

## Session 2

# From Jesus and Paul to You and Me

## A Religious History

Jesus did not establish a religion; he was and remained a Jew for his whole life. We know this from the earliest New Testament writings. For Jesus there was no New Testament, no Christian religious practice, and no intimation that there ever would be. Rather, in his own being he felt the dawn of a new day for humanity as a whole. He proclaimed the advent of a New Adam, a New Humanity, the coming of a “Kingdom” on Earth characterized by a direct experience of the Eternal here and now. This down-to-Earth yet Eternal dawning meant the advent of a humanity that **Trusted** “Mysterious Reality” as a loving father; that **Loved** Mysterious Reality, self, and others unconditionally; that experienced a **Freedom** that gave immediate authority rooted in our true personal depths (our authenticity) rather than in the traditions and laws of scribes and moral teachers. He saw in his own ministry the dawning of this Eternal Kingdom among those whose lives were being healed. He signaled the coming of an Eternally initiated restoration of authenticity for all humanity, not just for that part that would call themselves “Christians.”

Similarly, Paul did not establish a religion; he was and remained a Jew for his whole life. We know this from his own writings. For Paul there was no New Testament, no Christian religious practice, and no intimation that there ever would be. He did not distance himself from Jews. He shared his profound awakening in Synagogues with Jews and with Gentiles who were attracted to the rich heritage of Judaism. Paul viewed himself as a true descendent of Abraham, whom he viewed as an example of the Trust in Mysterious Reality that he, Paul, was experiencing. Like Jesus, Paul saw in himself, and in those healed by his message, the dawning of an Eternal Transformation for all humanity. He spoke of a second Adam, a New Humanity which he also identified with being “In Christ.” He believed that everyone was soon to participate in this Eternal dawning of New Life on Earth.

With this dawning of a down-to-Earth experience of a New Humanity came a companion dawning of how far humanity had fallen from the Eternity-related Humanity that is our birthright, our essence, our authenticity. The deeper we see into the truth of our authenticity, the deeper we see into the truth of our loss of that authenticity. And this loss, this sorrow, this tragedy, this depravity of our authentic humanity was seen by Paul and by Jesus as profound. “This is an evil generation.” “All have fallen short.” In modern times most people have recoiled from this profound view of human depravity.

Further, many ancient Greeks and many contemporary Christians have misunderstood the nature of this depravity. They have twisted the New Testament view to mean a depreciation of nature, of our bodily flesh, of our birthing and dying biology. But this was not what the fall meant within the Jewish context of Jesus and Paul. In their heritage, God, the Holy Mysterious Ultimate Reality, was Present in the material world – in birth, in death, in limitation, in possibility. The very Word “God” pointed to the EVERY-THING-NESS that is present in each and every thing, to the NO-THING-NESS out of which all things come and into which all things return. In this heritage “God” did not mean something good by human standards, but THE FINALITY “whose historical doings” define what is good. Final Reality is good because it is Real, not because it conforms to humanly invented purposes or the desires of a human psyche. The fall was a fall from finding joy in our created goodness. Fulfilled Life meant living openly within the everyday experience of that Eternal Mysteriousness that is manifest within our ordinary, temporal lives.

Humanity, then and today, is far removed from this understanding of Fulfilled Life, even though it is our birthright, our authenticity, our essence. Even among those in whom this Fulfilled Life is active, the fall remains. Paul did not see this New Humanity as complete within himself. He spoke of pressing on toward the full stature of Christ. And in our best scholarship the historical Jesus does not speak of himself as perfect. It was his followers who fictionalized him into a portrait of perfect authenticity. We see this portrait developing in Mark, Matthew, Luke, and especially John. “Jesus,” like “Buddha” and other exemplars, became a symbol for perfected authenticity. We do not know the extent to which these exemplars were perfect in their own Trust, Love, and Freedom. Like us they meditated and prayed to resist the “devil” and to be open to the fullness of Spirit. Jesus spoke of perfection as an opening in our sick souls toward an impending future created not by us but by the Reality worshiped by Moses and the prophets. Whatever was true for the historical Jesus, we are certainly all sick and in need of healing. We are all fallen beings that participate universally in an ongoing and profound fall from realism.

## Fall and Redemption

Rationalism, moralism, and sentimentalism are ways to describe the fall from our true being of trust, freedom, and love.

