

Decoding our Christian Words

From head-trip analysis to gut-trip analysis



William E. Salmon

DECODING OUR CHRISTIAN WORDS

DECODING OUR CHRISTIAN WORDS:

From head-trip analysis to gut-trip analysis

With study guides and work sheets for each code word

By

Dr. William E. Salmon

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EPIGRAM

*“You are undertaking a formidable task:
finding common current concepts
for the historic code words
through which the Christian message
has been conveyed.”*

Dr. Marshall P. Stanton, President (Retired)
Kansas Wesleyan University
Salina, KS

PREFACE

Book titles are interesting excursions into semantics.

This book is about decoding our Christian code words, and by the time the reader has worked through this workbook these terms will take on new meaning. Does this change reality? Not at all! What is changed is how the reader finds the Christian lexicon meaningful in its application to reality.

Reality never changes, but our perception of reality is clouded by several things such as the prevailing world view which gets up-dated from time-to-time. This happened at the time of Jesus; historians use this catalytic occasion to name history BCE--before the Common Era, and CE--after the upsetting events of the Early Church. Most readers remember these new terms with their old associations of BC (Before Christ) and AD (After the Christian Era). This earthquake in understanding is aided by Peter and Paul's work of shifting the world view of Jesus into the prevailing Greek world view. During Paul's tenure reality stayed the same but the language used to give it meaning was entirely different.

Such a radical change in understanding took place in the 15th and 16th Centuries giving us the familiar metaphors of the Modern world view. Again, beginning with Einstein in the 20th Century our metaphors provide us with new tools to describe an old reality. The problem is the contemporary church insists on using the old "Modern" metaphors to give meaning to a "Post-Modern" experience.

Why is this a problem; isn't it still the same old reality? Yes it is, but today's young adults and youth live out of a Post-Modern worldview. They are hungry to find meaning in a world that is experienced in upheaval; our economic, political and symbol systems are in a giant flux. The response of many people is to run and hide behind church walls that deny the Post-Modern collapse. Many people--all around the globe--are seeking to find meaning to make sense of it all and to find hope in hopeless times.

Today's churches can never reach the multitudes until it comes face-to-face with the Post-Modern experience. It needs to give the current generation new metaphors that give meaning to their old reality. This book gives direction for this purpose.

The task is not difficult. It means to abandon our search for understanding in favor of sensitivity to our human experience. It is not what we know about God that makes life meaningful. Rather, it is how we experience God that offers us hope. We experience God all of the time, we just never get to name our experience using the Christian lexicon. When God is experienced as forgiveness, then everyone--everyone--knows what it means to be forgiven. After reading this book this very human experience of forgiveness will forever be associated with standing in the shadow of God.

Pastor Bill
Salina, KS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. William Salmon is a retired United Methodist Minister and trained at the Ecumenical Institute, Chicago, now known as EI/ICA Chicago. In addition to this book, he is the author of "The Trinity Bible Commentary." In his career he served eighteen years in Kansas United Methodist Churches, eleven years as a Kansas Wesleyan University Administrator, and eleven years in international work with the Institute of Cultural Affairs (EI/ICA). For over fifty years he is married to Beverly Trapp, his college sweetheart. They live in Salina, Kansas – in the Nation's Heartland.

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FOREWORD

A PERSONAL INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The story of how this material came to be written is true. It came about in reaction to a brother clergyman of another denomination. My letter to him is the actual document. What I didn't know was that I would accept the challenge of actually producing this workbook as a way to clearly define my theology using my invented metaphor of "Gut Trip Analysis."

As I recall, it was during 2001 when I was asked by the pastor of the (Salina, KS) Trinity United Methodist Church to move a Wednesday evening prayer group from the Parlor into one of the Fellowship Halls with the purpose of expanding it from a few dear souls to more seekers. This was the initial motive to create the "Spiritual Swim Team," a group that met every Wednesday evening from 6 to 6:45 p.m. It was a time for prayer, honest collegiality, and spiritual reflection; John Wesley would be proud.

After a year the "Spiritual Swim Team" grew to a group of about 25 to 30 people. One day, I received a call from Bishop Jim Matthews, a prominent retired United Methodist Bishop whom I had met in Italy on a trip from Rome to Pompeii. The call went something like this in Bishop Jim's 90 year-old high squeaky voice: "Bill Salmon, this is Bishop Jim. I want to know about your Spiritual Swim Team. Are you a church with a swimming pool?" "No," I responded, "we are just a group of Christians who meet learning to be Life Savers and trying to keep our heads above Spiritual Waters."

How he found out about this activity I never found out. He lived on the East Coast, and I lived in the middle of Kansas. Anyway, my description is adequate enough to give you some idea of its purpose.

Soon after we started, I began writing these study guides as a method to stimulate conversation. Each week one topic would be drafted for our conversation. The group began to anticipate them from week-to-week.

Recently, in preparation for this publication these notes were slightly updated.
Enjoy the enlightenment they may offer to you.

Pastor Bill
Salina, KS

PART ONE: AN INTRODUCTION

HEAD-TRIP ANALYSIS TO GUT-TRIP ANALYSIS

A TRUE STORY

The Salina Civitan Club, a local chapter of an international service club, honors the preachers in their local communities once-a-year. The theme they use is based on an incident in WWII. The Troopship Dorchester was torpedoed in the North Atlantic. In the rush to escape, the soldiers hurried on deck leaving their life vests below. Four military chaplains took up the task of calming the men and helping them into the available life boats. When the life boats were filled, these four chaplains--a Roman Catholic Priest, a Jewish Rabbi, and two Protestants Ministers-- gave up their own life jackets to the men who jumped into the cold Atlantic waters. The survivors of this incident remember seeing their chaplains link arms, and bow their heads to pray.

It was my privilege to be asked to give the keynote address at this noon luncheon. The title of my talk was, "From the grave to the world." In it I noted that the four chaplains demonstrated their faith in a monotheistic God. They went to their watery grave with linked arms. However, the memory of their act resurrected their names and gave them to the world.

The main points of this talk were:

❖ Plenty of evidence of the grave the local ministers are in—

No active ministerial association; no ministerial voice on local social concerns; trading members and few new conversions; reaching only 10% of the youth in Salina.

❖ What hope is there?

In Bible study we need to do "gut trips" rather than "head trips:" (use our human experience to search for the meaning of Christian words — Jesus used parables); In preaching, teach the preaching rather than preach the teaching: (preach the meaning and then point to the text); and think like a

Jew and believe like a Christian: (For the Jews, God was as close as their breath; for the Roman/Greek world, God was absent in a heavenly realm).

❖ So, what is our worldly resurrection?

Throw out a Life-line (be the conscience of the community); Be life savers (does it matter what denomination manufactures the life jacket?); and link our arms together.

The talk ended by asking all present to link arms and to pray together the Lord's Prayer.

A RESPONSE FROM A LOCAL MINISTER

The above illustration sets the stage for the following incident. One local pastor sent me his response as follows:

Dear Brother Salmon,

Thank you for your message yesterday. Just one comment as a suggestion. Just talking about the Gospel and not sharing with people what it is leaves us in despair. While the name of "Jesus" was mentioned, nothing was said about a cross, bloodshed, payment for sin, forgiveness, grace, and that it is fully given by our gracious God. The strength for us to improve our lives comes from the love and forgiveness of Christ Jesus our Lord. Using your words, we must preach the Gospel teaching or we've preached nothing at all.

MY REPLY

Pastor _____,

Thank you for this opportunity for dialogue. This happens so seldom that I thought about including it in one of the illustrations of "the grave of our ministerial associations." If my talk inspired nothing else but to, "afflict the comfortable and comfort The afflicted" it will have been enough.

Speaking out of a United Methodist heritage as holiness people, it is appreciated that our deeds reveal as much about our Christian theology as our words. If Christ is an "indwelling spirit of God," then the Four Chaplains were demonstrating their faith in a moment when words would be insufficient. Their demonstration spoke more eloquently than their belief systems may have allowed had they had time to examine the beliefs held by each other. In fact,

their acts were clear demonstrations of their faith, while their beliefs may have been completely different.

Your letter is a demonstration of one of my points. Our old Christian Code Words become “head-trip” ideas that are divorced from our “gut-trip” experience. You mention: Jesus, cross, bloodshed, payment for sin, forgiveness, grace, the free gift of God, and Christ Jesus our Lord. All of those are established *ideas*. By associating these ideas with their *human experience*, then all of its warmth and meaning is released.

God --- The Perfect At-One-Ment is that in which we participate when we do things that bring about the At-One-Ment in our lives with neighbor, self and The Meaning of Life. This formula fulfills the New Commandment of Christ.

Jesus --- The demonstrator of the sacrificial nature required of his followers to give up all things that create separation between neighbor, self and The Meaning of Life; that is, to give up those things that are the antithesis of At-One-Ment. Also, this is a definition of Sin.

Christ --- The timeless embodiment of the Good News that demonstrates we can awaken to live the At-One-Ment given to us by God from the beginning of time and creation, and to which we are inheritors throughout our birth, our life, our death and eternity.

Cross --- The cross represents the act by which the human situation and fate is “reconciled,” “justified,” and “atoned.” (We are made At-One!)

Bloodshed --- The sacrifice necessary to replace the “earthly sacrifices of the old priesthood (Hebrews) --- (Ah, what a head trip answer, eh?) The Bloodshed is the sacrifice by which the Love of God becomes the yeast that permeates the earth to give hope to the hopeless.

Payment for Sin --- The redemptionist view could be expressed as the price paid into the pawn shop of life for the redemption of God’s creatures that are now no longer “pure elements,” but are “alloys of our creation.” (To translate: God’s humans are created to live in the Garden of Perfect At-One-Ment. Our propensity to disobedience is an explanation of our living outside this “Garden” in a state/fate separation from this At-One-Ment; i.e., we become *alloys* of the *pure elements* we were intended to be. Consequently, the only way we can

Head-trip analysis to gut-trip analysis

enjoy OUR HUMAN PERFECTION is in a personal relationship to Jesus Christ who is OUR SPIRITUAL PERFECTION, and from whom we are his beneficiaries.)

As a theologian who begins theology in the Creation Story, I prefer to understand the "Payment for Sin" --- for our state/fate of separation (*a la* Tillich) --- as the Alarm Clock (the revelation, the epiphany) to awaken and reawaken us humans to the reality of God's love that is as close as our breath! It is always there and always will be. Yet, because of our human situation to be spiritually asleep, and our human predicament as our inability to awaken ourselves, then it is necessary for something or someone to awaken us. This "awakening" is the gift of the Cross and the Blood of Christ. When this happens we experience this gift as a Christ Event or a spiritual awakening; we experience it as a "warm heart." (All this is Wesleyan theology.)

Also, this paragraph substantiates my point of, "Thinking like a Jew and believing like a Christian."

