

## *Paradigms in Conflict:*

### *Gnosticism versus the Gospel of Incarnation*

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“Religion brings us into creative connection with that which we can neither control nor master.” says Mark C. Taylor, Department of Religion at Columbia University. Gnosticism, both historically and presently, offers a starkly alternative religion to Christianity and a constant temptation that appeals to the individual ego. It offers a religion “under our control, and on our terms.” However, we find some elements of the Gnostic outlook within the Christian community itself, seeking to shape its future. I am grateful to Warren Brown and Brad Strawn of Fuller as well as Australian Mark Sayers of the Red Church for their astute cultural consciousness of this problem. Along with others, they help make sense of a growing phenomenon which threatens what we know as authentic discipleship. We find a combination of Gnostic beliefs within Egyptian, Persian, Jewish, Christian, Greek, Florentine Renaissance cultures. For the following inquiry, our focus will be on Greek (especially Plotinus) and Christian types.

Put succinctly, the Gnostic believes that the time-space-energy-matter world (one studied by the hard sciences) is inferior or evil. There is an inferior, evil or capricious creator (demiurge) behind it. Thus, people long to escape the world of matter to a more *sublime* place where they can discover the divine spark within them. They can proceed to this sublime place on their own by means of special hidden knowledge (*gnosis*), mentorship and special technology (magic). This world and our bodies are taken as a trap for the soul (immaterial self) which desires to be set free. In Greek thought (Plotinus), the soul desires to be one with the all, a sentiment like a goal in Hinduism: where *atman*, the individual soul, seeks to become one with *Brahman*, the world soul, to escape from the cycle of death and rebirth.

Doctrinal creeds and logical consistency do not matter so much to the Gnostic, who likes to mix philosophies and religions together. For example, Pico in Renaissance Florence collected the whole eclectic *Corpus Hermeticus*, which included a large variety of Egyptian, Persian, and Greek Gnostic writings. Truth is a lower value. Doctrinal boundaries can get in the way of personal fulfilment or of a person seeking to achieve divinity. This aspiration is something that fit in well with Renaissance thinking of the elevation and glorification of man, a significant break from medieval thought. Notwithstanding, it is important to note that the church condemned Gnosticism as a heresy and sought to repress its practices at various stages in history.

The goal of the Gnostic is to maximize their individual choice, authority and control over their destiny and to reach the highest plane of existence possible. It is a stance which is rebellious

against moral code and tradition. Furthermore, there tends to be a body-soul or body-mind dualism, as we see in French Enlightenment philosopher René Descartes – from whom we get the idea of a human as a *ghost in a machine*. The soul or spirit of man is seen to be the higher entity, sometimes in contrast to the *evil* body. This Enlightenment thinking has most definitely impacted the contemporary evangelical church. The great fear of Gnosticism is that the soul will be reduced to the body or determined biologically (making us nothing but our neural networks or our DNA). This is a legitimate concern in an age of scientism. Gnosticism has slipped into Christian conversation, music and preaching all too often. Frequently, we speak of escaping this world spiritually for heaven, thereby promoting irresponsible cultural and ecological attitudes about where we live. One stream within evangelicalism tends to give up on the ‘evil’ world, thus handicapping our understanding of redemption, and weakening the teaching on the incarnation. One author put it in terms of ‘biblicistic non-empiricism’, meaning that we do not have to study the world, because we have the Bible and therefore the answer to every question. This creates fundamental problems and much surreal confusion.

### Comparing Worldviews

The chart below has been modified from *Disappearing Church: from cultural relevance to gospel resilience*, written by clever and insightful Australian cultural commentator and pastor Mark Sayers (2016). The chart compares ancient and modern versions of Gnosticism with the Incarnational Gospel of the Kingdom of God. It helps us understand some of the concerns expressed passionately in the book of I John, also John chapter 1 and Colossians (all of which are addressing this early church concern about Gnosticism). It can likewise help us see at a glance some of the tensions, distractions and ambivalence in church and culture today, and even the confusion in our own hearts. Mark observes that we have entered the time of the “third culture” in the West, the post-Christian age, with its major challenges to mission, discipleship and communication.

Ancient Gnosticism	Contemporary Gnosticism	Gospel of the Kingdom/Incarnation/Resurrection/New Heavens & New Earth
Physical world is inferior.	Your world is inferior and your body is inferior, blocking your fulfilment. It must be fixed or changed.	Creation is good, although many broken relationships have resulted from the rebellious fall of humans. Christ has won, but all creation still groans towards its full redemption (Romans 8). It is a world in process of redemption, containing both good and evil.

