradition of Isaiah and Jeremiah, as thorns in the apathy of a congregation. Being sensitive to problem areas within the church, they are all too frequently in my view dismissed as malcontents.

Prophets can be the troubling but necessary conscience of the congregation. However, though they deserve to be heard, it does not mean that the congregation should take every recommendation! If there is “pain,” it must still be determined what the problem is and what needs to be done, if anything. If a congregationally-led church is to work, then all must be engaged. When it comes to a healthy body, denial and apathy are killers.

Evangelicalism and Exclusion

Exacerbating exclusion, oddly enough, is the “Evangelical” movement. Evangelicalism seeks to draw people in to the gospel, but, antithetically and relevant to this article, it tends also to divide “insiders” from “outsiders,” and, worse yet, to brand outsiders as projects or clients, making them the church’s *raison d’être*.

Jesus himself talked of “sheep”/“goats” and “wheat”/“tares”—those who accept the kingdom and those aiming to subvert it. Evangelicalism co-opts and simplifies

8 Gal. 6:10, Eph. 2:19, 1 Tim. 3:15, 1 Pet. 4:17.

9 A misquote of John 8:11.

10 They are the critics who may be given other less courteous names.

11 Eric F. H. Law, *Inclusion: Making Room for Grace*, 20–21.

12 Ibid, 21.

13 Ibid, chapter 5.


these notions to describe those who are “born again”/“not born again,” then draws a thick and dark line between them. The concepts of a life journey into a fuller understanding and acceptance of faith in God and following Christ as well as the church’s role in sanctification are somehow foreign to Evangelicalism. The author’s wife has stated in conversation, “I can’t remember accepting Christ as Saviour, but I don’t remember a time when I did not believe God or trust in Christ as my Saviour and Lord.” Those

community (in Matthew)—is greatly weakened or even ignored in the glare of the command in the Gospel of Mark to “go into all the world and preach the gospel.” Here, in my mind, is the point of tension between Evangelicalism and Anabaptism that must be constantly revisited and reconsidered to maintain a balance.

Conclusion

Each organization has and needs boundaries to differentiate itself.¹⁴ It also needs to recognize where these

3. If there is a desire to loosen boundaries, how can it be done slowly and thoughtfully so the congregation does not feel forced into a decision?

Rosedale is a church body of good and decent people who do not understand why outsiders don’t see them as a friendly church. However, in the same way that a group of “good” people can form a mob given the right circumstances, the characteristics of individual believers don’t automatically translate into the church body as a whole. Culture, politics, theology, and legalism can each in their own way hinder it and must be addressed. The road to healthy congregational life requires ongoing dialogue, willing diagnosis and openness to change. To be “good” we need to be willing to confront what ails us as a body. 

The concepts of a life journey into a fuller understanding and acceptance of faith in God and following Christ as well as the church’s role in sanctification are somehow foreign to Evangelicalism. Those experiencing salvation differently, and members from other church traditions, may be viewed as second-class worshipers or even as non-believers.

experiencing salvation differently, and members from other church traditions, may be viewed as second-class worshipers or even as non-believers.

This does not deny the right of a church to its statement of faith and practices. However, these should be made clear to any prospective adherents with opportunity and guidance to conform and attain status equal to other members.

Evangelicalism may also thwart full inclusion in community with a glib acceptance that those saved are safe from hell and so are left to manage on their own so the church can seek new converts. The majority of The Great Commission—teaching, baptizing and discipleship in

boundaries are and decide if they are appropriate to its goals. Offered for further consideration are three questions¹⁵ for the Rosedale EMC:

1. Has there been a frank self-evaluation of receptivity toward outsiders? Is there readiness to honestly and openly discuss and agree upon the degree of openness?
2. Have the boundaries been clearly delineated and understood so there are no assumptions or false expectations toward or by outsiders? What are the conditions of full acceptance?

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¹⁴ Ibid, 16

¹⁵ Proffering solutions is outside the scope of this paper. For help in addressing issues such as those at Rosedale EMC, refer to the books in the bibliography by C. Michael Hawn and Eric F. H. Law. The three by Law describe the processes with helpful appendices that will lead individual congregations to find suitable solutions.

What Would Bonhoeffer Say to the EMC?



Dr. Darryl G. Klassen

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TWO DECADES BEFORE the Kleine Gemeinde changed its name to the Evangelical Mennonite Conference, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed by Adolf Hitler for treason and his part in an attempted assassination plot. Bonhoeffer would hardly have known about the EMC, the tiny little cluster of churches then on the Canadian Prairies. However, if the famous theologian did know about this conference of churches, what would he have said to them? And what would he say today? The following is a fictitious letter, written as if by the hand of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, offering a critique and an encouragement to the EMC.

To the elders and people of the Evangelical Mennonite Conference,

Greetings to all of you in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. It is a privilege to address you and bring a word of encouragement to you as a fellow servant. As one who is called to shepherd the flock of Christ, I feel called by our Lord to address some concerns I have observed related to your understanding of faith and witness. These concerns arise out of my understanding of Christ and His Church, and I believe that the Holy Spirit guides my pen.

I believe you are a church in turmoil, having turned your focus inward and forgetting what it means theologically and

ethically to be a church in your community and in your world. It is my hope and prayer to restore in you a vision for being the

The language you use is somewhat inclusive and there is a facade of “welcome” in what you do. However, beneath the surface one would find a passive-aggressive struggle for control.

community of Christ by reminding you of the reality of Christ.

A Closed Society

When you come to worship it is not immediately apparent that your family of churches is a closed society. The language you use is somewhat inclusive and there is a facade of “welcome” in what you do. However, if one were to look beneath the surface of your worship one would find

a passive-aggressive struggle for control. There is discord over what styles of music and liturgy should be employed and the tension is felt each Sunday.

Beneath this layer of unrest there is friction over what style of leadership best fits this congregation, which is



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really just a mask for getting one's own way. You cannot decide whether to be congregational or hierarchical. Some of you have come to the understanding that the Church rises or falls depending on your effort and influence.

The root cause of this friction is a desire to make the Church a place to hide from the world so that the veneer of tradition and heritage can be safeguarded against outsiders. If you let the world in to your private meetings, you are too afraid of losing your so-called identity. You may not realize this subconscious impulse since the guiding principle of your vision is to "reach out." You want the outsider to come "in," but what you truly want is for the "outsider" to become an "insider" under the terms of your vision for Christian life.