I apologize for speaking in this way to a brother theologian. (*Your Denomination*) has a deep theological background that is so much deeper than many United Methodists. Your confirmation background is superb. This exercise is written to assure you that I could have used the old Code Words, and to have shared with the group the meaning of the experience of these words. However, I elected a different purpose.

My purpose in speaking at the luncheon was to challenge an active collegiality, rather than mouthing words with which every pastor will find fault. I believe it is better to demonstrate love-in-action than to say words that demonstrate the antitheses of At-One-Ment.

It is better we go down with the ship with "our arms linked" (representing the sacrifice of our selves and our theological differences), having given away "our life vests" (representing our diversity). This linking of arms is the demonstration of the resurrection that is possible when humans (clergy included) die to their peculiarities and their "ideas." Our linked arms can not be denied, while our words can. Isn't this a demonstration of hope to the hopeless drowning in the sea of theological irrelevance?

One last note: This letter is my effort to "teach the preaching, rather than preach the teaching." At least in the United Methodist Church, our people are

hungry to find the meaning of our old Code Words. While my attempt may be a feeble beginning — although, I've been thinking this way for 10 years — many of our laity/clergy beginning to think this way are finding inner peace and spiritual health.

This was my intent.
Thank you for this occasion to share.
In Lenten service to Christ, I am your servant

HOW WE GOT THIS WAY

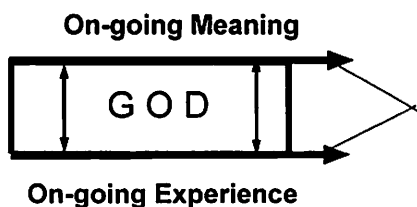
Our problem began 2100 years ago. This seems like a strange place to begin, doesn't it? Yet, our problem begins in the transition between the world of Jesus and the world of the Early Church. The Hebrew and the Roman-Greek world views is the locus of this change. The Apostle Paul is an agent of this change.

The Hebrew World View

The Jews in Jesus time understood the nature of God in very personal ways. This is why Jesus could call God "Father." Jesus' relationship to God was an intimate relationship.

The World View of the Hebrews was based on their human experience. First,

Jewish or Experiential Understanding



God was as close as their breath; it was an understanding given to them in the story of creation: God formed humans out of the dust and breathed into them the breath of life. Each time they inhaled or exhaled their breath was the presence of God *in their lives*.

Second, the Hebrew World View described how they lived *between* a Realm of Meaning and a Realm of Experience. When the Jews had the experience of hitting their thumbs with a hammer, they looked for the *meaning of the experience*. The question became, "What is God trying to tell me?" The

operating principle is, if you hit your thumb and it hurts, you can be grateful — you're alive! However, if you hit your thumb and it doesn't hurt — you're dead!

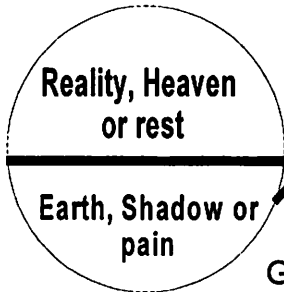
From this perspective, pain is a friend; it will never lie to you. In teaching this lesson, I ask people, "What do you say when you hit your thumb with a hammer?" After curious looks and stammering, I encourage them to say, "Thank you!" We can express our gratitude, we can be grateful, because pain never lies to us.

When this stance is taken, people no longer are VICTIMS. To be sure, we can be victimized (the thumb still hurts), but we have a choice to make: We can be victims or we can be VICTORS.

THE GREEK/ROMAN WORLD VIEW

During the mid-First Century, after Saul's conversion on the Damascus Road, Paul took leadership in taking the message of Jesus Christ into the Greek speaking world of the Roman Empire.

GREEK DUALISM:
Platonism, Stoicism
and



Gnosticism

**Escape through
secret knowledge.
Christian's
secret knowledge is
Jesus Christ.**

GREEK KNOWING

This Greek influence of language and culture was the work of Alexander The Great, who conquered the Greek City-States and the Persian Empire around 336 BCE. He brought with him the philosophy and intellectual culture of the Greeks into what would become the Roman Empire.

The problem faced by Paul in accomplishing this task was the translation of the Jewish World View into images familiar with the Greek World View. At the time

of this transition, the meaning associated between these two world views was clearly understood. At least it was for a long time.

THE FIRST MAJOR SHIFT IN WORLD VIEWS

During the 16th Century, the world experienced an unusual time when history of society and humanity was given a brand new direction. This dramatic shift is called a paradigm shift. This change came over a period of almost 200 years and changed on many different fronts. The results are known as: the Copernican/Newtonian Revolution in physics and the cosmos; the Reformation in theology and ecclesiastics; the Industrial Revolution in urbanization and marketing; and the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg, making information available to the common people.

The effect of these profound changes left the established church in a quandary. After promoting the notion of an “unchanging God,” the church’s response to this change was entrenchment and denial: God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Rigidity to change set in.

It was at this point that the meaning of our theological words became divorced from the experience of the words. Our theological words became IDEAS ABOUT something, rather than a description of OUR EXPERIENCE. The words became “Code Words,” instead of **words that point to the human experience based on reality.**

Our first revolution in understanding took place 1500 years after Paul translated the Hebrew experience into the images and metaphors of the Greek/Roman experience. While this took place, the church was in denial.

SUBSEQUENT SHIFTS IN WORLD VIEW

The next major change in world view came 500 years later in the Einsteinian Revolution in physics and the biological revolution of Darwin. The theory of Relativity embraces the notion that nothing is fixed or certain. Again, the established church did not embrace this new set of prescription glasses, preferring its myopia instead of the clarity of reality. Darwin shattered the church’s understanding of creationism based on the false premise that the Bible

is a scientific book instead of pre-scientific metaphors, images, stories and parables. The church believed it was impossible for God to use evolution as a method of a continuing revelation of creation.

As each of these profound shifts in human understanding took place, the old Christian Code Words remained as *ideas*, and their *meaning* divorced from the *human experience*. It can be said that as time passed the relevance of these old Code Words decreased. The result is that today the message of Jesus Christ is diminished because the use of our Christian lexicon is unrelated to our human experience of reality.

RELEVANCE: THE CRUCIAL QUALITY

We all stand before the same REALITY. We all live 24 hours a day. We are born and we experience a variety of physical and spiritual hungers. However, each individual is on a personal journey through life. Our perceptions of where we are on this journey are influenced by many factors: birth order, family history, culture and social circumstances, education, and physical, mental, emotional, and social and economic factors. These influences develop us into unique individuals.

All of these things color the way in which we view human reality. The image I prefer is that we look through a set of spectacles — eye glasses — the lenses of which are ground on the stone of our personal experiences.

The consequence is that we each experience reality in slightly different ways. The meaning is distorted and/or clarified depending on how we look through our prescription lenses.

The problem of relevance is now apparent. As we hear the old Christian Code Words, our interpretation of them is deeply colored and distorted. This is true, because these words no longer can be associated with our reality. The assumption is these Old Christian Code Words are no longer relevant.

AN ILLUSTRATION

Recently, I tried this experiment in two Sunday School classes. One is a class of twelve adults with young families. The other class of 45 older adults is known as "The Peace-Maker's Class." (Affectionately, they call themselves "The Pace-Maker's Class.")

A list of the words printed in the opening section of this document was given to each individual. I asked them to take a few minutes and define whatever words they could in the time allowed.

Their inability to answer the questions was astonishing. A few individuals in both groups attempted a few words. The majority made no attempt at all. Here is a sample of the words a few attempted to define: "Jesus" — identified as the Son of God; "God" — identified as Father; "Church" --- identified as people, place of worship; "Cross" --- identified as the way we are saved; "Resurrection" -- identified as Easter, death defeated. No one attempted to define the Holy Spirit, nor words like "Blood of the Lamb," "Payment for Sin," or "Evil."

A few observations

- 1) To be generous, if more time was allowed than the five minutes provided, perhaps more of the list could have been addressed.
- 2) However, observe the *kind of answers provided*. All of the answers are *ideas about* the topic. None of the answers reveal an *experience of*, or the *meaning of*, the topics.
- 3) The exercise proves the point I'm making; adults of all ages, raised in the United Methodist Church, having attended for years both Sunday School and Services of Worship to hear the preached word, cannot adequately explain their beliefs. Why?
- 4) The only answer I have after observing this phenomenon for many years is the words of our belief system are not associated with the experience to which the words point. Consequently, the words became *ideas* dissociated from human experience.

To summarize, our Christian belief systems are irrelevant to our human experience. We give lip service--literally--to old words that lost their power to stir the emotions and the imagination.

SO, WHAT TO DO?

The solution is to change the way we approach the words in our belief system. Instead of understanding them as ideas, we can appreciate them as experiences. Instead of running them through "our heads," we can run them through our "human experiences." In a word my wife prefers me not to use, we can run them through "our gut."

Turning our ideas into experiences moves our ideas from being detached or "cool", to being attached to our human experience and therefore our ideas are "warm and emotional." Once the words are identified with the human experience, people immediately appreciate the meaning of the words and experience them as relevant.

Note: this understanding is not prejudiced by any understanding of Einstein or Darwin. People can be Democrats or Republicans, they can hate or love homosexuals, and they can be fundamentals or liberals. The old Code Words are understood because each individual relates to them in light of their own reality.

The old, old story is fresh again.

THE ORGANIZATION OF THIS STUDY GUIDE

In each section, one of these Christian code words will be studied: The Human Situation, God, Jesus, Christ, Holy Spirit, the Church, the Cross, the Blood of Jesus, the Kingdom of Heaven, and the Grace-filled Life. Immediately following this section is a study of The Human Situation, because this is the place where theology begins.

A short "Study Section" of an old Code Word begins each study. This is followed by a "Work Sheet" as an exercise for the reader to do her or his own "Gut-Trip Analysis."

If the participant desires to dialogue with me about the topic, or wants me to review their progress, they can contact me at wsalmon@cox.net. To do this, copy your work on your computer to an e-mail form and e-mail it to me.

How is this for a benediction? Have a "blessed day." This is a head-trip phrase that can be translated into a Gut-Trip Analysis as, "Have a Happy Day." Or, as Roy and Dale Evans would say, "Happy Trails." If not this then, "Have a really GOOD DAY! After all, God don't make no junk."

PART TWO: STUDY GUIDES

TOPIC # 1: THE HUMAN SITUATION — THE REALLY REAL AND THE WAY LIFE IS

STUDY SECTION

Christian theology begins in the Human Situation. Unless it begins here, theology is a nice intellectual exercise in irrelevance. Those who practice this irrelevance are dilettantes.