<p>Matter is the problem. We must fear our lower <i>bestial</i> nature.</p>	<p>The mundane is the problem. Boredom is bad for you and must be resisted.</p>	<p>Sin and rebellion are the problem, creating a bad relationship with the loving Creator, with oneself and with creation.</p>
<p>Solution: escape the body to perfect the spirit, reach the heights of self.</p>	<p>Turn your body into a perfection (get a make-over). Take it to the edge of thrills and adventure.</p>	<p>Jesus' gift of grace has freed us from sin, guilt and shame. His life is incarnate Son of Man, a fully free life of servanthood. There should be no fear of one's body – it is God's temple. Humans are soulish/spiritual bodies, embodied beings, embedded in social networks and relationships. There is healing for the whole person and for culture in Christ.</p>
<p>Look inward to find the truth and the god within (that fragment of a divine spark remnant in you at creation). Work upward from there.</p>	<p>Look inside to find the real you and your full potential. You can be all that you desire to become with the right advice and modifications.</p>	<p>God opens our eyes to fullness of being, wisdom, virtue and reality/the true nature of things. Salvation is <i>this-worldly</i>, including <i>all things</i>: matter, bodies, relationships, morality, institutions, education, society and culture.</p>
<p>Escape this inadequate world to a perfect spiritual place or plane of existence.</p>	<p>Escape the mundane for the most amazing life you can have. You can have it all, now! Avoid commitments and duties the nail you down or restrict your freedom or choices.</p>	<p>There is joy, fullness, deep meaning and purpose found in worship and service to God and his kingdom purposes in this time-space frame. Our spirituality is embodied, our worship of God (not the world) corporate. Incarnation means that the transcendent and immanent come together in Christ and in the Body of Christ (the church).</p>
<p>Move towards perfection through finding special hidden knowledge (<i>gnosis</i>) from a guru or special spirit guide.</p>	<p>Move towards perfect body, life, marriage, career through tips, tweaks, hacks and self-help secrets of success. Self-create, or re-invent yourself as you like, as an original.</p>	<p>Pursue righteousness, justice, wholeness, authenticity, Christ-likeness via full social and communal redemption (within your relational networks). Find forgiveness and reconciliation now. Look forward to the new heavens and new earth, resurrected bodies when the world's redemption will reach it final apex.</p>

<p>You are a seeker, pursuing higher spiritual truth and hidden knowledge through special techniques (magic). You are trying to avoid imploding into the bestial.</p>	<p>You are a seeker pursuing fulfilment through incredible experiences and pleasures (travel, sex, fun, adventure, extreme sports, internet, social media, artificial intelligence).</p>	<p>You are the recipient of profound common and special grace, pursued and deeply loved by God. Heal that relationship and re-engage his covenant love to flourish in this world. You will never be a god, but can become a redeemed, flourishing human being. Let God be God! Practise Jesus' Lordship.</p>
<p>Move past the inferior god (demiurge) to find the real god – you yourself.</p>	<p>Move past organized religion, moral codes, and traditional codes of behaviour/ thought and find the type of spirituality that suits you. Doctrine or religious sources are not important. Try a variety to see what mixture works for you.</p>	<p>The Creator God seeks to partner with you in his mission through the church, the incarnation of Christ on earth. Model the character of humility, fruits and gifts of the Spirit within a healthy church body, a healing and witnessing community that impacts society for the common good. Become a godly citizen and a good neighbour. Live into a new story.</p>
<p>Move to fulfilment by breaking past boundaries left in you by the inferior god/demiurge and become fully divine.</p>	<p>Move past barriers set by past tradition, organized religion, older authorities and leaders. They are problematic and restrictive of your goals. Through innovation, seek you own special spiritual path.</p>	<p>Work toward spiritual maturity and gain wisdom through a community of believers writing a new story of kingdom values on earth that models integrity, joy and hope. Find your calling and use your gifts to promote <i>shalom</i> and the common good. Love your enemies and live humility.</p>
<p>When you finally arrive at this higher spiritual plane, you will discover that you are the god you have been seeking. Nothing can stop you now.</p>	<p>It is all about you, your passion, your subjective feelings and sensibilities, what you desire, need and are entitled to. Be all that you can be.</p>	<p>It is all about God and his story of loving, wise redemption for you and the planet. Only he is God and you are human with limitations and yet a high calling under his leadership. Jesus is the God-man at the right hand of the Father and he will return to bring the final fulfilment to all human seeking. His death on the cross is the climax of God's redemptive story and a model of servanthood for you.</p>