Christ's Purpose For the Church

To make the church a hiding place from the world, to shut out the world for a brief moment in the week, and to deny those in the community a chance to see people of faith in action, is contrary to Christ's purpose for the church. "...the first task given to those who belong to the church of God is not to be something for themselves, for example, by creating a religious organization or leading a pious life, but to be witnesses of Jesus Christ to the world."¹

We are the body of Christ and as such we are Christ's invitation to the world through word and life to become a part of the body. In truth, everyone already belongs to this body and to understand that Christ came into the world for just such a purpose is our message.²

No Sacred, Profane Separation

Accentuating your confusion is the misunderstanding that the life of the Church ends at noon on Sunday, after which you re-enter the world. We cannot separate the sacred from the so-called profane parts of life. There is no such thing as a spiritual life that is separate from your life at the office or at home or school.

Is it possible to live in the spiritual realm and divide that realm from your

We deny that Christ came into the world when we say we want to be Christian while denying we live in the world or when we fail to see Christ in the world we live in.

worldly existence? No, you would have to live in one and not the other, which is impossible. To make such a division is to desire Christ without the world, or, conversely, to live in the world without Christ. This is where we deceive ourselves.

"There are not two realities, but only one reality, and that is God's reality revealed in Christ in the reality of the world."³ In other words, we find Christ in the office, home or school as much as we find him in the worship service. We deny that Christ came into the world when we say we want to be Christian while denying we live in the world or when we fail to see Christ in the world we live in.

Throw Open the Doors

It follows that the challenge of the Church is to throw open the doors of the Church

and invite the world to come in and see God's intention for true community. Our musical style is not as important as the unity we express in submitting to whatever musical style is used. Those who come in from the community need to see that we accept each other. Being witness to this mutual acceptance, they in turn can be assured that they too will be accepted.

"The church is the place where it is proclaimed and taken seriously that God has reconciled the world to himself in Christ, that God so loved the world that God gave his Son for it."⁴ As Paul said to the Corinthians, we have become ministers of this reconciliation on behalf of Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 5:19-20). From this foundational understanding of the Christian life we begin to see why it is important to consider ourselves ambassadors of the church when we are at work. The witness of Christ expresses itself in us throughout the week, at work, at recreation, at home, as well as in the church.

To possess great swaths of biblical knowledge and spiritual truth is a wonderful thing. For some, however, it can become a weapon in the hand with which to bludgeon each other and to keep outsiders at bay. With such knowledge we may become puffed up and make the distinction that we are those who have received grace and the knowledge of Christ while those outside the Church have not. There is a division of "us" on the inside and "them" on the outside: "You may join us when you have conformed to our likeness and have adopted our understanding."

Judging Each Other

At the same time, with those "inside" the church, you use your different levels of understanding to judge each other. You who pretend to have a greater knowledge of ecclesiology and church government silence those who appear timid in their

1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 64.

2 Bonhoeffer, 67.

3 Bonhoeffer, 58.

4 Bonhoeffer, 63.

grasp of church issues. Thus only a few voices command the direction of the entire body. This is very odd for a church that professes to be “congregational.”

So you have become judges, it seems, judges of those outside the church and judges of each other. Knowledge can do this to a person. As judges we become like God, so we think, except that our judgments ultimately fall back on ourselves. This judging of one another only creates disunion between you and prevents true action from occurring in the body. “Judging is...reprehensible not because it springs from dark motives, as Nietzsche thought, but because judging is itself the apostasy from God. This is why it is evil, and why it produces evil fruits in the human heart.”⁵

To judge another human being is to ignore the reality of our own existence. God is the judge of all and possesses the sole privilege of being judge. We engage reality when we accept responsibility for others, not to judge them but to love them. “The moment a person accepts responsibility for other people—and only in so doing does the person live in reality—the genuine ethical situation arises.”⁶

Love Not a Method, But a Reality

We begin with loving each other in the community of faith and expressing that we accept the reality of Christ entering our world. Then as the community of faith expands and more people move in, we create a place where that love can embrace newcomers in a tangible way. “Love— as understood by the gospel in contrast to all philosophy—is not a method for dealing with people. Instead,

“Christian life means being human in the power of Christ’s becoming human, being judged and pardoned in the power of the cross, living a new life in the power of the resurrection.”

it is the reality of being drawn and drawing others into an event, namely, into God’s community with the world, which has already been accomplished in Jesus Christ.”⁷ This is the vision you need to develop as the future promises an increase of opportunities to love new people.

Christ’s concern is not with ethical ideals or with our invention of ways to become good, but that we would love each other. Jesus entered into our guilt so as to be burdened with our guilt. He did not come to make us uncomfortable with our imperfection. Jesus came to create in us a new human being as he himself was perfectly human. “Christian life means being human in the power of Christ’s becoming human, being judged and pardoned in the power of the cross, living a new life in the power of the resurrection.”⁸

Why Would We Deviate?

If that was Christ’s intention in coming into the world and becoming human, then as his body it is our calling to advance that intention. Why would we deviate from the Master’s plan to call the

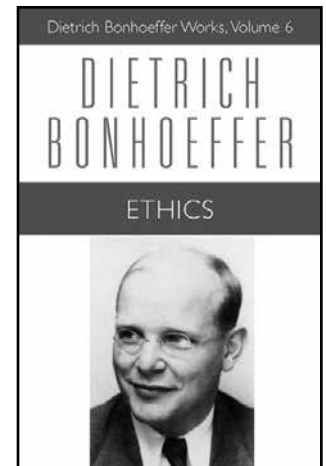
world into true humanness by forcing them into a mold of our own design? Yet that is what you do when you impress on newcomers your “Mennonite” culture and expectation.

There are good things in your faith heritage that you ought to share concerning Jesus Christ. But there are some added traditions that hinder others from joining the community and becoming real human beings together with you. Do newcomers need to speak German? Do they need to be related to someone you know? Do they need to have a surname that is acceptable in your social circles? These are such petty issues, and yet they are large enough to hinder a fuller participation of the community at large in your worship services.

The Sermon on the Mount

As Anabaptists you stress observance of the teaching found in the Sermon on the Mount, and this is good. However, you treat the Sermon on the Mount as a set of principles to live by, something which Jesus never intended. The Sermon was not given by someone who stood outside of the world and handed down a code by which you could become perfect. Jesus experienced the reality of life in his own person and spoke to it from his unique perspective as one who was reality itself.⁹

What Jesus wanted to stress in his sermon is that we are responsible for others, not only for those within the



5 Bonhoeffer, 315.

6 Bonhoeffer, 221.

7 Bonhoeffer, 241.

8 Bonhoeffer, 159.

9 Bonhoeffer, 231.

parameters of the Church, but for all people. This teaching was not just about doing tasks; it was to prompt, as it continues to prompt, responsible action concerning other people. "It calls individuals to love, which proves itself in responsible action toward the neighbor and whose source is the love of God that encompasses all of reality."¹⁰ This is why the individualism, the "me first" mentality that is evident in the Church does not fit the teaching of the Sermon or the reality of Jesus Christ. We look to Jesus as the One who lives responsibly.