The Human Situation is that which makes the theological task relevant and important. The following transliteration of scriptures reminds us, “The Meaning of Life (God) so loved the world that The Meaning sent us a Personal Illustration of what makes The Meaning meaningful, so that whoever surrenders his or her life in the name of this Personal Illustration finds life that is experienced as abundant.” (*My paraphrase of John 3:16.*)

As a Christian theologian, I practice the understanding that the experience of being fully human is illuminated in the stories recorded in Genesis 1:1 – 11:9. These are stories. These stories are myths! It is affirmed that the common definition of the word “myth” is understood as something untrue. However, the way theologians use the word, “a myth” is something so true that it cannot be explained in any other way than in a parable, simile, metaphor, fable or story. For example:

- ❖ Genesis 1-- Creation accomplished in six days. This is associated as a “Priestly Document” characterized by its orderliness, and the fact that the 7th day is Sabbath rest. Creation begins in the Void and ends with the creation of humans;
- ❖ Genesis 2 and 3-- Adam and Eve begin the story. This is associated with the Deuteronomists who are the storytellers. This is known as the second story of creation.
- ❖ Genesis 4-- Cain and Able describe the inhumanity expressed by brother against brother;
- ❖ Genesis 5-- Adam to Noah. A listing of those who lived extra long times because they were in tune with The Meaning of Things;

The Human Situation – The Really Real and the Way Life Is (TWLI)

- ❖ Genesis 6 to 9-- The Flood. The story of The Meaning of Things that gave up on The Rest of Us and then recanted to create for us the first covenant between humans and God.
- ❖ Genesis 9— The Covenant between The Meaning of Things and Noah;
- ❖ Genesis 10 through 11:9 — Calling of the Nations and the Tower of Babel. This is another illumination of human disobedience, as well as a demonstration of why different people speak in different languages; These stories never happened. They are told to illustrate the point on how humans came to be human. To believe otherwise is to destroy the stories' sacred traditional meanings. These are mythological archetypes used to illuminate how humans got to be human.
- ❖ Chapter 11: 10 begins a different section of the Hebrew Scriptures. In this chapter, the calling of Abram begins the first great saga between The Meaning of Things and humanity. Following this is the Jacob, Joseph and the Moses sagas. This is some of the best reading in the Bible.

The Garden story in Genesis 2/3 is a clear illumination of how our human situation became human. The Garden Children are disobedient and eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Those who ate of this fruit have their eyes opened to see through the eyes of The Meaning of Things (G-O-D).

The temptation to deny our humanity (Needs heading)

However, there is a second tree in The Garden, the Tree of Life and (by implication) Death. Now, The Meaning of Things has a big problem to solve. The Garden Children are spiritually awake, and if they disobey and eat of the fruit of this second tree, they will know the hour of their birth and the hour of their death. The Meaning-of-Things believes this is more to bear than any human can endure; the angst will kill them. By implication, this truth is expanded to include all of humanity. This is not the kind of information humans need to know; it is beyond their comprehension.

Entwined in this myth is the story of the Evil One personified in The Snake. From our point of view of "gut-trip analysis," it is helpful to remember that The Evil One always is The Liar. In the Garden Myth, this lie is direct; "Go ahead and eat

of the tree. God did not tell you the truth. You will not die!” Again, this part of the mythological story is told to illuminate the truth that The Big Lie confronts humans every day. As much as the Big Lie intimidates us, we are not victims. Christ proves we are victors!

THE REALLY REAL

Living in The Garden is ideal until this situation developed. Here all things lived At-One with each other, at peace with themselves, and in love with The Meaning of Things (neighbor, self and God). This ideal and idyllic situation is what I call The Really Real. This is the place for which God created us to live; that is, to live with God who is Perfect At-One-Ment.

Because The Meaning of Things cannot tolerate humans bearing this burden of denying their intended creation, the Meaning of Things kicks the Garden Children out of the Garden. My question is, to where did the Garden Children get kicked?

THE WAY LIFE IS

My answer is they got kicked into The Way Life Is (TWLI).

Now, The Meaning of Things has a big problem to solve. How can the Garden Children be restored to a personal relationship with The Meaning of Things without destroying their Free Will? Those who viewed the film, “Bruce Almighty” will appreciate this problem.

In this film, Bruce accidentally takes away his dog’s free will. The result is bizarre. This continues until Bruce comes to the new understanding that the dog cannot continue its unusual activities, it needs to be trained and disciplined. As this is accomplished, the movie illuminates how Bruce no longer misapplies the power given to him by God. In this way, Bruce awakens to how he is mistreating others, especially those he really loves (Grace), and how he can be a more human and a more humane being.

This illustrates the point very well. The way The Meaning-of-Things attempts to treat the problem presented by the Garden Children is to find a People of God who will be profoundly obedient so as to offset the disobedience displayed by

The Human Situation – The Really Real and the Way Life Is (TWLI)

the Garden Children. This fails time after time because of the human propensity to disobey; i.e., to go back to sleep after a brief experience of being awakened to The Meaning of Things. The Meaning of Things invents plans to help the People of God: Judges, Kings and Prophets all try to help the People of God with limited success.

In the New Testament, Paul tells us why these attempts fail. He writes, “Some might be willing to die for a good person, and some might die for a rightful cause, but who will die for people who don’t deserve it?” (*My paraphrase of Romans 5:7.*)

The answer given by The Meaning of Things is to send a Personal Illustration in God’s Son, Jesus the Anointed (Jewish) Christ (Greek). This Personal Illustration is the only one willing to demonstrate profound obedience through a willingness to die for those who don’t deserve it.

AT HOME OR ON VACATION?

So, what does this say about the human situation?

It says humans live in one world with two experiences, the natural world and the spiritual world. Because we live in the natural world during our four score and ten, we assume that this is the only world we have. It is the work of The Meaning of Things to awaken humanity to the reality of the Spirit World. The Spirit World is really our home. The natural world is our vacation!

As we awaken to this truth we discover a peace that passes all understanding. We experience a sense of “place.” We know we are really home, because we are awake to living in the Really Real. While The Way Life Is (TWLI) passes away, the Really Real is forever.

A Bible professor at Kansas Wesleyan University draws an interesting distinction. “Forever” is a measure of time while “eternity” is living life At Home in God’s Presence.

WORK SHEET

Pick up your daily newspaper and read over the headlines on the front page. Then, pick one article and read it thoroughly. Next, reflect on this article using the following guidelines:

- 1) How does this article illustrate your understanding of The Way Life Is (TWLI)? Remember, TWLI illustrates The Way Life Is. It is not the way we want it to be, or that it ought to be.
- 2) Does this article illustrate the Big Lie? Remember, the Big Lie supports the idea we are victims. Usually, every news article in some way illustrates that we are victimized; to be victimized is to live in TWLI. The purpose of the Big Liar is to convince us that we are victims. The truth is we have a choice either to be victims or to be victors.
- 3) How does the article illuminate The Really Real? (Remember, The Really Real is the kind of world The Meaning of Things [G-O-D] created in the first place. This is the world to which we spiritually awaken; it is the world in which we experience being "at home," "in place," "At-One." This is not an ideal world, it is a reality that already exists within us and to which we are spiritually asleep until we are awakened.)
- 4) How does this support John Wesley's idea that we are spiritually asleep and we are unable to awaken ourselves? What does this say about the work of the "People of God" – The Church?

TOPIC # 2: GOD — GETTING THE BIG PICTURE

STUDY SECTION

The Old Christian Code Word of “GOD,” is one of the most used words in our Christian lexicon, or dictionary. The traditional definitions are *omnipotent* (unlimited), *omnipresent* (being everywhere), and *omniscient* (all knowing). Other words frequently associated with God are *Mystery*, *The One-In-The-One*, *Higher Power*, etc.

Note that these are all “head trip” words. They are ideas about God. In fact, our brother and sister Jews are right. Whenever we believe we have identified God, we have failed. The Hebrew solution is to never write the entire word of the Deity except in a cryptic way:

JWH -- an unpronounceable word in Hebrew; or just G – D.

G - O - D is an English translation.

With this in mind, what is the human experience that points us toward the word G-O-D?

First, note that the approach of beginning in the human experience and then identifying the Old Christian Code word associated with this experience is an adaptation of the scientific method. The process is to observe, judge, weigh up, and name the reality to which our experience points.

I find myself using four definitions for God that relate to my human experience: The Guarantor, Perfect At-One-Ment, The Meaning of Life, and GOODNESS.

THE GUARANTOR.

God is the Guarantor of The Law. 1) Take a Christian and a non-Christian and drop them together off of a 10-story building. Who will hit first? Surprised? Both hit together. Why? Because God is the Guarantor of Gravity. This is true for everyone and everything in the entire universe. 2) Drive too fast through a school zone and you will get a speeding ticket. God is the Guarantor of our Social and Political laws 3) Do dumb things in the back seat of a car, and God

Guarantees our experience of parenthood. God is the Guarantor of our Moral Laws. 4) Neglect our Spiritual Laws, and when the trials of life blow over us will we have deep roots to see us through, or will we be overwhelmed because we have no roots? God is the Guarantor of our Spiritual Laws

THE REWARD IS IN THE DEED ITSELF

God guarantees that the “reward is found in the deed itself.” The reward is the “Wrath of God.” It is “wrath” because we hurt others, self and God, the result is pain, guilt, and shame. We experienced these as a “NO” to doing things that are for our own selfish pleasure or greed. We call it God’s wrath, yet this is really God’s love; i.e., Tough Love. God loves us enough to pay the price of awakening us to live only as humans. Remember, Jesus Christ was crucified to awaken us.

Likewise, we pay the price of doing smart things, and the result is joy, peace, fulfillment; people like to be around us. God’s wrath is experienced as God’s Love.

God guarantees the reward of both our Good and Dumb acts. The reward is in the deed itself. In this way, God does not punish us, except as we punish and/or reward ourselves through the choices we make: God guarantee’s the result of our choices. In fact, a reward or a punishment is built into our choices.

THE PERFECT “AT-ONE-MENT”

This definition is based on our Doctrine of the Atonement. This is one of those words that spell out the meaning of the word itself: AT-ONE-MENT is to be made At-One with neighbor, self and The Meaning of Life. This fulfills Jesus’ New Commandment to “love God, love neighbor and love self.” Our human experience is to observe that when we are in harmony with neighbor, self and God, we feel at peace, whole, loved, healthy, fully accepted. At these times we are experiencing a little bit of the Perfect At-One-Ment that belongs to God.

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THE MEANING OF LIFE

In 1 Corinthians 14: 33, Paul reminds us that, “God is not a God of disorder, but of peace.” If God is not a God of disorder, then when our lives become disorderly who are we to blame? Obviously, we can’t blame God. But we can blame THE WAY LIFE IS (TWLI).

Why blame TWLI? Because life does present us with disorderly experiences like cancer, death, disappointments, fear, tornadoes, accidents, etc. If God is a God of peace, then these experiences cannot be laid at the feet of God. TWLI is always unwanted, unasked for, unnecessary, and unneeded. Yet TWLI is TWLI.

Sometimes, in boldness, I blame Mother Nature. After all, our insurance companies want to blame the acts of Mother Nature (tornadoes, floods, fire) on God. When we understand the difference between God’s Love and TWLI, then life has meaning. We can stop blaming God and realize we are not victims. Yes, it is true that we are victimized by TWLI, but we have a choice between being “victims” and being VICTORS.