## Contemporary Articulations of Gnosticism

1. All power is rendered to you as an individual, and to your choices. It suggests that you have the potential to accomplish superior things, and even to become a god or goddess, if you play your cards right. Your soul can ascend to heights of perfection, the highest spiritual plane. You rebel against the system (expectations of others or institutions) and create/author yourself and shape your own identity (Foucault) and destiny. Self is the main actor in this cosmic drama. *Tuum Est* (it's up to you) is the secular University of British Columbia's motto compared to the old Harvard motto, *All Truth is in Christ*. The primacy of self, choice and personal freedom is celebrated. The focus is on your desires, rights and entitlements with a commitment-phobia, a moral law-phobia lest someone, some job or some relationship gets in the way of what you want for your life, lived in your unique way. This posture carries a strong subjectivist tone—how you feel about yourself, your relationships, your morality, your truth, your goals. What is left after you have abandoned morality is *performance* says Matthew Crawford (2016) in *The World Outside Your Head*. Your performance is how you will be judged and here there is no grace. Thus, we experience hyper-performance anxiety these days, as enough is never enough for our bosses or our own expectations. We are riddled with and controlled by fear, and become obsessive compulsive about achievement. Frank Furedi (2002) points this out in *The Culture of Fear*.
2. We exist in an inferior world resulting from an inferior/limited god, but the heights of spiritual accomplishment taunt us. It is essentially a world of darkness, but we long for the light. Salvation involves an escape to a more beautiful place of light, with superior experience and personal bliss. Secret knowledge is a key element on the road to enlightenment, however we define it. In addition, self-assertion is necessary to get what you deserve. The popular movie starring Julia Roberts and the bestselling book *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert (2007) illustrates this view. It met with tremendous resonance. It is all about the big spiritual search for new experiences, meaning and happiness. Heaven help the husband or anyone else who stands in the way of finding your higher self. Inherent in this view, is a worship of self, producing a *thin* self of limitless consumption of spiritual experiences, products and gurus on offer. Online dating is a classic example of this hunger for transcendence and spiritual fulfilment, one that can lead into dangerous risks. We seek to cut through our pain by pursuing pleasure, and this paves a precarious path to addiction. This refusal to rumble with our pain, shame and inner demons is a serious problem in late modern culture. It involves a refusal to love our broken world.
3. Make a run for it and escape the confines of this world or your present body. This is an upside-down view from the outlook of Genesis 1-3 and the Christian doctrine of creation-fall-redemption: a good creation is messed up by human sin. Escape your body (defined by gender, size, shape, ethnicity). *Hell* is interpreted as being stuck on earth in a mundane life or feeling like you are a man in a woman's body. Secret knowledge helps you break past the boundaries, transgress the limits, reject established definitions, cross boundaries between gay and straight, male and female (Michel Foucault). Androgeny (denial of given sexual distinctives) is a growing philosophy and its popular pursuit is one of the signs of Gnosticism. Head out for the spiritual plane and discover who you are, or who you think

you can become. Escape the mundane for the awesome, stimulating and pleasurable. Explore extreme sports, alternative lifestyles, fantasies, sex change operations, even a new country, or new planet. Experimenting with new alternative lifestyles to see what fits you uniquely is vogue. Escape your present real body to have the perfect body – the extreme makeover, which is often advertised on television through the cosmetic industry. Fleeing from God, his order, and his authorship become the new norm. The final goal is to create that unique you, a truly *original self*. The award-winning mid-90s film *Safe* depicts this attempt to escape the pollution of the city for a safe place in the desert. Things eventually collapse, because relational challenges emerge in all environments. Ultimately, no place is safe from the sin and evil in us.

4. Mark Sayers in *Disappearing Church* (2016) notes that Church Father Ireneas took on the Gnostics in early church times. Gnosticism thrives in a context of empire. They are people who disfigure our view of the world and miss entirely the concept of grace. Today, Gnosticism is revealed in a split between the public and private sphere. It creates a cultural myth rife with potential for young Gnostics to self-create. Popular American philosopher Richard Rorty articulates this viewpoint of two spheres of existence: public and private.
  - a. **The Public Sphere:** This is a beautiful place, a nice culture, easygoing, sentimental as in many of our modern cities and shopping malls. The Gnostic makes up life pragmatically as they go along and take ironic delight in the truth that there is no truth, no home to answer their sense of homelessness. It is a ‘schizophrenic consensus’ of public niceness and private meaninglessness, nihilism without the abyss. This is the architecture of our disbelief; we are seduced through the aesthetic. Nice public spaces and experiences satiate us and make us feel better. Churches can also serve this purpose for some today as well. We feel that we can self-create within these spaces. Foucault offers this in his doctrine of freedom as self-creation, a work of art. Richard Rorty is his North American liberal alter ego – a softer, pragmatic version of Foucault. My doctoral work brought a critique to this position.
  - b. **The Private Sphere:** Many today are riddled with fantasies, fuelled by consumerism, the age of image, the disengagement of social media and disembodied sex via the online porn industry. Contemporary Gnostic ghosts can feel quite fragile, alone, conflicted, meaningless, homeless, isolated, disengaged, unconsciously living out of a gospel of self-idolatry. They substitute a dream for reality. It is a dis-incarnate existence, obsessed with seeking freedom and choice, spiritual experiences, obsessed with performance and weighed down by performance anxiety, always needing to improve. Gnostics have commitment-phobia. They live in rebellion against any culture of moral code and personal commitments or sacrifice (Philip Reiff). Mark Sayers (2016) notes that it involves a “revolution of release versus restraint”. The contemporary Gnostic hides from the mundane, from responsibility, from suffering. Pitch becomes vital to recruit these people, with the focus on what benefits you get. Ergo, has the church itself become a tool for self-creation and self-fulfilment, a consumer commodity to be abandoned when it is no longer cool or useful or when a member confronts a relational conflict? How are we turning

consumers of worship services into committed stake-holders for the kingdom? Al Qaeda operates on a code, one of hardship and personal sacrifice, while its mutant godchild ISIS, became the master jihadi agency of pitch and allure through clever, glossy internet advertisement. ISIS offers adventure and a cause, jihadi groupie girlfriends and other fringe benefits. The catch is that these young Westerners who sign up to build the caliphate are threatened with execution if they decide it's too hard, not what they expected, and want to go home to mom. Who is still alive to accuse them of false advertising?