Is the Church, in fact, a body of people that witnesses of Christ to the world and witnesses to the revelation of God in Christ in the world? Then it cannot be about you alone or about any particular group of people.

Ultimately you have become distracted by your programs and personal agendas within the Church so that you cannot see the purpose to which Christ calls the Church. This places "self" at the centre where Christ rightfully belongs. He is not only the centre of the Church; he is the centre of all of life, which brings us back to your original problem: separating the Christian from the worldly life.

Clearly Christ ought to be the centre of your thinking, your service, your traditions, your vocation, and your recreation. "Christ is the center and power of the Bible, of the church, of

theology, but also of humanity, reason, justice, and culture. To Christ everything must return; only under Christ's protection can it live."¹¹ The calling of the Church is to witness to this reality not only on Sunday mornings, but throughout the week and in every sphere of life.

What Is the Church For?

What is the Church for? Is it an institution designed for individual edification and enrichment? Is it a place where you can be recharged to face a week of tensions and crises? Or is the Church, in fact, a body of people that witnesses of Christ to the world and witnesses to the revelation of God in Christ in the world? Then it cannot be about you alone or about any particular group of people.

"The church's message is the call to turn around, to believe in God's love in

Christ, to prepare for the second coming of Christ, the coming Kingdom of God. It is thus the word of redemption for all people."¹² The church is for all people. It is not a club or a closed society.

For this reason you must rethink the purpose of worship in your gatherings. While some think of music as harkening back to a nostalgic time when you first knew revival and life in Christ, you must now think of how the world hears these songs. Do they speak of the reality of Christ in their lives? Or are they sung in a language foreign to their ears? You must recast your vision for the Church to

embrace the world and be in the world so that the world can know the reality of Christ.

For this reason, you must rethink the purpose of your conference in the world. When you step out of the comfortable circles of your faith communities, you take with you the witness of Christ. When you feed the hungry in your community or provide a service or engage your neighbour, it must be done in humility and not to ease your conscience. "...Visible deeds, which must be done to make people ready to receive Jesus Christ, must be deeds of humility before the coming Lord, which means deeds of repentance."¹³

I pray that your conference may participate more fully in the reality of Christ as you come to realize how good our God is in giving us Jesus. Θ

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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CMU GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY

The GSTM is a special place that helped me—by its faculty who care and think, students from different traditions, and subject matter that stretched the soul—to serve in the Church. The bursary for EMC students helped a lot, too.

David Kruse MA (Theological Studies), 2011 grad

A bursary for graduate students from the Evangelical Mennonite Conference is available. For more information contact mkrohn@cmu.ca.

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¹⁰ Bonhoeffer, 242–243

¹¹ Bonhoeffer, 341.

¹² Bonhoeffer, 356.

¹³ Bonhoeffer, 164.

Feature Sermon

Revelation 3:7–13

How Does One Measure Success?



James Driedger

James Driedger is a self-supporting minister in Blumenort EMC. He works as a carpenter when he's not studying, and holds a BA in Christian Studies from SBC. He presented this sermon at Blumenort on June 17, 2018.

HOW DO YOU determine if your relationship with Jesus is healthy? Is it something you gauge subjectively based off of your “spiritual” accomplishments? You know, if you do devotions at least four days a week, volunteer at church on a monthly basis, and bring at least one person into the kingdom of God in a year, then you are a healthy or, dare we say, successful Christian.

If you do measure your personal relationship with Christ by your external successes, what do you do when none of your prayers seem to be answered? What do you do when an illness knocks you off your feet for a year, and spending time in the Scriptures, or volunteering in the church, is an impossibility? What if you are 37 and you have never led someone to the Lord? Are you a failure as a Christian if this describes you? How does one gauge success as a Christian?

Or, how do you determine whether a church is healthy and successful? Do you base it off of building size or numerical growth—whether or not people are coming to the Lord on a regular basis? Is a church with numerous, well-functioning programs that serve people inside the church and the community a

sign of a successful church? How about influence? Do you measure the healthiness of a church or para-church ministry based off of their influence in their city?

If you do measure the healthiness of a church based off these external factors, what do you do when your church doesn't grow for 30 years? When programs have to be shut down because they are ineffective? And when the society around you turns against you, and, as a result, the little influence you had in your community no longer exists? How should churches gauge success?

Today we are going to look at the letter that John sent to the church in Philadelphia. The Christians in Philadelphia were wrestling with questions similar to those just asked. They were wondering whether or not what they were doing as a church even mattered; whether or not they should just pack it up since they were

⁷“To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. ⁸I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. ⁹I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. ¹⁰Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.

¹¹I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.

¹²The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on them my new name. ¹³Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

unsuccessful. They were doing nothing grand, nothing noteworthy, nothing that would suggest that they were a successful church. In response, Jesus sends a significant message in which he encourages them and clarifies how he gauges the success of a church. And so, if you have your Bible with you, turn to Revelation 3:7; we are going to discover how Jesus measures success in the first century church of Philadelphia.

Christ's Self-Description

As Jesus has done in each of the previous letters, he presents himself with a certain set of attributes that describe some truth about himself. And it's important to remember that these attributes are not chosen at random. Jesus presents himself in each of these letters with attributes that are particularly suitable to the situation of each church.¹

Here, in the letter to Philadelphia, Jesus describes himself with three attributes: "And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: "The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens" (Rev. 3:7 ESV).

The Holy One

Jesus' first description is that he is "*the holy one*." While this may appear to us like a nice title—you know, "Of course Jesus is the holy one because he never sinned"—the title is actually quite significant in light of the OT. And perhaps the most significant connection that we should

make is that Isaiah—who is referenced often in this letter—uses the phrase "the Holy one of Israel" exclusively of Yahweh (Isa. 4:1, 5:19, 10:20, 37:23, etc.).

In other words, by using this phrase, Jesus is not only claiming divinity, but he's claiming to be the God of Israel—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And as we are going to find out, this is quite significant for the church in Philadelphia.

Jesus' second description is that he is "*the true one*." This description refers to the genuineness of something—that Jesus is truly who he says he is.

The True One

Jesus' second description is that he is "*the true one*." This description refers to the genuineness of something—that Jesus is truly who he says he is. Jesus had claimed to be the Messiah, and he wants the church in Philadelphia to know that his claim is true, for as we will see there was debate in Philadelphia over this claim. The word "true" in Revelation is also often coupled with the word "faithfulness" (Rev. 3:14; 19:11; 21:5; 22:6, etc.), indicating that Jesus' claims are not only genuine, but that he can be counted on to fulfill that which he says he will do. Jesus can be trusted.²

Has the Key of David

The final description that Jesus uses is a little more interesting. He refers to

himself as the one who "*has the key of David*." Once again, Jesus is quoting the book of Isaiah with this description. So what does it mean that Jesus has the key of David? Isaiah 22:22, which Jesus is quoting, reads: "And I will place on [Eliakim's] shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open."