Our relationship to The Meaning of Life does not change The Way Life Is. Our relationship changes us! In this way, God is the Meaning of My Life.

GOODNESS

Much depends on the context. Goodness often is mis-construed as being nice. However, there is an ontological reality in the being of GOODNESS.

One myth, the source is now lost to me, that Socrates and the Sophists had a debate about the meaning of life. The Sophists said that Goodness was the meaning; Goodness is of more value than the Truth. Socrates promoted the idea that Truth is the meaning of life, and he won the debate. The success of which gives us today’s science, social, political and economic accomplishments.

Unfortunately, all of these are “things” that leave us On Vacation rather than lead us Home. GOODNESS makes living worthwhile as Truth continues to reveal more about our natural existence.

WORK SHEET

Using the words to this prayer¹, work on the Old Christian Code Words that are ideas rather than experiences. Run these words through your own human experience. Give it the ol' college try! Observe the words in bold, and ask yourself, what is my experience?

Is someone here moving toward the twilight of life and fearful of that which we call death?

Why be afraid? God is able.

Is someone here on the brink of despair because of the death of a loved one, the breaking of a marriage, or the waywardness of a child?

Why despair? God is able to give us the power to endure that which cannot be changed.

Is someone here anxious because of bad health?

Why be anxious? Come what may, God is able.

Surely God is able.

In each instance, how do you describe your human experience (Gut-Trip Analysis) of the word "God?"

By-the-way, the underlying sub-theme of this prayer is "surrender." This is a nice Gut-Trip word, isn't it? What would it mean to surrender our fears, despair and anxiousness to God by saying, "Lord, I'm too tired to make sense of it all and I turn in all over to you; it's your problem now?"

What will define us? Are we defined by our human situation or by our relationship to the Meaning of Life?

¹The United Methodist Hymnal # 106.

TOPIC # 3: JESUS --- SEEING THROUGH THE LITTLE PICTURE

STUDY SECTION

In the Christian lexicon, or dictionary, the second most used Old Christian Code Word is "JESUS." Also, it is one of the words that seldom gets clarified, and is often confused, because it is closely associated with the Old Christian Code Word of "CHRIST."

These two words, Jesus and Christ, are inseparably bound up with each other. However, they represent two functional realities. In the following Study Section, we will look at the Christ Dynamic. In this session, we will separate JESUS — the human factor from, CHRIST — the spiritual factor.

THE ROOT OF OUR PROBLEM: JESUS/JOSHUA = GOD SAVED

The biblical world lived in two cultures; one culture was Jewish, and the other culture was Greek. During the time of Jesus, these two cultures intermingled. It may surprise some to know that the Jewish Jesus was never called "Jesus." Rather, his name was Joshua!

How did this happen? Well, the Hebrew name for "Jesus" is Joshua, while the Greek name for "Joshua" is "Jesus." I think you begin to see some of the difficulty. It is helpful to note that the Hebrew word, Joshua, is translated "God Saved." Often, this is the case for all of the Hebrew words, and for many of the Greek words as well, they have meanings appropriate to their character.

CHRIST IS NOT JESUS' LAST NAME.

One of the common misconceptions concerning Jesus is that "Christ" is his last name. This is not true! His father (Joseph) and his mother (Mary) were not Mr. and Mrs. Christ. The name "Jesus" indicates his *earthly nature*. The word "Christ," as we shall see in the next session, indicates his *spiritual appointment*.

JESUS AS MESSENGER AND HARBINGER

AS MESSENGER

The human Jesus represents the human factor in the statement of faith. As the Early Church moved away from their Jewish roots into the Roman world that spoke, thought and reasoned as Greeks, it became necessary to translate the Hebrew Code Words into the pictures and images (paradigms) understood by the Greeks.

Because of this shift in culture, Jesus the human took on “mystical or supernatural” attributes unfamiliar with the Hebrew/Jewish culture. To the Jewish Christians, Jesus represented a messenger whose life and ministry demonstrated the Good News of the Gospel: All is Good, All is Received, Past Approved/Forgotten/, Future Open. Or, another way of speaking about the Gospel is: The life you have is the life you can live ABUNDANTLY!

AS A HARBINGER

An interesting footnote to this discussion is that the dictionary identifies the word “harbinger” as “one sent in advance of troops, a royal train, etc., to provide or secure lodgings and other accommodations.” This definition is very close to the Early Church definition that Jesus is the one who bears in his human body the map leading us to salvation (wholeness, full health, happy assurance, intimacy with the Perfect At-One-Ment, etc.)

Both as messenger and as harbinger, we can view the birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection as the “bearer.”

CHRIST-BEARER: A TRANSPARENT UNDERSTANDING OF THE HUMAN JESUS

Again, we point to the root of the problem that lies in the transition between the Hebrew/Jewish world view and the Roman/Greek world view. The Greeks believed in a supernatural world. This is the Greek foundation for our current spiritual understanding of meta-physics, literally, “beyond” the “physical.” But we are led far astray from the Jewish understanding that God is not beyond the physical. Instead, God is intimately bound up within every human; God is as close as our breath.

When we “de-mystify” Jesus, then we can “see through him” to his true function as the “bearer of Christ.” The German story of St. Christopher tells this tale. Saint Christopher became the one who carried the Christ child: hence, Christ-bearer, or in German, *Christus--Offer*.

WORK SHEET

Using the hymn¹ “There’s Something About That Name,” write a paragraph using your understanding of how a Jew understands the name Joshua. Push your thinking from a supernatural “Jesus” into something that relates to your human experience. Ask this question, “In light of the Study Section above, what is my experience of Jesus?” Be honest with yourself.

For example: Jesus is the message of the Good News. He bears a message of hope found in the mist of my hopelessness.

THERE’S SOMETHING ABOUT THAT NAME

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!
There’s just something about that name!
Master, Savior, Jesus!
Like the fragrance after the rain.
Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!
Let all heaven and earth proclaim:
Kings and kingdoms will all pass away,
But there’s something about that name.

You may want to try a transliteration of this hymn.

OK, you try it. Have fun with it.

¹ The United Methodist Hymnal # 171.

TOPIC #4: CHRIST (1) -- RE-BALANCING OUR RELATIONSHIPS

STUDY SECTION

In the review of the Old Christian Code Word for Jesus, we learned that Christ is not Jesus' last name. However, we did make the startling announcement that Jesus' first name is not Jesus. Rather, his Jewish name is Joshua. The English version of Joshua is translated as Jesus.

Now, let's turn to the name "Christ" to see what we can learn. As the title of this Study Section indicates, we will do two studies on this word. Our first study examines the Christ dynamic for re-balancing our relationships. The next Study Section will examine the Christ dynamic of the sacrificial life.

CONTEXTUAL STATEMENT

NOT JESUS' LAST NAME--

If "Christ" is not "Jesus" last name," then what does the word Christ represent? In the Hebrew/Jewish tradition, the expected Messiah was known as "The Anointed." This was a person who was set aside to do a special work. To the Jews, the Messiah would come to "redeem" them. However, in the Roman/Greek world, the word Christ was translated as "The Logos," or the eternal WORD: the meaning of everything.

Even a quick analysis of this sentence reveals how the Jewish tradition is more of a Gut-Trip Analysis," while the Greek tradition is more of a Head-Trip Analysis. It is necessary to remind ourselves that the Christian Testament (the New Testament) is a Greek document translated from the images and paradigms of the Jewish culture.

THE LOGOS

The Gospel of John opens with the famous phrase, "In the beginning was the *logos*, and the *logos* was with God, and the *logos* was God." This statement is confirmed in Genesis 1: First note that God makes creation out of the void by use of God's word, "Let there be. . ." God uses the *logos* to do the job. Second, note in Genesis 1: 26, when God creates humans God says, "Let us make

[humans]. . .“ The implication is that, at least, both God and the *Logos* are present.

THE MYTH OF THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT

The way we are using the word “MYTH” is in a technical sense. Traditionally, the word myth implies something untrue. However, when we apply the word myth in the biblical tradition, it means “something that is so true that it can only be explained in a story, metaphor, allegory, simile, fable, or parable. The first eleven chapters of Genesis fit this biblical description of myth.

The purpose of these chapters in Genesis is to describe, through some colorful story-telling, the truth concerning *how we humans got to be human*. Let me say it clearly: these stories have no historical fact. There are stories that floated around the Middle East for a thousand years, The ancient Hebrew story-tellers borrowed them and made them their own.¹

A TWO-FOLD TRUTH

The first truth to which these stories point describes our *spiritual reality*, or our spiritual home. Humans were created to live AT-ONE with God, with neighbor and with self. (You’ll recognize this triune formula in Jesus’ teaching known as the Great Commandment.). However, even living face-to-face with the Perfect At-One-Ment (God), we humans were enlightened by eating of the tree in the Garden known as the “Tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil.” (Genesis 2, 3.) The danger for God lay in the possibility that we humans would eat of the second tree, “The tree of Life,” and by implication of death. Should that have happened humans would have the knowledge equal to that of God. Because of our PROFOUND DISOBEDIENCE, God kicked us out of the Garden of Eden and we were expelled into THE WAY LIFE IS.

The second truth to which these stories point describes our *human or natural reality*, or our physical and natural abode. Beginning in Genesis 4, this human

¹For a more detailed treatment of this topic, turn back to the Study Section on The Human Situation.

reality is described in a series of stories: chapter 4 — Cain and Able, sibling rivalry and murder; chapter 5 - 9 --- Noah, the killing of the unfaithful, and salvaging The Remnant; chapter 11 — The Tower of Babel, pride and the confounding of humanity by language.

GOD HAS A PROBLEM

In chapter 12 the Abram saga begins. This is the beginning of the story of our salvation. Humans are expelled from the Garden of our mythological/spiritual reality, and left to their own devices to live in their human/natural reality. With their freedom humans were given the gift of FREE WILL.

But this leaves God with a problem. God loves humanity so much that God wants them to live AT-ONE with God, neighbor and self. But how to do this without destroying God's promised gift of Free Will? Obviously, the stories in Genesis 4 through 11: 9 tell of the human propensity to greed and selfishness. These things are the antithesis of At-One-Ment.

The answer to the question of our salvation is, literally the rest of the story found in both the Hebrew and the Christian Testaments. God's first answer provides The Law of the 10 Commandments as the measure of our PROFOUND OBEDIENCE. When this failed, then God came to live among humanity as God's *Word: The Anointed (Hebrew) Christ (The Greek Logos)*.

FROM DISOBEDIENCE TO OBEDIENCE

We humans are unable to provide the act of PROFOUND OBEDIENCE necessary to restore us to a permanent relationship to The Perfect At-One-Ment. We cannot fulfill the letter of The Law; it only convicts us. This left us in a state of separation. This is our state-of-being. We are separated from neighbor, self and God. The only way for humanity to be restored is through an act of profound obedience. This requires an act that is entirely outside ourselves, yet done for us.