5. Other Examples of Gnosticism: a. Political philosopher Eric Voegelin notes that both the political left and right seek salvation through human effort and knowledge alone. Some of us are utopian in our expectations of our politicians and others are deeply cynical. We have seen quite a display of Gnosticism, false claims and promises, even weaponized lies and fake news in the most recent election cycle; b. Eckhart Tolle is a very popular guru, a classic example of a Gnostic leader, appearing on Oprah. He is a deceptive character who plays games with the variety of religions, claiming that all are one at their spiritual source.; c. Carl Jung is the Analytical psychologist who rebelled against his materialist mentor Sigmund Freud. He explored many aspects of spirituality in his therapy, even experimenting with the occult and parapsychology. Once, he claimed to channel a 2<sup>nd</sup> century Egyptian Gnostic. Sometimes, he used sex with his clients as a form of therapy.; d. Closer to home, Christian Smith, a respected Notre Dame sociologist, concludes that many American "Christians" eighteen to twenty-three, including people from the evangelical community, believe not in theism but in what he perceives as *moral therapeutic deism*. This view states: 'I must be happy and feel good about myself, watch out for my interests.' They see God as distant, out there, ready to help whenever they need him, but otherwise irrelevant day to day. Not exactly what Bonhoeffer would deem the cost of discipleship. This leads naturally into a discussion of some of the challenges Millennials experience.

### **Sidebar on Millennials: a little empathy please**

It is not healthy to caricature. However, motivational speaker Simon Sinek has captured a profile of this generation (born after 1984) under four categories. He is someone who cares and wants to help. He challenges business leaders to quit whining and step up to their responsibility. Simon identifies four characteristics of concern:

- a. **Failed Parenting**— As kids, they were told they were great and could have anything they wanted, just by desiring it. They are not prepared for adversity.
- b. **Addicted to Technology**— Giving a young teen a cell phone is like giving them a key to the liquor cabinet. It provides so many avenues to escape reality and get that dopamine hit that leads to addiction.

- c. **Impatience**—Brought up in an instant gratification age, they are not prepared for challenges in relationships that can take time and much effort to work through, or the reality that job success or prized work can take years.
- d. **Bad Match with Corporate Culture** –Corporations tend to focus on numbers, bottom line and productivity and not on a supportive work environment, where a person with struggles can expect empathy <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hER0Qp6QJNU> .

Millennials can be found to act like Gnostics: self-creating, disengaged, with the commitment level of a ghost. Simon jokes that when asked, millennials say they want “purpose, impact, free food and bean bags”. The take home lesson from this insightful interview, which went viral on YouTube, is that we need to help millennials get in touch with reality, to learn the benefits of hard work over the long haul as the path to deeper joy and accomplishment in life. The crutch of technology stands out as a strong deterrent to maturity in relationships, critical self-evaluation, and basic resilience in life. Suicide rates, drug overdoses and depression are all increasing rapidly in this generation, and it consequently results in deep worry and frustration for all concerned. Anxiety levels are through the roof. Millennials blame themselves for their failure at work, but part of the responsibility lies at the feet of corporate leadership. These leaders need to show empathy and help young people curate their emotional intelligence and social skills such as listening, communication and patience. Finally, we all need to get our mobile devices and social media consumption under control and strive for more balance in our lives.

Psychologist Angela Duckworth’s (2016) research on *Grit: passion and perseverance* is relevant. Duckworth posits that millennials need to learn to take responsibility on the arduous long journey up the mountain of life, parallel to the journey of faith and discipleship. There is much talk about finding our passion in life, but perseverance is equally important, claims Angela. That is the only way they will find this deeper long term joy. At the end of the day, life is not a scavenger hunt for love or a job. Millennials would be wise to attend to Simon’s other classic TED Talk contribution to leadership, the famous *Golden Circle*: to begin with the *why* (purpose), and then work out the *how* and the *what*. One of the examples he uses is the life of civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr., to illustrate a more robust approach to life, work, calling and mission. [https://www.ted.com/talks/simon\\_sinek\\_how\\_great\\_leaders\\_inspire\\_action](https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action) Millennials are leaving the church in droves, impatient that it does not cater to their interests and needs. Experts are scrambling to find out the reasons. <http://faithit.com/12-reasons-millennials-over-church-sam-eaton/>

## Christ-centered, Cross-shaped, Incarnational Response to Gnosticism

Now we move to the proactive side of our discussion, including why the incarnation is so important in the age of Gnosticism. How is the gospel of the kingdom physical, this-worldly, embodied, embedded in relational networks, in culture, within institutions? How do we help Christians engage their world and their culture more effectively? What are the mythologies in culture, and the church that prevent people from grasping the true robustness of the gospel? A striking example of Gnosticism infiltrating the church today can be found in the prosperity (aka Health and Wealth) gospel.