So what's going on here? In this chapter, Isaiah critiques the leadership of the nation of Israel. Previously, a man named Shebna (Isa. 22:15) was the chief steward of king Hezekiah's household. He had authority to *allow* or *prohibit* access to the King and his palace. However, Isaiah calls him out as a foolish governor and states that God will replace him with Eliakim, who will genuinely care for the people and who will therefore possess the "key of the house of David" (22:19-22).³

Here's the point: Just as Eliakim, a man of integrity, was vested with the authority to admit or exclude people from king Hezekiah's presence, so now Jesus has the greater authority to admit or exclude people from the heavenly Jerusalem. This point is also building off of a description that Jesus used earlier. In Revelation 1:18b Jesus claims to have "the keys of Death and Hades," referring to his rule over death and judgment. Here we read that he has "the key of David," referring to his rule over life and those who will enter the kingdom of heaven. *Jesus holds the power over salvation and judgment*, and he wants the church in Philadelphia to know that.

And so, to summarize, Jesus has just reminded the church in Philadelphia that (1) he is the God of true Israel, (2) that his claims are genuine and that he can be counted on, and (3) that he alone has authority over life and death. These attributes are given to this church because of the situation taking place in Philadelphia, and to that we now turn.

1 So, for example, Jesus describes himself to the church in Ephesus as the one who holds the church in his hands—as a symbol of authority over the church (Rev. 2:1). This attribute heightens, therefore, the significance of his warning later on, that if the church in Ephesus fails to repent from their compromise, he will remove their church (2:5).

2 Grant Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 187.

3 This key should probably be understood metaphorically; so also, John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 422; and Robert, H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 100.



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Mosaic in St Mark's Basilica depicts the seven angels of the churches.

Encouragement

Jesus begins the body of this letter with the exact four words that he used in the previous letter to Sardis: “I know your works.” But instead of the scathing message that he gave there—“I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead” (3:1)—Jesus takes an unusual route, in comparison to most of these letters, by quickly injecting some words of encouragement.⁴ The first part of verse 8 reads: “I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut...” (Rev. 3:8a).

What's going on? Jesus knew that when the church in Philadelphia heard those initial words—that “I know your works”—that they would hang their heads in shame because they had done nothing incredible works-wise like the church in Thyatira (2:19); and they had had next to no external success like the church in Sardis appeared to have (3:1). And in fact, this was true. As the rest of verse 8 reads: [I know]_“that you have but little power

While from the outside this church was “unsuccessful,” having little power, in Jesus’ eyes this church was successful, and so he lays no accusation against them.

but yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name” (Rev. 3:8b).

You see, the church in Philadelphia had, in the eyes of all,

“little power.” They had little going for them. They were not a big church. They were not a big enough group to have influence in their city. They were small, poor, and uninfluential.⁵ They were like a small rural church in northern Ontario that hadn't grown for 30 years, was the laughing stock of the community, and was wondering if God even knew they existed.

But Jesus, the one who walks in the midst of all churches (including ours!), knew this church. This church did not need to be accused of anything. No they weren't perfect; but this church had something—something that they needed to know Jesus saw.

Despite the fact this church had “little power,” they had refused to compromise the teaching of Jesus. They had kept his word faithfully. But more than that—more than giving lip service and intellectual assent to the teachings of Scripture and backing off when the going got tough—this church had obeyed the words of Jesus in the midst of persecution. While from the outside

this church was “unsuccessful,” having little power, in Jesus’ eyes this church was successful, and so he lays no accusation against them.

And so, when Jesus pauses, after telling them that he knows about their work, and quickly tells them that “I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut,” He is building off two of his earlier claims: (1) he is the true one; if he says the door to the kingdom of God remains open, he can be counted on; and (2) he holds the key of David and has authority to grant them access into his kingdom. This church, Jesus guarantees, if it continues doing what it's doing, will enter the kingdom of God. What encouraging words for a church that probably had a low view of itself.

There were events taking place in Philadelphia that had caused the church to wonder whether or not they were part of the kingdom of God. But as Jesus established, he has absolute control over the kingdom of God, and he leads this letter by making clear to this “unsuccessful church,” that the door to the kingdom of God is open for them. Jesus sees their faithfulness, and they will enter the kingdom of God. No one, not even the Jews from the synagogue down the road, will prevent them from entering. And that is exactly the type of pressure the church in Philadelphia was facing.

Conflict and Vindication

You see, we know historically that there was conflict between the Jews and Christians in the city of Philadelphia.⁶ And we also know that by and large the debate between Jews and Christians in the first two centuries was over the identity

⁴ So also, Robert, L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1992), 276.

⁵ George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 60; and Osborne, *Revelation*, 189.

⁶ See *Ignatius*, Phil., 6; 8.2. Ignatius wrote these letters close to his death, which was probably during the reign of Trajan (AD 98–117); *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. and trans. by Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 170.

of Jesus and the identity of the people of God. Was Jesus the long-expected Messiah or not? And who were God's people?

Now that said, the Jews and Christians co-existed with one another for some time. Christians continued to meet in the temple, and would gather together in Jewish synagogues throughout the world. But this was not to last. As internal divisions remained unresolved and external pressures from Rome increased, the Jewish people became more hostile to the Christians. And in many instances, Christians were expelled from local synagogues. For in the eyes of the Jews, the Christians had believed a lie, and were people who did not worship the same God as them.

A Different View

This is what had happened in Philadelphia. The Christians had been excommunicated from the Jewish synagogue, and had been told that they were not the people of God. But as we will find out, Jesus had a very different view of the situation. Verse 9 reads: "Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you" (Rev. 3:9).

The Synagogue of Satan?

Wow! The Jews meeting down the street attend the "synagogue of Satan"? What language! What denomination of Judaism is that? Let's unpack this verse a bit.

First of all, why would Jesus refer to a Jewish synagogue in the way? We must remember that during his earthly ministry, Jesus had been quite stern with unbelieving Jews. In fact, he told some that: "You are of your father the devil" (John 8:44); and so there is precedence for this type of rebuke. Jesus had strong



Amphitheatre at ancient Philadelphia

words for the Jewish people who did not recognize him and who in turn persecuted him and his followers.