WHY IS THIS ACT NECESSARY?

The issue behind the necessity for this off-setting act of profound obedience is how to preserve our Free Will. If God simply declares our forgiveness (being saved) without the necessity of an awakening, then the human choice to remain asleep would no longer be a choice. Our Free Will is overcome.

This act is provided through the ministry of The Christ: the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus CHRIST. The Christ deliberately chooses to die for us “while we were yet sinners [separated].”

The result is that when I have an awakened relationship with The Christ, and others have a similar relationship to Christ, we are united through our relationship to Christ.

The traditional theories, or doctrines, supporting this experience are the following:

Reconciliation — using an economic illustration, the monthly “reconciling” of our check book with our bank statement comes to mind. The same is applicable to our relationship with neighbor, self and God. On one side of the ledger is our separated selves. On the other side of the ledger are those separated from us. When we each have a relationship through Christ we are reconciled.

Justification --- This is another economic illustration with the same result; we are justified; the relationships are balanced through our relationships with Christ.

Atonement --- this is one of those words that spell out its meaning: AT-ONE-MENT. When separated relationships find common ground in their relationship through Christ, then they are made At-One; they are atoned.

CHRIST IS A UNIVERSAL EXPERIENCE

One caveat must be made: The experience of The Christ is a universal experience. If the *Logos* was in the beginning, and through all eternity, then the Christ Experience can not be limited to just Christians! However, it is limited to those who are AWAKENED TO IT. One further step: The Christ is already with

each and every human, whether they are asleep, or blind to it, or not. Yet, it is necessary to be awakened to the Christ to enjoy the benefits of Reconciliation, Justification, and Atonement.

WORK SHEET

In light of your review of the Study Section on Christ (1), analyze the following human predicament. Use the conclusions you just studied to write a paragraph on how you understand this situation.

ILLUSTRATION

Nick is unfaithful in his relationship with Rebecca. He has an affair with his office secretary. Rebecca recently experienced a spiritual awakening, but is consumed with guilt because she “may have done something to drive Nick away from her.”

What’s going on here?

For extra credit — Do you have a suggestion on how to affect a RECONCILIATION?

TOPIC # 5: CHRIST (2) — LIVING THE SACRIFICIAL LIFE (THE CROSS)

STUDY SECTION

OUR HUMAN SITUATION

In a previous session we identified The Christ as the enabler of the relationships between neighbor, self, and God. Observe that this is the triune formula of the New Commandment. What is the solution? Our *human situation* of separation is a state-of-being. We are fated to live in separation; i.e., male and female; black or yellow. Yet, our experience of separation is overcome as we experience Righteousness, Reconciliation, and/or At-One-Ment. The experience of these new relationships is what we point to when we say that "*the Christ made us whole!*" Note that this is a Gut-Trip Analysis of the statement to be saved.

OUR HUMAN PREDICAMENT

In this session, we examine the meaning of The Sacrificial Life. This is the life that addresses our *human predicament of being spiritually asleep*. It is a predicament because we cannot awaken ourselves. Our human situation is that we are spiritually asleep to the meaning of being human, and we can wish not to awaken to any other reality! Consequently, when a messenger is sent to tell us "Wake Up," we want to kill the messenger! Of course, this is what the Pharisees did to Jesus. Jesus reminded the Pharisees that they were not living the abundant life, and to Wake Up.

Actually, this human experience is very common. Every time my wife awakens me to some act of separation I'm doing, I strike back. This is the same as attacking the messenger because of the message.

It is our experience that we are spiritually asleep (like Lazarus), and *The Christ, the Anointed/Logos*, knocks on our tombs and calls us into a New Life. The experience of waking up is to acknowledge our Authentic Humanness as spiritual beings wrapped in natural bodies. This is the experience of "being born again."

Note the process

1. We are asleep to our spiritual realities;
2. We deny that our natural existence is only a small part of reality;
3. As we are awakened we are confronted with a choice: return to sleep, or awaken, and re-awaken, and re-awaken. . . . etc.;
4. The one who delivers this message to us is in danger of being crucified.

THE EXPERIENCE OF THIS CHRIST

THE GERMAN EXPERIENCE

During the 20th Century, the Christian Church fermented a theological revolution based on finding the meaning to "living the sacrificial life." This search for meaning has its roots in the German theologians fighting against the Nazi regime in Germany. Among these familiar names are Rudolf Bultmann, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Paul Tillich, Richard and Reinhold Niebuhr, and Viktor Frankl. Their social understanding of Christian theology issued a wake up call against the inhumanity of the German Third Reich. This wake up call was picked up in the black civil right's marches, the marches for the civil rights of women, later for the physically disabled, and more recently for the gay community, All of these "marches" are wake up calls for all of us to awaken to the meaning of full humanness for all human-kind.

Wherever awakening takes place, this is the living work of The Christ.

THE LATIN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

The courage of the church's priests and missionaries in a crusade for the theological awakening in Latin America is inspiring. This awakening is bought through their deaths and martyrdom. The familiar dynamic here is named "Liberation Theology."

THE FEMININE EXPERIENCE

The legacy of Liberation Theology is picked up by the secular and the theological feminist movement. Today, almost every female Christian theologian represents some form of the female liberation movement.

The niche experience

In the last decade, many of the human experiences were enlightened by some aspect of The Christ. For example:

The Disabled God: toward a liberatory theology of disability (Nancy L. Eiesland);

The Black Christ (Kelly Brown Douglas);

We Were Baptized Too: claiming God's Grace for Lesbians and Gays (Marilyn Bennett Alexander and James Preston);

The Suffering Christ (Henry Nouwen).

This is only the tiniest tip of a publishing iceberg on this topic.

The point to be made is that most humans are spiritually asleep. The work of God's disciples is to be spiritual alarm clocks awakening people to REALITY! That is, to be awakened to the intentional purpose for which humans were created: to be humane and human.

WORK SHEET

As I learned more about the faith that supported Black people in their struggle through slavery and the many other trials of White racism, I discovered that my grandmother's faith was not unique. The Black Christian experience has been one in which Black people have consistently confirmed the presence of a sustaining and liberating Christ in their lives. This Christ reflects Black people's strident no to any notion that the God of Jesus Christ put them on earth to be chattel, "strange fruit" in Southern trees, or anything less than full human persons. This sustaining and liberating Christ of Black faith represents God's urgent movement in human history to set Black captives free from the demons of White racism.¹

In light of the topic, answer the following:

1. Write a sentence to remind yourself of the **human situation** of Black slavery.
2. Write a sentence to remind yourself of the **human predicament** of White society ("the demons of White racism) that allowed slavery to exist. (How does the slavery of others represent White Americans being spiritually asleep and can't awaken themselves?)
3. Make a note on how White America denied their awakening? (Identify the "demon of White racism.")
4. Make a note to describe how you may, or may not, participate in this denial.
5. Describe the work of Martin Luther King as an agent of The Christ.
6. After your own awakening, what did you do to keep spiritually awake?

¹Douglas, Kelly Brown. The Black Christ. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), "Introduction."

TOPIC # 6: THE HOLY SPIRIT --- EXPERIENCING OUR FREEDOM

STUDY SECTION

START BY WRITING DOWN YOUR OWN DEFINITION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. Please do it now before you read on.

Among the four most common expressions of the Christian Faith (God, Jesus, Christ, Holy Spirit), the term "Holy Spirit" is one of the most misunderstood terms. To date, we reminded ourselves of the following:

GOD The "Big Picture" revealed as The Guarantor, The Meaning of Life, Perfect At-One-Ment, GOODNESS.

JESUS The "Little Picture" of At-One-Ment revealed in the human Jesus; the one who demonstrates the sacrificial life;

CHRIST The Anointed One (Hebrew) and the Logos/Word (Greek); the activity that is the reconciliation, justification and/or atonement of our lives. Also, the Christ is experienced as the sacrificial life.

Our purpose is to associate these Old Christian Code Words with our *human experience*. The old "code words" are IDEAS about reality. When we associate these words with our human EXPERIENCE, then reality is understood and appreciated. Now the words *mean something*.

THIS IS OUR EXPERIENCE OF THE WORD HOLY SPIRIT.

First, the word "spirit" gets a bad rap because it gets associated with the supernatural. Nothing could be further from the truth. "Spirit" is associated with AT-ONE-MENT; it is an aspect of God who is the Perfect At-One-Ment. At-One-Ment is not supernatural; rather it is the goal for all human experience. We want to resolve every activity, thought and experience in At-One-Ment. In this way, we experience a peace that passes understanding.

Second, the word "holy" gets a bad rap for similar reasons. Anything supernatural is a Head-Trip Analysis, and not a Gut-Trip Analysis. The word Holy can be associated with health, wholeness, goodness, a deep sense of satisfaction.

The words “Holy Spirit” represent the end result of living AT-ONE with neighbor, self, and God, the fulfillment of the New Commandment. Consider the following:

A prisoner in the Salina County Jail is searching for peace in his life. His life is frustrated by family abuse at home, his “freedom” is restricted in jail, and he feels he is a victim of his circumstances, and in the same way he believes he has victimized others.

In counseling the prisoner, we explore what it means to be victimized and to be a victor. “What’s the difference,” I ask? His reply hits at the heart of the matter. “The difference is my choice!” BINGO.

An interesting side note to this story is that after three months in jail, this prisoner still practices THE FREEDOM OF HIS CHOICE. He is a better prisoner, and a better man.

Let’s look together at this story. The prisoner is awakened to a new understanding. This awakening is the experience of the Christ Event. This event offers him a new decision. As an awakened individual he has a choice: he can remain awake, or to go back to spiritual sleep. THE FREEDOM OF HIS CHOICE IS THE WORK OF HEALTHY AT-ONE-MENT, the Holy Spirit.

One more observation. Once we are awakened, we can never deny the experience — we have seen the light. However, we can go back into spiritual sleep. Yet, every time we are awakened again, the experience is that of a SPIRITUAL ALARM CLOCK! This spiritual clock is another aspect of the Holy Spirit.

INSTANT EVANGELISM

It is possible to practice giving people their freedom of choice. This is done through asking a simple question while saying goodbye. Ask, "Have a good day, will you?"

The power is in the question. When asked, the individual to whom this is addressed must form an instant opinion: "Yes, I will have a good day." Or, "No, I won't." Either answer is an expression of their choice empowered by the Holy Spirit.

It is so simple. It can be said to any sales clerk, or to the toll-taker at the highway toll booth. Try it! Give someone their gift of freedom.

WORK SHEET

Read over the following poem song with an eye and/or an ear to the meaning of FREEDOM as the experience of CHOICE.

FREE AM I¹

Tune: Summertime

Free am I, come aware at the center.
 Standing nowhere, and forever exposed.
Shaping who I am, and the one who will be.
 I'm now becoming, endlessly.