Faith requires its own infrastructure. As we read in I John and John chapter one, the incarnation forms the four pillars and *agape* love forms the main structural beam in the house of faith, the body of Christ. These are core precepts. Without the fleshly Jesus who is fully God and fully man, as stated in the Athanasian Creed, we have a different religion, not Trinitarian Christianity. The Apostle John strongly affirms this in his letter to young churches. We have explored briefly how Gnosticism, ancient and modern, threatens the authenticity of Christian life and the depth of discipleship? In fact, it threatens the church's very flourishing—it constitutes a form of spiritual darkness. The incarnation calls us by God's power out of the darkness, and into the light, into love, into a program for redemption of *all things*. This program includes not only our hearts or spirits, but our physical bodies as well and our extended family and community, everything about us. These powerful kingdom values are depicted by Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount and throughout his teaching career. It is all grounded in *agape* love, a quality of personhood that is directly sourced in God. Jesus introduces himself as the new law of love—the source of our freedom and hope. The Apostle, in both John chapter 1 and I John, depicts a weighty, *this-worldly*, tactile, dynamic, *thick*, fleshy Jesus-centered gospel. These writings offer a beautiful tapestry of truth that sounds a real depth and covers a tremendous breadth. It does not let us get away with faking it: "Don't say you love God and hate your Christian brother or sister" (I John 4: 20). Believers own their accountability and admit when and where they have failed. They take responsibility for others. Virginia sociologist James Davison Hunter clarifies:

If, indeed, there is a hope or an imaginable prospect for human flourishing in the contemporary world, it begins when the Word of shalom becomes flesh in us and is enacted through us toward those with whom we live, in the tasks we are given, and in the spheres of influence in which we operate. When the Word of all flourishing—defined by the love of Christ—becomes flesh in us, in our relations with others, within the tasks we are given, and within our spheres of influence—absence gives way to presence, and the word we speak to each other and to the world becomes authentic and trustworthy. (J.D. Hunter, 2010, 252)

This is not secret knowledge, but vital and visible *public truth*—we have touched and embraced our God and redeemer, eaten, walked and camped out with him. We have witnessed a physical, resurrected Jesus which takes on our central fear of death; we have experienced a love that expunges all fear and makes us brave. Ancient Christians did not have a natural-supernatural, body-soul split in their consciousness. We need to recover today the embodied understanding of personhood that they were gripped by, and challenge this contemporary

ghostly (dis-incarnate), self-contradictory existence. Incarnational thinking and *agape* love offers a powerful platform for Christian life and witness today. As I drilled down into the goodness of God and *agape* love for my recent book, I was overwhelmed by its power and profound implications. We need to leverage it to the full extent to change the world.

Churches cannot afford to sprinkle fairy dust on the current crisis. Lives, marriages, jobs and the future health of churches are all at stake. We need to speak, teach, disciple and preach prophetically into this cultural crisis. The last chapter of my book, *The Great Escape from Nihilism* (G. Carkner, 2016), goes into much more depth on the magnitude of incarnation. Below are some suggestions as to a direction in addressing these concerns and moving us toward incarnational discipleship. Much more could be added, but the following musings should at least spark some conversation and fresh observation. Serious thinking and dialogue are vital to moving forward and saving lives from self-destruction. Some of our megachurch pastors are admitting that they wish they had gone deeper spiritually (more incarnational) in their work years ago. We produce vulnerable disciples if we don't build such faith infrastructure.

- a. **Sacrifice Revived** How will we produce real depth versus superficial, consumer discipleship, which often just sets believers up for recruitment by cults, New Age spirituality or prosperity gospel charlatans. The church needs resilient believers who view creation and the world through the prism of the cross, who see sacrifice for the other as a great aspiration and a holy calling. We must encourage them: "Do not escape the world; do not worship or possess the world; cultivate a life of love for others." This puts the value, the very meaning of life in the other and gives life to the other, and in giving, discovers the deeper meaning and joy of life. We need a Christological-incarnational hermeneutic for discipleship. How do we make Christ as suffering servant present in the world, through his disciples? You see, Gnostics strive to go around suffering or drown pain in pleasures, adventure, consumerism, social media, or binge television watching. On topic, here is a comment from former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams:

At its center and permeating its relationships is the conviction that truth can only be shown and spoken in compassion – attention to the other, respect for and delight in the other, and also the willingness to receive loving attention in return. (R. Williams, 2005, 123)

Gnostics can be brought out of their isolation into sacrificial community where they can flourish. They rediscover self within this dynamic and learn the skills of listening, empathy, patience and compassion. This can provide a home where belonging and trust grow. In Part III of *The Physical Nature of Christianity*, Brown and Strawn (2012) write about *complex dynamical systems* and how this relates to Christian formation. It is the key context in which people change and are transformed. We often assume that preaching to individuals is the key component of discipleship. Of course, it is very important, but it is actually relationships that heal as most every counsellor will corroborate. These authors encourage us to pay more attention to entities like social networks, mutual shaping experiences, clusters of

relationships, and mutual imitative reinforcement. This book and especially Part III is vital for pastors and Christian educators. In church, we often focus too much on the individual believer or potential believer, focus on feeding them the right information or challenge. But not enough attention is paid to group dynamics, or group discipleship. Are we catering to the Gnostic mood of today when we are so oriented to enticing (pitching to) the individual with all their desires, quirks, and sense of entitlement in order to build our congregations. Social formation of people within networks and clusters begs for more attention in our discipleship, as we seek to imitate Christ. Millennials could be encouraged, motivated and mobilized to contribute through such groups, to learn the art of sacrifice. Ghosts could be transformed into givers and covenant members. It is easier to ask for help in a group where there is trust and mutual commitment.