And in this specific situation, it appears as if Jesus refers to them as the "synagogue of Satan" because they claimed to be Jews, when, in fact, they are not. Now you may be thinking: "How does claiming to be a Jew, when you are an ethnic Jew, all of a sudden make you part of some satanic synagogue?" This is an important question.

You see, if you would ask any first century Jew, "Who are the people of God?" they would answer "*The Jews.*" And if you would ask them, "*Who are the Jews?*" they would respond by saying, "*The people of God.*" In other words, the word *Jew* and the phrase *the people of God* were used synonymously and interchangeably; and, significantly, this understanding was not only recognized by the Jews, but also by the Christians. Christians began to see themselves as the true people of God, and, thus, as true Israel.

Three Questions

The Jews in Philadelphia had kicked out

the Christians from their synagogue, claiming that because of their ethnicity and religious heritage they were the people of God and the Christians were misled.⁷ The Christians, on the other hand, had reason to think differently. Had not Paul, the apostle sent by God, taught that "no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly... But a Jew is one inwardly" (Rom. 2:28–29)? Was not the church now the true "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16)?

Had not Peter referred to all Christians living in the Dispersion as "the chosen race" and "God's people" (1 Pet. 2:9–10)? Had not the ethnic Jewish people forfeited there identify as the people of God when they rejected Jesus as the Messiah? Jesus' answer to all these questions is, "Yes!" Yes, a true Jew is someone, whether Jew or Greek, who is circumcised of the heart. Yes, all Christians are part of the true Israel of God. Yes, all Christians are now God's people. Yes, the ethnic Jewish people who reject Jesus as Messiah have forfeited their identity as the people of God. Jesus feels strongly about this.

The ethnic Jews in Philadelphia "lie." They say they are the people of God. They say they have the gateway to the kingdom of God. But these are lies, says

⁷ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 101.

Jesus. These are lies, says the one who introduced himself as *the Holy one of Israel*. These are lies, says *the true one*—the true Messiah that the Jewish people disbelieved. These are lies, says the *one who holds the key of David* and controls entrance into the kingdom of God.

Will Bow

What about the second clause of verse 9? Jesus goes on to make the point that in the end he will make these Jews, who claim to be the people of God “come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you.” What is meant by this statement?

Once again, Jesus is referencing the book of Isaiah. One of the verses that Jesus probably has in mind is Isaiah 45:14 (cf. Isa. 60:14). It reads: “The wealth of Egypt and the merchandise of Cush, and the Sabeans, men of stature, shall come over to you and be yours; they shall follow you; they shall come over in chains and bow down to you. They will plead with you, saying: ‘Surely God is in you, and there is no other, no god besides him.’”

This text predicts that the Gentiles will come and bow down before Israel and their God in the last days. But by referencing these verses here, Jesus makes a stocking statement of reversal. As one biblical scholar writes, Jesus’ point is that this “prophecy has been fulfilled ironically in the Gentile church, which has become true Israel by virtue of its faith in Christ. In contrast, ethnic Israel

fulfills the role of the Gentiles because of their unbelief.”⁸

In other words, while the prophecy in Isaiah had the Gentile nations coming before Israel acknowledging that they were the true people of God, Jesus turns this promise on its head and argues that in the end, the Jews will acknowledge that the church—those circumcised *not* in the flesh, but in the heart—is the true Israel of God.⁹

While the church in Philadelphia had been expelled and persecuted by the Jews,

How had the church in Philadelphia been faithful? They had been faithful by emulating the endurance and faithfulness that Jesus himself had embodied in the face of opposition.

Jesus promises these Christians that they are on the right track; that they are the faithful ones; and that someday the Jews will recognize his love for them (cf. Isa. 43:3–4).

Exhortation and Promise

Jesus then turns from vindicating the church in Philadelphia, to exhorting the church and promising them eternal life for their faithfulness. Jesus comforts this church with several promises, and exhorts them to remain faithful. The first promise is in v. 10: “Because you have kept [the word of my endurance¹⁰], I will keep you

from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth” (Rev. 3:10).

In response to this church’s faithfulness, Jesus promises to protect them. How had the church in Philadelphia been faithful? They had been faithful by emulating the endurance and faithfulness that Jesus himself had embodied in the face of opposition. These Christians had taken Christ’s example of endurance as their model, and Christ did not fail to recognize this.¹¹

And so, in response, Christ promises that, just as he had made it possible for them to enter the kingdom of God, he is able to sustain them as his people. And he will do so by protecting them from the tribulation that is to come.

Escape or Protection?

This verse has been a point of contention: Is Jesus promising escape from the world, or is he promising protection from the wrath of God that will be poured out on unbelievers? Is Jesus promising to remove these Christians, or protect them?

The key phrase in this verse that helps our understanding is “those who dwell on the earth.” This phrase is a technical term used throughout the book of Revelation to describe unbelievers opposed to God (6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 12, 14; 17:2, 8).¹² In other words, the “hour of trial” that Jesus is keeping the church in Philadelphia from, is the judgment that those who reject Jesus will face.

Because the Philadelphians have been faithful to Jesus and have not abandoned their faith, they will be like the rest of the church that is exempt from God’s judgment. They will, on a larger scale, be like the people of Israel in Egypt, spared from the plagues that came on the Egyptians, but who, nevertheless, remained in Egypt.

In some ways, this promise is similar to the prayer that Jesus prayed in John

8 G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 287.

9 Osborne, *Revelation*, 191, makes a necessary note: “It is important to realize that this is not anti-Semitism. The Jewish people, as in the Gospel of John, are now part of the world due to their unbelief and rejection of the true Messiah.”

10 This translation differs from many English versions, but it best reflects the Greek grammar to take the genitive pronoun “my” with the genitive “patient endurance” instead of with the accusative noun “word.” See Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 283.

11 So, Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, 62; and Beale, 289.

12 So also, Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 290.

17:15: “I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.” Jesus is not promising escapism! He is not promising to remove them from difficulty. Throughout the NT, persecution is seen as the believer’s lot. Instead, Jesus promises that this church will be protected from God’s judgment against unbelievers.¹³

Hold Fast

Having promised that they are exempt from judgment, Jesus then exhorts the

Elements of Promise

Jesus then goes on to list the four final elements of promise: “*The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name*” (Rev. 3:12).

To the “one who conquers”—or more specifically, to those who remain faithful—Jesus promises these things.

A Devastating Problem

Despite Philadelphia’s great location for commerce (it lay on a major Roman road), the city had a devastating problem. The city was positioned near the epicenter of the same earthquake that devastated Sardis in A.D. 17. But more than just the initial quake, Philadelphia was prey to aftershocks for a long time. These aftershocks forced much of the population to live outside the city, since walls were constantly cracking and the buildings were insecure.