**Rationalism** is a substitute for our deep Trust in Reality (faith) and a cover for our despair over our actual lives. **We are all rationalists**, for we are neither fully open to Mystery, nor curious about the Unknown but are content with our own inherited or self-constructed meanings. We are uncomfortable with not knowing and with knowing that we will never know the meaning of life with our fragile minds. Making meaning is a healthy function of our minds, but our minds are finite and our meanings limited. By our human standards Reality is absurd, and we are loath to fault our own unrealistic views. We prefer to blame Reality for not being “meaningful” by our criteria. This is our fall – eating from the tree of self-constructed meaning and thereby losing the good taste of authenticity. **Conservative Christians** tend to reduce Trust in the Mystery to belief in doctrinal assertions. We all have beliefs, like we all have toenails, but our beliefs are humanly created and open to change. Clinging to any set of beliefs, religious or secular, is a sign of having fallen into rationalism. There are no final Christian beliefs. Faith means Trust, not belief. And our thinking about the meaning of Trust is an ever-evolving theology. **Liberal Christians** tend to reduce Trust in the Mystery to a humanly created worldview they find comforting. The word “God” (if they use it at all) is a human idea rather than an Awesome, Un-understandable Experience. They play meaning-making games rather than explore the call of Jesus and Paul to make the transrational Leap of Trust in a Mysterious Reality. Rather than leaping into the deep **Peace** of radical openness to the Mystery-of-What-is-Actually-So, they opt for security in products of their meaning-making minds.

**Moralism** is a substitute for our deep Freedom of Spirit and a cover for our slavery to established opinion or to the idolizing of our own self-righteousness. **We are all moralists**; we are not Free from our self-image and our habits of personality – not Free from our limiting views of good and evil – not Free from our false expectations. We do not wish to hear the story of Adam and Eve as a story about our fall from realism into our own self-constructed standards of good and evil. Adam and Eve ate a lie. They ate the lie that we humans can know what is good and what is evil. Such final knowledge is forbidden the human species. We actually live in uncertainty about the right things to do. **We retreat into moralism** when we lack the courage to face the ambiguities that characterize our actual choices. We prefer to judge everything by known criteria and deny Reality the right to judge our standards. We opt for a moralism that squeezes our

souls into a tight box and twists our good intentions into slavery rather than enjoying the **Blessing of Freedom**.

**Sentimentalism** is a substitute for our deep Love of self, others, and the Ground of our Being. It is also a cover for our malicious attitudes toward self and everyone. **We are all sentimentalists** who seek escape from the horrors of our real situations into fantasies of our own creation. We whitewash ourselves. We whitewash humanity. We avoid realizing the depth of humanity's flight from Reality and humanity's fight with Reality. We praise this fight and flight rather than view it as our depravity. Seeking a pleasant and peaceful mind we avoid lucidity about our own depravity and our own lack of dedication to realizing our full potential in realistic living. Our sentimentality extends to creating God in our own image, to inventing a Supreme Someone who holds our values and assists us to realize them. We are loath to notice that this opposes a devotion to that terrifying yet glorious Actual Reality, the worship recommended in the Bible. Instead, we worship illusions. And Reality, being Reality, will soon smash our illusions, leaving us in despair. Some dismiss sentimentality as harmless, but it is deadly. When we take pride in our sentimentality, we are willing to cheat, lie, and murder (if need be) to defend our false sense of things from the Truth. Sentimentality is a flight from or a fight with a Reality that we cannot stand and cannot escape -- in other words, sentimentality is hell. Our sentimental souls are in hell because we are not enjoying the true sweetness of our essential strength, our out-flowing compassion, and our enchantment with the wonder of Being.

The horrific depth of our rationalism, moralism, and sentimentality is called "sin" in the letters of Paul. Humanity is being delivered from this "sin" by the **redemption** that dawned in Jesus. "Redemption," is a much misused word. We can recover this word from piousness and confusion if we see that it merely means being restored to the actual, Reality-based authentic humanity from which we have fallen. Three words can hold the core qualities of the ever-deepening experience of our ordinary yet profound humanity: (1) **Trust** of the Absolute Mysteriousness of Reality and Reality's welcome Home to that Mystery rather than a rationalism that seeks to shave Mystery down to our own meager orderings, (2) **Freedom** rather than a moralism with which we can prove ourselves right by our own efforts to obey our own standards, and (3) **Love** of the actual, directly experienced Eternal Reality which supports and includes self and others, rather than a sentimentality that glories in our own fantasies.

Our rationalism, moralism, and sentimentality constitute a many-faceted flight from Reality and a many-faceted fight with Reality. This is a fight we are destined to lose. It is a flight from a Reality we cannot escape. This flight or fight can only end badly – in a despair that kills all joy.

**All of us**, not some of us, have fallen into this tragic condition of sin. And all of us, not some of us, are potential saints. In our essential beings we are already saints of Trust, Love, and Freedom. Sainthood is our true life in spite of the fact that only a few of us are clearly identified with this Sainthood and are willing to give up "the pattern of sin" and let Sainthood flourish.