- b. Incarnational thinking recovers the **power of grace**. We do not have to do it all on our own, as radical individuals. This world is a gift from God to be enjoyed, not owned or worshipped – grace is paramount. Christ helps us roll out the implications of the kingdom on earth, in time and space. His ministry, significantly, was only three years long, to show us who was supposed to bring in the kingdom of grace on earth – his disciples empowered by the Holy Spirit. The church as God’s redemptive agency for the world, should embrace its fullest calling as a conduit of this grace and a faithful presence of *shalom*. We can rebuild like Nehemiah with persevering commitment and dedication. Christ, within his community, leads by example, inspiration, empowerment of others. He calls us into our true humanity, cross-shaped compassionate suffering and servanthood. Brown and Strawn (2012, 110) write: “the purpose of the church is the formation of a community of persons that is characterized by the reign of God, and as such, reflects God’s presence as a means of grace to the world.” To cap this point, I offer a quote from the prize-winning essay in *First Things* by graduate student Jimmy Myers.

[Jesus] brings the whole festival of divine grace to a world that has excluded itself from it and invites ... humanity to take part, to enjoy a feast of resurrection where all divisions, segregation, and exclusion are transcended, where all have their place at the supper of the Lamb, where all, who see the face of the Beautiful One and in that seeing are transformed, are inundated and radiated by Beauty itself. In a word, to paraphrase St. Athanasius, he becomes the Ugly One so that we, the original ugly ones who have made this world ugly with our violence, might become beautiful. (J. Myers, *First Things*, 2015)

Jimmy shows real insight into his age, where there is a strong aesthetic influence on culture. The song “How Can It Be” by Lauren Daigle is also a passionate, prophetic expression of this amazing, empowering grace.

- c. Incarnational thinking discerns **reality from fantasy**, the ‘in-the-flesh’ from the ghostly. Gnosticism makes an individual more fragile, because it is grounded in fantasy. In fact, we could further extend our thinking to explore the relationship between Gnosticism and

nihilism. Crowds can be seductive ghosts. They can show up for handouts or spectacles today and disappear with the east wind tomorrow. Jesus did not trust them, but rather focused intensely on a small group. What is real are individuals, communities, families, groups, neighbourhoods and associations. We need to identify and expose the cultural myths that inhabit and confuse the minds and hearts of so many today. But what is needed ultimately is a conversion to *deep church*, into an abiding relationship with God, a resilient discipleship journey that enables the individual to develop an orthodox biblical understanding that can carry them through the rest of their lives.

This process first involves ‘withdrawal’: taking distance from a damaging and false cultural narrative that the individual is everything. Secondly, it involves ‘return’ to society after a deep abiding in Christ. Examples of this process given by Sayers are John Calvin (leader of the Geneva Reformation) and Ignatius of Loyola (leader of the Jesuits), both of whom started out humbly in withdrawal and a dedicated pursuit of God. Out of this retreat and then return, they spawned great movements. Before re-engaging in public, they sent their roots deep into Christ and took the time to pursue personal formation: humility, holiness and righteousness in line with the kingdom and biblical revelation.

Neuroscientist Warren Brown writes, “spiritual formation is about reshaping the whole embodied person – as in new habits, a different character, new virtues, and a greater capacity for hospitality, love and care for others.” Additionally, he says that it involves the “whole person gaining in wisdom and virtue... reshaping of our whole physical-mental-psychological selves into the image and likeness of Christ” (W. Brown and B. Strawn, 2012, 109). We should take baptismal candidates more seriously in this regard. It would be well worth the effort to intentionally mentor disciples in these capacities. How do we connect, be vulnerable, ask for help, share ideas, serve and be served?

- d. Incarnational thinking reminds us that we are **storied, communal selves** within a covenant of love, not ghostly individuals or techno-hermits. As Christ is the inner logic of scripture, we can read the Old Testament with Jesus, keeping the book open for ongoing spiritual nourishment. Yet the question remains, do we believe that all things are in Christ? A close reading of the text means that Christians read the Old Testament *christologically*. In light of Christ, we can capture the full narrative journey away from God, back towards God, with God, for God, to the glory of God. The voice of the Psalms is the voice of Christ resonant with his teaching on the kingdom of righteousness. The Hebrew Scriptures are provisional and incomplete by necessity. They anticipate more to come, more to be discovered, more story to unfold. It is a powerful discipleship move to accept the entire biblical narrative as the vehicle for God’s transformative work in culture. Sociologist Brené Brown in *Rising Strong* (2015, 39f) claims that we need to own our stories, however difficult. She offers hope that we can also rewrite our stories with a different outcome: transcending despair, addiction, dysfunctionality, fear, and loneliness. But we need a larger story of redemption to envision this. A story is like a map; it charts our course but simultaneously unlocks meaning, forms bridges, making sense of disparate ideas and experiences. Our character develops as we face adversity and our story helps solidify the meaning of our struggles. There is a deeply

researched while at the same time pastoral tone in this book. Churches should think about, develop and relay their story creatively, repeatedly, to bring solidarity to their community and give them forward momentum. It is well worth the effort to get beyond immediate practical and pastoral details.