While those in Philadelphia knew all too well how something like an earthquake can dislodge you from your home and cause you to live with instability, Jesus’ promise to make them a pillar in the temple of God, was a promise of security and permanence; their eternal fellowship in the presence of God was certain (Rev. 21:22-22:5).¹⁶

The final three “name promises” all promise belonging: (1) Having the name of God means that you belong to him as his child. (2) To have the name of the new Jerusalem means that you now belong to that eschatological city of the people of God, an unshakable city, one that will never be destroyed. (3) To receive Christ’s new name refers to everlasting identification with Christ.¹⁷

In summary, these promises guarantee that to those who overcome—to those who remain faithful to Christ—Jesus promises permanent fellowship.

Call to Listen

As in each letter, the logical flow of the text climaxes with the promise of eternal life, and then ends with the phrase: “He who has an ear, *let him hear* what the Spirit says *to the churches*” (Rev. 3:13).

The promise of inheriting eternal life is contingent on the church’s ability to “hear.” If the church truly hears—which implies not only the physical act of hearing, but also *acting* upon that which you heard—then they will be overcomers.

The church in Philadelphia needs to

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church: “I am coming soon.¹⁴ Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown” (Rev. 3:11).

“Hold fast what you have.” What is it that the church in Philadelphia has? As we have just read: the church has an open door that no one can shut, which means that they have citizenship in the kingdom of God, despite what their Jewish neighbours say (vv. 8–9). And they have the promise of future vindication and protection by God himself (vv. 9–10). And so while this church has all that Jesus requires—faithfulness—they must still guard what they have, so as not to lose it.

These four promises are more or less all saying the same thing: They all promise the church in Philadelphia “end-time fellowship and identification with Christ.”¹⁵

Jesus has Isaiah 56:4–5 in mind with the first promise: “To [those] who...hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.” This is a promise of permanence. Why would Jesus promise this?

13 Osborne, *Revelation*, 194, rightly notes: “This does not mean that the pretribulation position is necessarily wrong, only that Rev. 3:10 cannot be used in favour of this position.”

14 I think Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 104, points the reader in the right direction when he states: “The promise is not that Christ’s coming will take place quickly whenever it happens, but that it will take place without delay.”

15 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 293.

16 So, Osborne, *Revelation*, 197: “There is no contradiction between 21:22 and 3:12, for the ‘pillar in the temple’ here is metaphorical for the permanent place the believer has in the final kingdom.”

17 Osborne, *Revelation*, 198–99.

hear that Jesus is the God of true Israel. They need to know that he is who he says he is. He is the true messiah. They need to hear that he alone has the authority to admit or exclude people from the kingdom of God. They need to hear and know that Jesus sees their faithfulness despite the struggle with their Jewish neighbours, and that he will vindicate them. They need to know that Jesus will keep them from judgment. They need to know that they must be faithful to the end so as to not lose their crown of life. And they need to know that Jesus can guarantee them permanent fellowship and identification with Christ.

Conclusion

As in each of the letters, the message to the church in Philadelphia is at the same time a message to all seven churches, and subsequently, to the universal church. The Holy Spirit still speaks to his church through these letters. So what do we need to hear?

I think the point that we need to hear today is that: *Being faithful to Jesus is more important than the external successes by which we could measure our relationships with Christ, or by which we could gauge whether or not we are a healthy church.*

As one scholar puts it: “God is more interested in faithfulness than success”¹⁸ or effectiveness. Or perhaps better yet: *being faithful is the measure by which we should judge our success as a church and our personal relationships with Jesus.*

Now you might be asking, “What exactly is meant by faithfulness?” Well, as we saw in this letter, Jesus defines faithfulness as adhering to his teaching (v. 8) and his own example of faithfulness (v. 10). This is what Jesus defines as success in this letter. Being faithful to Jesus in the midst of persecution (and, yes, verbal persecution counts; see 1 Peter), being faithful in the midst of a secular

and hostile culture is how Jesus gauges success.

This, my friends, is not hard to understand or grasp intellectually. But it

We want to be a fruitful church! But, these things should take a back seat to faithfulness.

can be most difficult to live out. Yet we are called to live out our faith in Jesus. Faith that is private is a cheap faith. Our lives ought to publicly (and by that word, I simply mean always, wherever we are) display our faithfulness and allegiance to, and identification with, Jesus. *Jesus is our Lord and King, and that should show.*

All Jesus asks for from this church in Philadelphia is that they would remain faithful—and those that do, are overcomers. Church, I do not think Jesus’ main desire for our church is that we double in size as a congregation in the next 15 years. I also don’t think Jesus is most interested in all the cool programs we could yet offer in our church. I don’t even think Jesus is all together that concerned with the vision of our church *if we as a church are not faithful to him.*

I do not think that the things I just listed are bad things. In fact, I think they are good and that we should desire and pray for them. We want to be a fruitful church! But, these things should take a back seat to faithfulness.

The church in Philadelphia needed to know that Jesus saw them as a faithful church, despite the fact that nothing seemed to work for them and that in the eyes of many they were a dead church. They needed this message for encouragement.

We today might need to hear this message before we begin to think that our external successes define the healthiness of our church. We should take a serious look at our own lives and our church and ask that hard question, “Am I, or are we, being faithful to Jesus?” Is being faithful to Jesus our first priority as a church? May God be gracious enough to show us the areas where we each need to repent, and gracious enough to empower us to walk faithfully before him. Amen. Θ

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¹⁸ Osborne, *Revelation*, 199.

Feature Sermon

Follow Me

Russell Peters



Russell Peters is the senior pastor of La Crete Christian Fellowship Church in northern Alberta, a position he began in June 2017; he had served there as an associate pastor since September 2013. He holds a BRE with a major in pastoral studies and a minor in counselling (PRBI). He and his wife Lynda have a son Ashtyn and two daughters, Brooklyn and Kyanna. This sermon was presented at LCCFC on Dec. 28, 2014.

I AM GOING TO TAKE THE liberty this morning and tell you a story from the perspective of a character in the Bible. Some of the things are made up by reading between the lines and from me putting myself into the shoes of the character himself. I would suggest that you allow your mind to get into the character as well.

This is my story, but not entirely. I was there and these events impacted my life significantly.

Good morning. My name is Peter. Actually, it hasn't always been Peter. Jesus gave me that name. My parents named me Simon. I was born into a Jewish family from the town of Bethsaida in the region of Galilee. I grew up just like every other Jewish boy. I was taught all the ways of our faith. When I was old enough, I began to work in the family business just like many other boys in my village.