Free am I, fated to life and dying;
 There is naught to blame, life's a gift to receive.
Feeling all our woes, and creating the future.
 I'm final measure, endlessly.

Free am I, now beyond good and evil,
 Deciding the right, and surrendering the deed.
Ever smiled upon by the mercy of Being:
 I'm then commissioned, endlessly.

Free am I, coming home on the journey.
 Putting gods to flight with the bend of the knee.
Heavy burdens light, all life's cares made easy.
 I'm under judgment, endlessly.

Go back to read your first definition of The Holy Spirit at the beginning of this session. What do you think? Write a paragraph on how your definition of The Holy Spirit is changed.

¹ Used with the permission of the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA): John Burbige

TOPIC # 7: THE CHURCH -- THE AWAKENED

STUDY SECTION

START BY WRITING DOWN YOUR OWN DEFINITION OF THE CHURCH.

Please do it now before you read on.

The literature examining the word "CHURCH" is another of the "misunderstood" words. Like other Old Christian Code Words, the word "church" became an *idea about something*, rather than the *experience of something*; the word became institutionalized; the word became an organization. This is demonstrated by giving an assignment to almost any age group to draw a picture of "the church" and what you'll get back is a picture of a building.

One of the big problems with many churches is they have an 'edifice complex.' Almost universally, the largest percentage of any budget goes to support the building. The next largest percentage goes to support the pastors and staff. A minuscule percentage goes to support the ministry and outreach of the church.

During the 1940's and 1950's, H. Richard Niebuhr gave us a new tool to describe "The Church as a Social Pioneer." Niebuhr makes the point that,

"The Church . . . is the sensitive and responsive part in every society and the human community as a whole. It is that group which hears the Word of God, which sees God's judgments, which has the vision of the resurrection."¹

The Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) took this definition from Niebuhr's book and wrote words to the theme from "Exodus." The first verse is:

The Church of God is like the pioneer, the sensitive, responsive one.
Who hears the Word of God and sees His judgments,

¹Niebuhr, H, Richard. "The Church as social pioneer." A study paper of the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA).

And has the vision of the resurrection.²

The words **pioneer** and **sensitive and responsive** are fairly well understood. However, several other statements in this song need to be run through our human experience.

- ❖ For instance, **hears the Word of God** = the Good News illustrated in the statement “You can live the life you have and live it abundantly!”
- ❖ **Sees His judgments** = people not living abundantly illustrated in the statement, “I’m waiting for my ship to come in,” or, “I’m this way because I’m a victim of my circumstances.” These statements are judged by the Word of God because *our ship is already in!* We need to pick up the life we have and live it! Now we have a choice to be victims or victors.
- ❖ **Has the vision of the resurrection** = Even in the middle of hopelessness and meaninglessness, we are not abandoned by the Good News.

Note that Niebuhr’s definition of the church is on what the church does. Another way of saying this is what the church does is what the church is. A second definition of The Church was given to me by John Cock, a friend in North Carolina. His definition is that **The Church consists of Spirit’s Servants**. Observe that this is not “Spirit Servants,” but rather “Servants of the Spirit.” I like this definition because the emphasis is on an activity (servanthood) and it describes to whom we commit our servanthood (The Spirit). We are those in service to “Life’s Alarm Clock” awakening people to full surrender of who they are and what they have to serve The Meaning and Purpose of Life (God).

The third definition of The Church is my own. But I see it demonstrated more and more by those who practice being The Church. The Church is **The Awakened Ones**. This term is implied in Niebuhr’s statement concerning the “sensitive and responsive ones.” Using the figure in the above paragraph, The

²Used with the permission of the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA): John Burbige.

Church consists of those who have heard their spiritual alarm clocks and have chosen to help awaken others.

WORK SHEET

From the reading in the “Study Section, what is the problem we have in understanding a definition of The Church?

Using Niebuhr’s definition of The Church as the “sensitive and responsive ones,” illustrate an example of a “sensitive and responsive” group or a group-within-a-group. If necessary, re-read H. Richard Niebuhr statement in the Study Section.

If this activity/event illustrates The Church at work, then what is— **THE JUDGEMENT OF GOD?** (Did this event happen because of our being **un-human** (racism, sexism), or because of our being **in-human** (pride or self-depreciation)?

THE VISION OF THE RESURRECTION? Where did you see, or experience, hope in this event?

Describe how the church is the activity of **THE AWAKENED**. What does it mean to be a “Spiritual Alarm Clock?”

TOPIC # 8: THE CROSS --- A WONDROUS ATTRACTION FOR US

STUDY SECTION

Along with the words "God," "Jesus," "Christ," and/or "Jesus Christ," the word THE CROSS is another one of the most frequently used words in the Christian lexicon. However, like all of our Old Christian Code Words, we are left with an idea about The Cross, rather than the experience of The Cross.

An example of what I mean by "an idea about The Cross" is illustrated in the hymn "Lift High The Cross"¹. Observe these words:

Chorus: Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim till all the world
adore his sacred name.
Come, Christians, follow this triumphant sign.
The hosts of God in unity combine.

In the chorus, "the cross" is associated with "the love of Christ." How is the experience of the "love of Christ" associated with "the cross?" Do you see the problem? Certainly, everyone knows (or thinks they know) what "the love of Christ," is, but what is it?

This may appear to be knit-picking our hymnody, but the hymnal is filled with Head Trip stuff. However, it is interesting to note that any brief review of our hymnody concerning the cross is a lot better theology than most other sections. For example, "Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed:"²

Vs. 2

Was it for crimes that I have done, he groaned upon the tree?
Amazing pity! Grace unknown! And love beyond degree!

¹The United Methodist Hymnal # 159.

²The United Methodist Hymnal # 294.

Vs. 4

Thus might I hide my blushing face while his dear cross appears;
Dissolve my heart in thankfulness, and melt mine eyes to tears.

This is something to which we all can relate: I understand "my crimes" and my "blushing face" is something to which I can relate. My "eyes melted to tears" is something with which I can associate.

Vs. 3 is key to my experience of The Cross. Observe:

". . .dissolve my heart in thankfulness. . ."

Why "thankfulness?" Why is the cross a wondrous attraction for me?" It is a wondrous attraction for us because The Cross is the event by which the human condition (i.e., our fatedness to be the gender we are) is made AT-ONE with the Perfect At-One-Ment that is God. For example, it is my fate to be a male. So, what is my hope to defeat this profound experience of separation from females? Remember, separation is the antithesis of At-One-Ment. There is no hope! Jean-Paul Sartre is correct; there is "No Exit." If there is no exit, then what is the solution? The solution is the following:

RECONCILIATION

When males have a personal relationship to The Event of Crucifixion, and when females have a personal relationship to the Event of Crucifixion, the unifying principle is the Event of the Crucifixion. The bridge to this new relationship is "Reconciliation;" two sides are brought into balance. In this way, my hopeless human situation is transformed into hope through the reconciliation of the cross of Christ.

JUSTIFICATION

As in reconciliation, the unequal sides of our ledgers are brought into balance with the opposing relationships. In this way our hopeless human situations are transformed into hope through our justification in the cross of Christ.

RIGHTEOUSNESS

In explaining our human condition, the early Hebrews turned to the myth of the Garden Story. As the word is used here, myth is something that is so true that it can only be expressed in parable, simile or metaphor. The first Adam and Eve were profoundly disobedient in the Garden of Eden, desiring the knowledge of Good and Evil, and the knowledge of Life and Death. To prevent this, the first couple was kicked out of the Garden of At-One-Ment to live forever in The Way Life Is (TWLI). In this state, humans live as the unrighteous because they are no longer "right" with God the Perfect At-One-Ment.

Enter Jesus—the Messiah/Anointed--Christ is the profound act of obedience by deciding to intentionally die on our behalf. When we each have a personal relationship to Jesus Christ we are made "right" again.

ATONEMENT

The human predicament is that human beings are out of synch with our intended purpose of living AT-ONE with God, neighbor and self, thus fulfilling the New Commandment of Jesus Christ to love God and neighbor as we love ourselves. In this predicament, we fulfill the opposite purpose, or the antithesis of how God created us to live. The conscious act of Jesus Christ demonstrated that obedience to God is to live AT-ONE with God, neighbor and self, and fulfill our intended purpose as human beings. This is the doctrine of the Atonement.

THESE FOUR CONCEPTS, RECONCILIATION, JUSTIFICATION, RIGHTEOUSNESS, AND AT-ONE-MENT, DEFINE THE ACTIVITY OF THE CROSS. IS IT ANY WONDER THAT THE CROSS HAS A WONDROUS ATTRACTION FOR US?

WORK SHEET

Read over the hymn¹ "The Old Rugged Cross" from the perspective of Justification, Reconciliation, Righteousness and/or Atonement. From one or more of these perspectives, how does this information make a difference in your appreciation of the hymn?

For example:

JUSTIFICATION: VS. 1

". . . the emblem of suffering and shame. . . for a world of lost sinners was slain." The experience of the cross -- suffering and shame I understand. "Lost sinners" is Head-Trip Analysis," and when this statement is run though our human experience "lost sinners" are those victimized by our fate to live and die as those separated from each other. This fails to achieve the At-One-Ment desired by God. The Cross of Justification provides the bridge between opposing parties. This is the gift of Justification.

RIGHTEOUSNESS: VS. 2

". . . for the dear Lamb of God left his glory above. . ." This whole sentence is head trippy. Yet, when these words are run through our human experience they represent something meaningful. Take some time to reflect on your experience of the Lamb of God. Read what we've said about "God" as Perfect At-One-Ment. How does our experience of a lamb support this definition?

RECONCILIATION: VS. 3

". . .stained with blood so divine. . . for 'twas on that old cross Jesus suffered and died to pardon and sanctify me." Well, the stain of blood is no problem for me; this comes out of our human experience. Since "Pardon and sanctify me" are Head-Trip words, what is our experience of being pardoned? Recall that sanctification is the experience of living as an Awakened Christian. What is our experience of these words?

¹The United Methodist Hymnal # 504.

ATONEMENT: vs. 4

" . . . share and reproach" I clearly understand. This is the price of discipleship; we are seen as being different and/or misunderstood. It is the last phrase of this hymn ". . . to my home far away, where his glory forever I'll share" is head trippy. Where is our "home far away?" If we thought of our "home" as the place where we live in At-One-Ment with God, neighbor and self, what is our experience of this "home?"

OK, try your hand at it.

TOPIC # 9: THE BLOOD OF JESUS CHRIST --- THE CLEANSING EXPERIENCE

STUDY SECTION

Among all of the words in the Christian lexicon, the Blood of Jesus Christ are the least used words and the least understood. This is particularly true in my own denomination of the United Methodist Church. I don't believe it was always this way, but I am a churchman of over 60 years, and I can never remember this topic explored from the pulpit. The exception is the few attempts I've made.