Beyond Jesus' profound bodily presence on earth, he has also been present in his community (John 14-17; Ephesians 4). As *agape* love-incarnate, he left a following to carry the vision forward, and he commissioned a mentored leadership—the Apostles. This unique community is a historical extension of the incarnation. This diverse, worldwide community of Christians (now around two billion) offers a cultural presence, performance and embodiment of God's goodness. It remains an influence of *salt and light* conscience for society, socially locating divine goodness in diverse places around the globe. Moreover, it is having profound influence for the good at great cost. This entails a tremendous responsibility, opportunity and benefit for humankind at large. Its concern is the flourishing of all, including a profound commitment to dialogue across various traditions and a will to promote peace (M. Volf, 2015). Christian community is a dynamical system write Brown and Strawn in their salient book, *The Physical Nature of Christianity* (2012). He uses a comparison to an ant colony very effectively. Genuine formation occurs within the integrity of mutual, responsible relational networks that matter to us. The authors draw brilliantly on breakthrough insights from current neuroscience, psychology and sociology research.

- e. Don Klaassen's **pioneering, persistent reconciliation** outreach to Aboriginal Canadians in Chilliwack, B.C. This is the incarnational church in action. Over several decades, this noble, faithful colleague has been building bridges with Indigenous elders among the reserves in his area. He has developed strong friendships with some leaders, and has also drawn his whole church family into the conversation, expanding the incarnation of the gospel. As I explained to him recently my concern about Gnostic versus incarnational Christianity, he resonated with the issue immediately because of his experience. This difficult kingdom work is bearing significant fruit as Indigenous leaders grow in their trust of him and his church family. They trust him due to his posture of reconciliation and servanthood over the span of several years. One of the connectors Don's group has discovered is the building of garden boxes on reserves. The residents of reserves are asking for more boxes and are open to establishing genuine friendships among the church folk who come with a *posture of peace*. Recently, a prominent chief publicly proclaimed "We are not waiting for the government to bring us reconciliation, we are doing it now with this church." The chief went on to say how other chiefs in the area are very interested in doing the same on their reserves. What a beautiful visual articulation of *shalom*. Aboriginal leaders want honest, equal partnerships and Don is delighted that other churches in the area are now interested in exploring a similar partnership with reserves. Others feel that his church has developed a good model of listening, justice, and reconciliation. As the trust builds, Native elders become vulnerable and admit that they need help in dealing with their youth and giving them a purpose. Amidst all these developments, people are also becoming increasingly curious about what motivates this demonstrated love. Opportunities are arising to pray for needs that are expressed. Don is

hoping that he can introduce Faith Circles or Discovery Bible Study groups among those that God has prepared. See *Contagious Disciple Making* by David L. Watson and Paul D. Watson

- f. Incarnational thinking involves a **moral conversion**, including the development of moral language skill and proper categories. We can learn how to make wiser moral judgments, using the capacity of our intelligence and reasoning skills in the service of moral and affective orientation (our loves). Gnostics are radically/demonically disoriented, with a twisted, artificial view of the world. Love (I Corinthians 13) is a foundation for ethics, bringing hope, liberating the individual to see virtues as transcendent of desires. Love opposes revenge and promotes forgiveness and reconciliation, collaboration, tolerance and patience with the imperfections (and differences) of others. Love goes beyond the Golden Rule, taking risks in its initiatives, listening to the stories and engaging the needs of others. Jesus is the *law of love*, the divine-human example to inspire us. Psalm 119 reveals the richness of the language of our relationship, within covenant love, with God's statutes, principles, duties, rights and obligations. It also articulates his moral excellence of goodness and authority, his power and desire to help us live the honorable life and avoid evil. We are capacitated to indwell this poem (as with other scripture) and grow from it, it offers a worship experience that changes our outlook. We can always do better, think better, behave more honestly, honorably and authentically. Author Charles Taylor helps us recover the whole discourse of the moral good in the first part of his landmark tome *Sources of the Self*. It is a powerful platform for dialogue on morality, filled with deep insights about what we value and why. Duff McDonald (2017) shows why this arena is important in today's world through his gripping critique of the moral failure of our business community (*The Golden Passport: Harvard Business School, the Limits of Capitalism and the Moral Failure of the MBA Elite*). Should we not research and experiment in our churches concerning the powers of good character and the virtues, build out our ministries in this critical space? Pastors would do well to seek training in ethics and they can fruitfully integrate moral themes into regular teaching. This is where people live and struggle; they need guidance. God is highly committed to holy living.
- g. Incarnational thinking involves a **commitment to the highest value on truth**. Lately, we have heard much about the *post-truth* age. The Oxford Dictionary claimed that 2016 was the year of "post-truth", the year the term was coined. CBC Radio Ideas hosted a very insightful program (Fall 2016) on the topic "The Truth about Post-Truth" with Paul Kennedy. In the program which interviewed top Canadian and American political scientists and philosophers, it was pointed out that there are many influential people today who are devaluing truth and settling for propaganda or tribal thinking. One neuroscience writer is a bit more direct and calls the phenomenon *weaponized lies* (Daniel J. Levitin, 2016). It is vital in a day of half-truths, sales pitches, fake news, deception, and raw prejudice to call people back to the importance of speaking and living the truth, living with integrity. Christians must hold up a high value on truth for the sake of the kingdom and the gospel. Evangelicals often get caught up in what one author called "biblicistic non-empiricism", meaning that their only point of discernment

is the Bible and they fear academic and scientific insights. This is an inadequate hermeneutic and the source of much poor theology and reflection on culture within the church.