A Fisherman

My father was a fisherman, and I learned the tricks of the trade from him. I learned how to mend the nets, how to lay them out after a fishing trip so that they would last longer. Along the way I learned all about the law. Times were relatively good. We weren't rich, but we had enough and we were content. I was fortunate enough to find a wife, and we shared a good life together.



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One day while I was out working by the boat with my brother Andrew, this man came along and called out to us that we should follow him. Jesus was his name.

One day while I was out working by the boat with my brother Andrew, this man came along and called out to us that we should follow him. Jesus was his name. We didn't hesitate. This was a chance of a lifetime; so we left our boat and nets and followed him. My life had been fairly

uneventful and actually kind of boring up until now.

My life was normal. I needed some excitement; and we always did the same thing day in and day out. For years we had always put the nets away properly, but not this time. "What will Dad say?" I

thought. “This is just not good business practice. Boys, you are destroying our profits. Whatever profit there might have been will be used up to buy new nets because these are going to ruin if you don’t take proper care of them.” He was probably going to say something like that, but today I didn’t care about that.

Introduced to Jesus

Actually, seeing this man wasn’t such a surprise. You know, I didn’t just spend all my time fishing. I was actually quite interested in spiritual things as well. I liked to hear about the old days. I liked to listen to a good preacher, and we had found a good one; so I went to listen to this guy whenever I got a chance. You know, Andrew, my brother that I was fishing with, he was actually the guy who introduced me to Jesus.

One day, John, otherwise known as John the baptizer, was preaching and baptizing when Jesus walked by. This was the guy we went to listen to whenever we got a chance, when we were able to sneak away from fishing for a bit. This day I wasn’t able to go, but Andrew went and John had said something about this man Jesus: “Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” What an interesting statement.

Andrew had to see more. So Andrew and another guy followed Jesus for a bit, and when suddenly Jesus turned around and said, “What are you looking for?” a little surprised they said, “Teacher, where are you staying?” Jesus responded with “Come and see,” and so they did and they stayed with him that day.

The next day, Andrew found me at the boat where we were supposed to be fishing. I was already working. Andrew’s gallivanting all over the place following strangers and hanging out with them and I am working trying to pay the bills.

He found me and said, “Simon, we found him.” “Who?” I asked. He said, “The Messiah. We found him. He has come, the one that we have been waiting

for, the one our forefathers spoke about, the one that was promised. He’s here. Come and see. I am not joking. This is the real deal.”

At first I was a little upset with him, but when Jesus came along and said, “Follow me,” we were gone. It’s worth it if Dad gets upset if he is really the Messiah. He couldn’t be; maybe he was, in our lifetime. We just had to check it out, and the best way to do that was to hang around with him for a while.

A Wedding of All Things

The next day we found ourselves in Cana, at a wedding of all things. You know, guys don’t go to weddings. That is girls’ stuff; guys go fishing. Anyway, this was a small sacrifice to make if this was really the Messiah. This is the one who was going to save us. He was going to be popular, and we were going to be right there to witness it all.

While we’re hanging out at this wedding, all of a sudden this guy’s mother comes up with some servants and tells him that they are out of wine. “Oops,” I thought. “I guess this party is over!” But then he does something weird. He tells the servants to go and fill the jars used for ceremonial washing and bring the water to the master of the banquet.

I just had to watch this. The master is going to be furious when he tastes water and he is expecting wine. But that didn’t happen. Actually the master was happy, overjoyed. He said this was the best wine he’d ever tasted. It couldn’t be. I saw the servants fill the jugs with water. I just had to have a taste; so I did and I couldn’t believe it. It was wine. Who is this guy? The Messiah? I didn’t know what to make of it all.

‘Who Touched Me?’

Things just got stranger after that. We watched Jesus heal people, cast out demons. One time we were walking along and this woman came up behind us and she touched

Jesus’ robe. Who would have noticed? But he did, and he just stopped, turned around, and said, “Who touched me?” I spoke up and said, “Get real, Jesus. You have to be kidding. There are tons of people all around us. Lots of people touched you, and you ask who touched you?”

Who is this guy? The Messiah? I didn’t know what to make of it all.

He replied with, “I felt power go out from me. Who touched me?” He was for real and the people knew it; and this woman comes out of the crowd and confesses to having touched him. She was unclean. Who else had touched her? Whoever had was ceremonially unclean, and Jesus was one of them, but it didn’t seem to faze him. He just replied, “Your faith has healed you. Go in peace.”

We were on our way to Jairus’s house because his daughter was sick when all this happened and someone from his house showed up and said, “Don’t bother. Forget about it. She died. It’s no use.” Jesus wasn’t deterred by that. He told Jairus, “Don’t be afraid. Just believe and she will be well.” We should have caught that; we had just seen this woman get healed because of her faith and now he is telling Jairus just have faith.

When we arrived, we went into the house and he sent everyone out except me, James, John, Jairus and his wife. Jesus took the girl by the hand and said, “Child, arise,” and she got up. I tell you she was dead, as dead as dead can be, but that didn’t stop him.

My mind was absolutely blown away. I could tell you many more stories like the times when he fed a whole bunch of people on a few loaves of bread and some fish.

Walking On Water

But my favourite memory was when I got out of that boat and walked on the water.

That was so unbelievable, but I have never been so scared as when I took my eyes off Jesus and realized what I was doing and I began to sink. But there was Jesus again. He grabbed my hand and helped me onto the water again. Me and the boys would talk about that sometimes, and they'd ask me what it felt like. It is something that you just can't quite explain.

Amazing Preaching

Those were some of the miracles that he did and they were great; but I have to tell you about his teaching or preaching, whatever you want to call it. Jesus was absolutely amazing and radical. He taught in a way that I had never heard before; he taught with authority. I thought John the Baptist was a good preacher, but he couldn't hold a candle to this Jesus.

He taught in these stories called parables, and sometimes they were really hard to understand. Good thing we were close to him, and had that special bond with him, because he would pull us aside and explain them to us. He taught us how to live. I mean really live. He taught us how to relate to people; and I tell you some people are hard to get along with, but you could always count on Jesus to do the right thing.

I thought I knew my Scriptures. I mean, I hadn't studied them the way that the Pharisees and Sadducees had, but I thought I had the basics down pat, enough to get me into right standing with God. But, boy, was I wrong. After being with him I read the Scriptures in a way that I had never read them before. He just brought them into a brand new light.

'Your Sins Are Forgiven'

Every time we looked around this guy was doing something that we couldn't explain and people were seeing it. People didn't

really necessarily care who he was, but they knew that this guy had some sort of power to heal people, and so they brought their sick friends to him all the time.

This one time we were gathered in this house and it was just packed; you couldn't squeeze another person in if you tried.

All of a sudden there are these people up on the roof, and they're making a hole in it and they lowering this guy in off the roof. By this time we expected certain things to happen in situations like this.