The "Blood of Jesus Christ" is central to our *salvation*. I've italicized the word *salvation* to note this is one of our Old Christian Code Words. Everyone has an idea about the meaning of this word. The result drives a wedge between people holding different views. This defeats our purpose as human beings which is to live At-One with neighbor, self and God.

When the word *salvation* is pushed through our human experience (Gut-Trip Analysis), every one can relate to the meaning of this word. *Salvation* means to be freed from slavery to victimization; we have a choice to be victims or victors, and it means to be freed to fulfill the creative gifts we are and have. This is the experience of authenticity. We are free from living a lie. We are freed to "Know the truth and the truth will set us free." (John 5:32)

Now, that we have *salvation* defined in our human experience, let's look at this dynamic in light of the two great events in Judeo/Christian history: Passover and Crucifixion.

PASSOVER

For the Hebrews, the Passover is the story that authenticates their purpose as God's People. After Egyptian slavery for hundreds of years, Moses receives the call to set the Hebrew people free. This is accomplished after getting Pharaoh's attention. The last attention getter is the threat that death would pass over the land killing all of the first born children, unless the door posts of their homes were painted with the "Blood of the Lamb." The Hebrews painted their

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doorposts, and the Egyptians failed to do it. The result was that Pharaoh was impressed enough to allow the Hebrew people to be set free!

CRUCIFIXION

For Christians, the Crucifixion is the story that authenticates our purpose as Christian People. The Old Adam of Genesis is the story of how humans became human! The disobedience, and independence, of the Garden Children to eat of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is a defining experience. The next day when Adam and Eve awoke from their slumber, they discover they are naked and no longer in the garden. These mythical children are conscious of being conscious about their consciousness. In other words, humans are free to live fully human and fully awake to their spiritual reality.

This is a nice story but the implications are profound. But there is a problem. Humanity obviously is fully human and seldom fully awake spiritually. The rest of the story is God's attempt to AWAKEN humanity to their spiritual reality in order to live as WHOLE PEOPLE.

As scripture asks, "Who is willing to die for those who are spiritually asleep? Some might die for a righteous cause. Others might die in service to those who are spiritually awake. But who will die for those ASLEEP; that is for those living selfishly and greedily?"

(My paraphrase on Romans 5: 7.)

The solution is for Perfect At-One-Ment (God) to live among us as Jesus The Christ (Messiah/Anointed; the New Adam). His purpose is to perform an act of re-balancing the profound disobedience of the first Adam. This is accomplished through the act of Jesus shedding blood on behalf of all human creation.

The following paraphrase of the Apostle's Creed supports this notion:

"The Lamb of God sits at the right hand of God in the realm of Perfect At-One-Ment (God). The Lamb is sent to our human experience through a "virgin birth," lives, dies, is buried, descends into hell, and rises from the dead. After 40 days living as the walking dead, Jesus--as The Christ--ascends back into the realm of God where he again sits on God's throne. Only this time, the throat of the Lamb of God is cut and drops of blood

fall down to permeate the earth as the yeast that cleanses us from our spiritual sleep in The Way Life Is. Then, the Blood awakens us to the full, wholesome, whole reality of The Really Real; the life of God intended for us to live in Perfect At-One-Ment.”

THE BLOOD COVENANT

A thorough reading of the Old Testament reveals an interesting pattern associated with the Blood Covenant. The foundation of this story concerns the relationship of David and Jonathan who made covenant together based on their friendship.

And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt. (1 Samuel 18: 3, 4.)

So Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, “May the Lord call David’s enemies to account.” And Jonathan had David reaffirm his oath out of love for him, because he loved him as he loved himself. (1 Samuel 20: 16, 17.)

There is the brief outline of the covenanting process, and the ultimate seriousness in which it is taken.¹

Jonathan and David were “blood brothers:”

First, they exchanged robes as the symbol of putting on each other. Their relationship was serious enough to wear each other.

Second, they exchanged swords and bows as the symbol that from now on David’s enemies were Jonathan’s enemies, and Jonathan’s friends were David’s friends.

¹This information can be gleaned from the Old Testament. However, for this information I am in debt to Malcolm Smith who delivered these ideas in a lecture series he called “Terms of the Blood Covenant.”

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Third, they exchanged belts on which small knives were carried. These knives were used to cut a symbol into the palm of their right hands. Even today, when we greet people we offer the right hands empty of any instrument for harm. Also, if the palm is slightly upturned to reveal the scar in the palm, the individual to be greeted knows to whom we belong. This foreshadows the nail holes in the hands of Jesus, marking the one to whom we belong.

Fourth, on the belt would be a small bag of money symbolizing the exchange of their earthly wealth and earthly debts.

Fifth, they broke bread, feeding each other a piece of bread symbolizing the eating of each other in order to wrap themselves around the other. This was followed by an exchange of wine glasses symbolizing the drinking of each other's blood.

At weddings I frequently explain the seriousness of the Holy Covenant of marriage by using this illustration. Sometimes, I say to the congregation that, while the marriage service is special, the most holy moment for me is at the wedding reception when the couple exchanges the symbols of cake and juice/wine. Literally, the couple is saying, "We are so serious about our relationship, that we are going to wrap our bodies around each other in order to make ourselves one!"

Also, this clarifies why "On the night that Jesus was betrayed, he took bread/wine, and said to his disciples, 'Eat and drink for this is my body and blood,'" none of the Disciples declared, "Yech! What is this, cannibalism?" Nothing of the sort! They knew what was going on because the Hebrew nation practiced covenant for 2,000 years before Jesus performed this event.

So there we have it! The Blood of Christ is our New Covenant. We are asked to remember this event frequently. Paul reminds us to remember our covenant with Christ every time we break bread and drink. Isn't this why we pray before meals?

The following is material prepared by Gene Marshall who writes in the *Realistic Living: a journal on ethics and religion*. His topic is "Washed in the Blood of the Awed Ones."

Each of us has been part of a truth-resisting humanity. Each of us has had blood shed for us. Perhaps you can recall a bold teacher who told you truth that you did not want to hear at the time. Perhaps you hated that teacher. Perhaps you mistreated that teacher with your feigned boredom or your caustic comments. Perhaps you said discrediting things about that teacher. And perhaps now you treasure that teacher. Perhaps you are now more grateful for that challenging teacher than for the teachers you thought were more kind to you. You have been washed in the blood of that teacher.

. . . Blood is shed because "God" is forgiving. Even though we have been hostile to the truth, abusing and perhaps killing those who brought truth to us, "God" welcomes us home to the truth. . . We were made for truth, and truth is our true home. We have found our family and our family is glad to see us.

. . . We are washed in the blood. The blood of Jesus was shed for us. He did so willingly. . . He knew that all of us are forgiven. He knows that the very same humanity that killed him was also welcomed home to the authentic life that Jesus himself lived and taught. He offered us a cup filled with his own blood and bade us drink.¹

¹"Realistic Living Newsletter, June 2003, Issue No. 38. Gene and Joyce Marshall write and publish this newsletter. You may contact them at Realistic Living, Rt. 3, Box 104-A5, Bonham, TX 75418.

WORK SHEET

In light of our conversation in the Study Section above, please turn to the Charles Wesley hymn,¹ “Spirit of Faith Come Down.” Your assignment is to study each verse in light of Passover, Crucifixion and the Blood Covenant.

Vs. 1: “. . . .reveal the things of God.” What are “the things of God?” Re-read the “Passover” paragraph, in the Study Section and recall the freedom won by the Hebrew people. Next, re-read the “Crucifixion” paragraph and note the capitalized words (p. 65: AWAKEN humanity; WHOLE PEOPLE). What does this tell you about “the things of God?”

Vs. 2 How does the phrase “. . . and breathe the living Word” relate to “. . .our interest in his blood?” Re-read “The Blood Covenant” section again. Review in your own mind the experience of the covenant. How is this “Good News” the living Word?

Vs. 3 What is the meaning of the phrase “. . . the all atoning Lamb?” Re-read the paragraph on “Passover,” and relate it to the ways in which humans are enslaved and saved.

Vs. 4. What is the meaning of the phrase “and saves . . .who’ere on Jesus call, and perfects them in love?” Re-read the introductory remarks about salvation. Make note how this information interprets the phrase, “Inspire the living faith. . . .that conquers all, and doth the mountain move, and saves who’ere on Jesus call and perfects them in love.”

¹The United Methodist Hymnal # 332.

TOPIC # 10: THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN -- THE SPIRITUAL OASIS

STUDY SECTION

Teilhard de Chardin writes, the earth

. . .has become almost completely luminous from within. Such has been my experience in contact with the earth--the *diaphany of the Divine* at the heart of the universe on fire; Christ, his heart, a fire, capable of penetrating everywhere and gradually spreading everywhere. (*Italics mine.*)¹

The diaphany of the Divine! What a lovely metaphor. To understand the word *diaphany* think of butterfly wings, or think transparency. Marcus Borg in his book The Heart of Christianity explains this phenomenon as "Thin Places."

"Thin places" are places where these two levels of reality meet or intersect. They are places where the boundary between the two levels becomes very soft, porous, and permeable. Thin places are places where the veil momentarily lifts, and we behold God, experience the one in whom we live, all around us and within us."²

A colleague wrote an email the other day to observe, "Sometimes in classes or groups I seem to want to say things in a deeper level and I can't seem to find the right words to travel there. My thoughts are there, my feelings are there, I sometimes think that my actions are there. I'm at a loss for words. I think my spirituality is running deeper than I had ever thought possible."

My response was, "The object of this conversation is how to experience reality. Reality is all we have, and we have it all of the time. The key word here is experience. The reality we experience is the reality that overwhelms us and

¹Reprinted from Borg, Marcus. The Heart of Christianity (San Francisco: Harper 155.)

²*Ibid.* 155, 156.

blocks our awareness of something more. It is this "something more" that I identify as *our* SPIRITUAL OASIS. This is the experience of Awakening to reveal that God is with us! The more we awaken, the more this is revealed.

It is where human reality meets Spiritual Reality that I call the SPIRITUAL OASIS. Borg calls this experience meeting "the more."³

WHAT ARE THE DYNAMICS OF THE SPIRITUAL OASIS?

First, the Spiritual Oasis is not an escape from reality. Recently, I explained the experience of the Spiritual Oasis. "My life finds its meaning through living in the shadow of Perfect At-One-Ment. This doesn't mean I live without contradictions. But it does mean that I bring my contradictions with me to this relationship. That is, I embrace all of my life, just as it is!"

Bringing our contradictions with us is like saying we bring our experience in the deserts of life with us to the Spiritual Oasis. In the Spiritual Oasis we find that living is more than food and drink. It is here we eat our daily bread--no matter how moldy---and see through it to a deep satisfaction. And it is our ability to take our daily drink and see through it to the Living Water to quench our spiritual thirst. In other words, the Spiritual Oasis is not an escape from The Way Life Is, but its intensification.