Gnostics are hard at work in this arena, substituting fantastic views for reality, hiring masters of spin to manufacture consent. Lucifer, after all, is the prince of lies and manipulation. Jesus stood for the truth and for realism (John 8: 32): “If you obey my precepts, you will be my disciples and you will know the truth and this truth will set you free.” This is no small claim. Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, argues for realism, the truth about God, the world and humankind. Fake news is no news at all, but essentially *lies* designed to confuse, obfuscate, manipulate public opinion, to get what a certain tribe wants. It is a form of cultural pollution. It was very disturbing to read a blog post by a top Jewish historian of anthropology, Yuval Noah Harari, who trashed all religion with a broad brush as a form of propaganda or post-truth. The blog could have come from the mouth of Richard Dawkins. It was the one of the weakest statements (rant) on religion I had read, and just poor scholarship. We need the empirical and rational as much as we need the theological. We need good wisdom, discernment and truth-tests, fact-checking mechanisms. I have spent my whole career wrestling with the relationship of faith and reason, Christian belief and academic scholarship and it is an absolute scandal to see what politicians, Wall Street, bank CEOs are trying to pass off as sound statements and justification for their will to power. Tyrants want us to believe whatever makes them look good or look like saviours. Academics are not without guilt here. Young disciples need to be mentored in truth, integrity, honesty, authenticity. The Apostle John is honest with us and says that if we claim to have no sin, we are liars, not truth-tellers. Truth does not dwell in us. This is an issue that comes under the Lordship of Christ.

## Conclusion

The New Testament makes the amazing claim that Jesus is, in the flesh, the wisdom of God and the power of God (I Corinthians 1: 24), the *nexus* and integral relationship of faith and reason. As divine *logos* (John 1: 1-4), he is the transcendent word made flesh, the underwriter of all human thought and language. Truth is ultimately found embodied in a person, a presence, it is not a mere idea. Jesus is reason personified, the *raison d'être* of it all. He helps us make sense of life; the narrative is clear. He is the answer to our deepest questions: Why are we here? What is our calling or purpose? *Quo Vadis*: Where are we going? Who are we working for? What or who do we love? God's speech is embodied, full-blooded, not flat, lifeless or atomistic. The incarnation is a most powerful *communicative action* (Kevin Vanhoozer, 2009), so much more than mere letters, words or sentences. It contributes unusual levels of energy to human creativity and culture and affirms the physicality of our world and our bodies. It is loaded with spiritual vitality and meaning; it

rings with the poignancy of the poetic, prophetic, and pedagogical. Humanities scholar Jens Zimmermann's stunning summary insight on this point represents a fresh re-articulation of incarnational reality – the opposite of ghostly Gnosticism. It shows that there is something deeply meaningful about the life of Jesus of Nazareth, who is both Son of man and Son of God. God has acted vulnerably in and through the form of a human individual, by uniting the divine freedom of self-giving *agape* love with the agency of a human being, acting in a community, within a historical-cultural context, within a tradition. In the Christ event, one is confronted with the intensely personal, which consequently has impact through forms of interpersonal communication and personal presence.

Christ the creative wisdom of God, and God's active Word in creation, is enfleshed in the temporal-historical dimension of our world as the concrete Jewish Messiah, Jesus the Christ.... This is the Word through whom all things were made, and the Word hid in the eternal bosom of God, the Word who spoke through the prophets, the Word whose mighty acts defined the history of Israel. In Jesus the Christ, this Word has become flesh, and the eternal has become temporal, but without ceasing to be eternal.... In Christ temporality and eternity are conjoined.... In the incarnation, creation, the world, time and history have been taken up into the God-man, who *is* the center of reality.... Faith and reason are inseparable because their unity is in Christ. (J. Zimmermann, 2012, 264-5)

This incarnational posture moves us from Gnostic self-assertion to humble servant leadership, mutuality, community and hospitality, into the virtuous society. It takes us away from pure self-interest and prideful, god-like superiority, and leads us toward a welcomed responsibility for others. Our mandate is to let God be God. We escape our isolation, aloofness and indifference, and re-enter courageously into embedded vulnerability and mutual trust. It leads us out of our sensuality and sloth into an adventure that is grounded and hopeful. We have been rumbling with reality and we are not afraid, because we have discovered just how important the incarnation is for everyday life and discipleship. The worthwhile pursuit and practice of virtues builds a solid ground for freedom with depth, freedom in the long run, freedom informed by love. Thus, we have stepped back from the abyss of nihilistic despair and cynicism, the end game of Gnosticism. We are not hard-wired to be gods. And we have discovered in the incarnation a new transcendent-immanent horizon of vast meaning. God has invested deeply in this physical-spiritual world, this soulish-body which is his temple. We are deeply connected to this world and yet also deeply connected to the kingdom of heaven. We have recovered an empirically honest human anthropology, which is also more hopeful in its potential for individual and social change. This positioning of the individual self within community makes possible the ability to love self, the world, the other and God, and to recognize hopeful signs of progress. It is a creative and joyful way of being present to others that creates space for more being, more abundance in life. Individual identity is strengthened and thickened through generosity, gratitude and mutuality. The incarnation is this and much more.

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