We expected Jesus to do what he normally did—heal the guy and send him off. But he did something different. He said, "Your sins are forgiven."

This took the cake. Everything he had done up to now we could explain away

I thought I knew my Scriptures. But, boy, was I wrong. After being with him I read the Scriptures in a way that I had never read them before.

as being someone sent from God, like a prophet. When he said, "Your sins are forgiven," the religious leaders could no longer ignore him. In that phrase, this guy had claimed to be God even though he hadn't said the words; but no one can forgive sins except God himself. Who does this guy think he is? We were all asking the question, some were just more vocal than others.

I kinda felt sorry for the Pharisees and Sadducees because every time they thought they could stump him, they were stumped right back. It was interesting to watch, and I felt this odd sense of security when I was with him. Boy, did I love him.

The Passover

Then one night, we were celebrating the Passover; and while we are eating, he takes the bread, and breaks it, and tells us to eat. "This is my body." Then he takes the wine and passes it around, telling us to drink in remembrance of him. We

didn't have a clue. This was our Lord, our Saviour, our Messiah. We were sure of that. So what did he mean?

He had told us that he would have to suffer and die, but it really didn't match up. Actually, I told him once that nothing like that was going to happen, and he called me "Satan" and told me to get behind him. That set me back, caused me to think. He told us we wouldn't understand right away, but we would in good time.

Then he comes over and wants to wash my feet. I said, "Not a chance. You are so much greater than I could ever hope to be. There is no chance that you are going to wash my feet." He said, "If I don't wash your feet, you can have no part of me." Well, I didn't want that, so I told him to wash my whole body.

I didn't get it, and He told me so, but in the end I let him wash my feet. What a humbling experience to have the greatest man you have ever known wash your feet, but what could I do? Everything else about this man had challenged the way I thought about life, God, and others, so why not this?

I Felt Horrible

After supper we walked out and he went to pray. He prayed like no one I had ever met before. I was tired and it had been a long day, so I fell asleep while he was praying. I couldn't even stay awake for a few hours while my Lord was praying. I felt horrible.

Then all of a sudden Judas shows up and kisses Jesus on the cheek. He had left earlier. We didn't quite know why, but didn't pay much attention to it. We soon found out he had betrayed Jesus. Then there were guards around and the teachers of the law. I knew they didn't like him and his teaching, but I didn't realize it was this bad even when Jesus had told us what would happen. I guess I was living in denial.

So when they went to grab Jesus, I drew my sword and cut off the ear of the

High Priest's slave. I just couldn't handle it. They weren't going to take my Jesus without a fight. Jesus rebuked me and healed the guy's ear. I didn't get this either.

They ended up taking Him away, and the worst time of my life began. I thought I loved Him. I thought I had what it took. I thought I was ready to die for this guy. But guess what I did. I told the people I didn't even know him, and he went to the cross alone.

The Greatest Event

I am so happy that my story doesn't end there the way the Judas's did. If he had just stuck around, he could have witnessed the greatest event in history, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. I got to see it, and it changed my life forever.

A Heart-to-Heart

Later we went fishing, me and the boys on the lake fishing, soaking in our misery. I was still feeling bad about letting Jesus down and denying him not only once, but three times. All of a sudden we noticed Jesus on the shore and we went to him. After we had finished eating the fish that Jesus had cooked up for us, He pulled me aside for one of those heart-to-heart talks. "He asked, "Simon, son of John, do you really love me more than these others do?"

When mama calls you by your full name, you know you better listen. When Jesus addresses you by your full name, the same holds true.

"Yes, Lord," I answered. "You know that I love you."

Then He said, "Feed my lambs."

Then He asked me again, "Simon, son of John, do you really love me?"

I answered again, "Yes, Lord. You know that I love you."

And He said, "Take care of my sheep."

Then Jesus asked a third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

I felt bad because Jesus asked me the third time, "Do you love me?" but I

answered, "Lord, you know all things. You know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

How could He have such confidence in me after just having denied him? It felt good, but I was overwhelmed by the love He was showing to me. But you see, He is always ready to forgive. I should have known that. I spent three years with him pretty much every day, and yet these things come as a surprise.

The Future

Then he told me something else: "When you were younger, you dressed yourself. You went wherever you wanted to go. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands. Someone else will dress you. Someone else will lead you where you do not want to go."

He said this to let me know how I would die. My death would bring glory to God.

Then Jesus said to me, "Follow me!"

That was the scariest thing he could have told me. What do you mean, "Follow me"? It was the same thing he said three years ago when I first saw him at the boat. Only now following Him wasn't just to find out who he was. Now I knew who he was, and how in the world do I follow a life like that?

So I turned around and saw that the disciple Jesus loved was following us. He was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper. He had said, "Lord, who is going to hand you over to your enemies?" When I saw him, I asked, "Lord, what will happen to him?" Jesus answered, "Suppose I want him to remain alive until I return. What does that matter to you? You must follow me."

Follow Me

"Follow me." He had said it again. I know it doesn't mean what I thought it meant three years ago, but I don't know how to put it together. I knew I couldn't concern myself with what God wants for everyone or anyone else and look to them being

jealous of them. If God wanted John to live forever, then I needed to be okay with that.

Christ's obedience to God the Father led him to the cross, but God didn't abandon Him. I need to trust the same

"Follow me." That's what he left me with. "Follow me."

for me. So I fixed my eyes on Jesus, his life, and his teachings because he is the author and perfecter of my faith. He, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has now sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. I considered Him who endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that I would not grow weary and lose heart.

"Follow me." That's what he left me with. "Follow me."

That would mean to live like Him, to love like Him

But then He died for me.

Can I be like Jesus?

I want to be like Jesus.

I want to "follow" you.

For most of us disciples, following him meant our death. Actually it meant we would be killed for the gospel, but for others it was different. John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, lived a long time and ended up dying of old age on the island of Patmos.

What does "Follow me" mean for you? I don't know. I can't tell you.

Matthew 16:24: "Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me."

Eugene Peterson says it this way in his paraphrase: "Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how." *Θ*

The Final Word

The Good News About Our Differences

OUR DIFFERENCES ARE COMPLEX AND more subtle than we often recognize. But the good news is that the things that distinguish us from one another do not have to set us against each other. The work of Christ and the ministry of the Holy Spirit enable us to be many and one at the same time. This is what it means to be the church. We are not altogether different. We are all together different. The various parts of the body of Christ have been knit together into one.

Brian J. Tucker and John Koessler, *All Together Different: Upholding the Church's Unity While Honoring Our Individual Identities* (Chicago: Moody, 2018), 29. The emphasis in the passage is by the authors.

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