Second, is it possible to permanently live in the Spiritual Oasis? The answer is an ambivalent No and Yes.

THE PROBLEM OF AMBIVALENCE

On one hand, humans are stuck in human reality without choice. It is our fate to be human. Often, I describe the human experience as living in the desert where we are thirsty and hungry; it is hot and dry; life is hard and ends in death.

On the other hand, as *we awaken to the experience of deep satisfaction* we became awake that there is "more" to living than just the desert. Often, I describe this as an experience of living in both a Human Reality and Spiritual

³*Ibid.* The experience of "the more" is introduced on pages 65 ff.

Reality. It is human because we bring our contradictions with us. And it is spiritual because it is the experience of deep satisfaction, love, and spiritual nourishment. This is the "more" that is the experience of At-One-Ment, the Kingdom of Heaven, the Spiritual Oasis.

THE DANGER OF A PARALLEL UNIVERSE

There is a danger to be avoided that is called the parallel universe; i.e., living in two *objective* worlds simultaneously, that is an *objective human reality*, and an *objective spiritual realm understood as heaven*. I want to deny this parallel experience because it makes our Spiritual Oasis an object, or a concept, to be studied rather than the experience of it.

So what's the answer?

THE SOUP OF LIFE: OUR TWO REALITIES EXPERIENCED AS ONE

The answer is that both our human reality and our Spiritual Reality are found in the soup of life. We experience these two realities as one, and that the one is found in the other. To grasp these dynamics it is necessary to put on reality glasses. One lens illuminates the things in the soup that are part of our human experiences: pain, joy, frustration, and death. The other lens illuminates the things in the soup that represents our spiritual experiences: joy, peace, deep satisfaction, At-One-Ment.

The lens of our human experience we use all of the time. The lens of our spiritual experience is used little, if at all. Consequently, it is when we awaken our spiritual sight that we experience the "thin places."

YES, IT IS POSSIBLE TO CONSTANTLY LIVE IN THE SPIRITUAL OASIS

The more we awaken to our life in a human soup where Human Reality and Spiritual Reality co-exist the longer we experience the deep satisfaction of living in our Spiritual Oasis. It is learning to bring to our Spiritual Oasis our failures and our successes, our anger and our joy. It is learning to bring all of our human propensities and contradictions to the Spiritual Oasis. In other words, as we Awaken to the wonders of the Spiritual Oasis the more we desire to let every

human experience--the bad and the good--to be washed in the waters of our Spiritual Oasis.

Howard Thurman, the confidant and spiritual advisor to Martin Luther King thoroughly grounds this point for us.

I am determined to live the outer life in the inward sanctuary. The outer life must find its meaning, the source of its strength in the inward sanctuary. As this is done, the gulf between the outer and inner will narrow and my life will be increasingly whole and of one piece. What I do in the outer will be blessed by the holiness of the inward sanctuary; for indeed it shall all be one.¹

JESUS CALLED THIS EXPERIENCE THE KINGDOM OF GOD (HEAVEN)

The thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew is what I identify as part of the Teacher's Handbook for teaching the Spiritual Oasis. The chapter has six parables of Jesus concerning the "secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven." (13:11 NIV)

Concerning the Parable of the Sower (13: 1 - 23 NIV), the Disciples ask Jesus "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" The implications of Jesus' reply are that parables are the language that takes us into the Spiritual Oasis. Jesus continues to make this point in verse 16, "But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear." In other words, those who have spiritual eyes and ears experience the joy (blessedness) of living At-One in the Kingdom of Heaven; i.e., the Spiritual Oasis. Spiritual eyes and ears see and hear the fulfillment of life right in the middle of all our human contradictions and foibles.

¹ Thurman, Howard. Meditation of the Heart. "The Outer Life and the Inward Sanctuary." Beacon Press. 1953. p. 173.

THE SPIRITUAL OASIS IS AN EXPERIENCE FOR EVERYONE

This experience is not limited only to Christians, it is something that all humans experience. Christians name this experience the Kingdom of Heaven. Others never name it, and some may give it other names. Thich Nhat Hanh (Thay), a Buddhist monk, describes it this way.

The miracle is not to walk on thin air or on water, but to walk on Earth. The Earth is so beautiful. We are beautiful also. We can allow ourselves to walk mindfully, touching Earth, our wonderful mother, with each step. We don't need to wish our friends 'Peace be with you.' Peace is already with them. We only need to help them cultivate the habit of touching peace in each moment.¹

There it is. This is the purpose for those living in the Spiritual Oasis. We are to help others "cultivate the habit of touching peace in each moment."

SO, WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

What is the difference between being a Christian and a non-Christian? Actually, there is no difference. We all live lives within the same reality, but our perception of reality can be as different as our race, culture, genetics, or educational experiences are different. Christians are those who are AWAKE to the "Thin Places." Jesus named this understanding The Kingdom of Heaven." We name this the experience of the Spiritual Oasis.

Non-Christians may be AWAKE to their Spiritual Oasis but never give it a name. Others may never awaken to it, but it doesn't matter because this experience comes to everyone whether they are awake and have named their experience or not.

¹Quotation from a workshop on "Cultivated The Satisfied Heart" at a Mindfulness Retreat, March 7, 2004 at St. Crispin's Episcopal Conference Center, Seminole, Oklahoma.

THE CHRISTIAN COMMISSION

Because Christians are Awake and have named it, Christians are commissioned to help others awaken to the Kingdom of God, or to the experience of their Spiritual Oasis. It is not necessary that everyone name the reality, but the experience belongs to everyone nonetheless.

WORK SHEET

The assignment is a Bible Study on Matthew 13: 36 through 44 (NIV): The Parable of the Weeds. I can count ten metaphors identified in this section. Our approach is to divide a paper into two columns. The Left column is labeled The Phrase in Scripture, and the right column is labeled A metaphor For Relating to "The Human Experience," or the "Spiritual Experience."

The ten phrase-metaphors I've listed. In the other column you decide if these phrases can be associated with the experience of Human Reality (the human experience), or with the experience of Spiritual Reality (the experience of the Spiritual Oasis).

THE PHRASE IN SCRIPTURE	A METAPHOR FOR "THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE" OR FOR THE "SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE"
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The field is the world2. The good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom3. The weeds are the sons of the evil one4. The enemy is the Devil5. The harvest is the end of the age6. The harvesters are angels7. The weeds are pulled up and burned8. The Son of Man will send out his angels9. They will weed out his kingdom of everything that causes sin and all who do evil.10. Then the righteous will shine like the sun	

TOPIC # 11: THE GRACE-FILLED LIFE -- TRANSPARENCY

STUDY SECTION

When asked to critique a sermon for a pastor, I ask, "Where is the 'So what?'" What is it God is asking the congregation as the Awakened People of God to do? Perhaps, this is an appropriate time to ask this about our study of our Old Christian Code Words. "So what?" After all of our Old Christian Code Words are translated from Head-Trips into Gut-Trips, what is it God expects those now Awakened to do? My answer to this question is that God expects the Awakened to live transparently.

TRANSPARENCY DEFINED

What I mean by the word transparency is to allow people to look through us. This definition, attached to the meaning of being the Awakened, means that our actions, choices and life styles reveal something about being an authentic human being. I have a book on my book shelf that convicts me every time I look at the book's title. It is, "*are you fun to live with?*"¹ The Foreword describes the author's purpose. "The emphasis is on *how* one can apply the principles of communication which are integral to the Spirit of Christ and to the deepest desires of human nature." For our purposes, the statement, ". . .integral to the Spirit of Christ and to the deepest desires of human nature" represents our definition of TRANSPARENCY.

First, transparency means to live so that the Spirit of Christ is illuminated. The word *illumination* is helpful and gives us the feeling of a Gut-Trip word. Living transparently is to illuminate Christ who lives in us.

To be faithful to our purpose, the word "Spirit of Christ" needs to be run through our human experience. "Spirit" is experienced as our "freedom to decide" to live as victims or victors. "Christ" means to surrender ourselves to

¹ Whiston, Lionel. are you fun to live with? "Forward," (Waco: WORD BOOKS Publishers, 1968.)

The Meaning of Things (G-O-D). Being transparent in the “Spirit of Christ” means to consciously choose to live the surrendered life.

Second, Whiston reports that as we choose to live the surrendered life, then we are dealing with “. . .*the deepest desires of human nature.*” Whiston applies this statement to a kind of communication. Our purpose in this Study Section is to apply this experience to living as the Awakened, or to live as those whose lives illuminate what it means to be real human beings. Real humans are in touch with the deepest desires of human nature. Real humans demonstrate the surrendered life. Real human beings practice what it means to be humane. Real human beings live with their human contradictions as well as being in touch with their Spiritual Oasis at the same time. By surrendering, authentic humans exchange their independence from God for a dependence on God.

This is the “So what!” God expects us to live the surrendered life and to be real human beings. The result is that we become transparent. When we become transparent we become FUN TO LIVE WITH!”

WORK SHEET

Read through this poem by D.H. Lawrence. Reflect on how Lawrence answers the question of what a “grace-filled life” looks like in the following poem.¹

SONG OF A MAN WHO HAS COME THROUGH

Not I, not I, but the wind that blows through me!
A fine wind is blowing the new directions of Time.
If only I let it bear me, carry me, if only it carry me!
If only I am sensitive, subtle, oh, delicate, a winged gift!

If only, most lovely of all, I yield myself and am borrowed
By the fine, fine wind that takes its course through the
chaos of the world
Like a fine, an exquisite chisel, a wedge-blade inserted;
If only I am keen and hard like the sheer tip of a wedge
Driven by invisible blows,
The rock will split, we shall come at the wonder, we shall
find the Hesperides.²

Oh, for the wonder that bubbles into my soul,
I would be a good fountain, a good well-head,
Would blur no whisper, spoil no expression.

What is the knocking?
What is the knocking at the door in the night?
Is it somebody who wants to do us harm?

No, no, it is the three strange angels.
Admit them, admit them.

¹Pinto, V. de Sola and Roberts, F. Warren. *ed. The Complete Poems of D.H. Lawrence*, Vol. 1 (New York: The Viking Press, 1964). 250.

² “Hesperides:” Greek mythology this is a place where three to seven nymphs guard the wedding gift of Gaea to Hera.

AFTERWORD

Now that you have read this Study Guide, and worked through each of the Work Sheets, you are prepared to do “Gut trip analysis.” When you hear, or see, an Old Christian Code Word, you’ll know to ask the question, “What is my experience of this word?” Practice makes perfect. Never again let these old ideas about God, Jesus, Christ, Holy Spirit, etc., cross your mind but what you do the mental theology necessary to run the word through your experience to turn these words from Head-Trip Analysis to Gut-Trip Analysis.

The key operational phrase in this study is, “What is your experience of that word?” Learn to push yourself to clarity, and then learn to gently push others to clarify the meaning of Our Old Christian Code Words.

Happy Trails!

Pastor Bill
Salina, KS

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