Both Jesus and Paul proclaimed a fast-arriving dawn for the whole of humanity in which this widespread sin would be wiped away and redemption would be enjoyed by all humans. Paul expected this future to happen soon, just as soon as enough Gentiles had been grafted into this amazing unfoldment and both Jews and Gentiles could be shamed into opening to this final transformation of our humanity.

But what was "soon" for Paul and what was "soon" for God turned out to be different. Here we are, over 1900 years after Paul expected sin to be defeated and redemption to engulf us all, and sin is still widespread – perhaps more complicated and horrific than ever. The Eternal Life of Trust, Love, and Freedom is still rare and incomplete, even among those of us who have tasted it.

This is sobering. It must have also been sobering to 1st, 2nd, and 3rd century followers of Jesus and Paul. They had to notice that this universal redemption was unfolding slowly. The “soon” of the original proclamation was a “soon” that was going to be later, apparently much later. But they trusted Reality, trusted that “God’s delay” was part of God’s mysterious wisdom. Yes, it was a learning experience. Trust requires that we, the Trusting ones, be open to living the delay of the final coming of universal redemption. Trust requires that “for the time being” we live in patience for the final coming of redemption.

### **Living the Long Haul**

So, these first fruits of a “new humanity” (as they called themselves) began to adapt their strategies to living in an ongoing sinful world for the long haul. They created religious institutions of Christ-way Judaism. They created new forms of religious leadership, wrote books, had intense discussions, mastered schools of thought, canonized the “best” writings, and excluded other writings. All this was done in order to remain clear and committed to true redemption. A huge movement came into being. Outsiders called them “Christians.” The name stuck. But God, they claimed, was still working to redeem all humanity, not just those few who practiced the new religious inventions.

When Constantine provided the opportunity, this fast expanding “Christian” movement assumed responsibility for the political system of the entire Roman Empire. No matter what we now think about much of what they did, we can still stand amazed at their energy and achievements. They built a massive church organization with priests and monks and nuns in almost every village of Europe. They established bishops to minister to kings and other aristocrats. The Western Church established a Pope to stand in creative relation to the emperor. Eastern Orthodoxy also built hierarchical leadership patterns nation by nation. These strong organizations fought against heresies of Hebraic moralism, heresies of Greek rationalism, and heresies of sentimentalism, old and new. They organized intense monastic movements, one after another, to compensate for the laxity and delusions that came from working with the masses of civilization.

They built Christendom! Glory Hallelujah, they built Christendom! It was indeed a glorious achievement. And it was a tragic achievement. These socially powerful institutions of religion tempted the greedy and the power-crazed (of whom there are always many) to use that assembled power for their own rationalistic, moralistic, and sentimental escapes from Reality. The once Spirit-inspiring ministries warped into cultural, political, and economic oppression that called forth “The Protestant Reformation” and the “Roman Catholic Counter Reformation.” Both reforms were more radical than those of the religious orders and did combat with the established hierarchy of Christendom. Luther identified the Pope of his day with Satan and risked his life to challenge the sin of decayed Christendom. Breaking with that hierarchy, he established a new one. The Counter Reformation attempted to reform the old hierarchy and reestablish unity among its salvageable elements.

Christendom split into many reform experiments but that did not end the pattern of Christendom. Christendom proceeded forward in a multiplicity of competing fingers of religious invention that endure to this day. They carry a grand heritage. They also carry horrific perversions of the initial impetus of the Christian heritage, and they are all dying. Christendom is passing away. We face the need for a religious transformation – a new sociological wineskin for the wine of Trust, Love, and Freedom.

### **The Next Christianity**

It is not, however, the end of the redemptive mission. We live in the early days of a

new vital form of Christian community, a new wineskin for Eternal Spirit. There are still those who are living in Spirit (in Trust, Love, and Freedom) – the very same Spirit that was manifest in Jesus and Paul and in that ever-enlarging host of mighty witnesses. But the sociological shape of Christian practice and mission is undergoing a transformation as huge as the construction of Christendom, perhaps as huge as the Jesus-inspired dawning itself, perhaps as huge as the Moses-led impetus 34 centuries ago. We live in a time of Spirit resurgence and religious invention comparable to the time of the great prophets of Israel, the Buddha, the Upanishads, Lao Tzu, Zarathustra, and others.

For those of us who carry in our beings the primal impetus of Jesus and Paul as well as Mark, Matthew, Luke, John, and others, we might date the beginning of our current ferment of renewal and reconstruction to a droll yet comical Dane, Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard initiated Christian witness into a period of existential reinterpretation -- theology was related to life experience. This was carried forward by others like: Karl Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, H. Richard Niebuhr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Rudolf Bultmann, Suzanne de Dietrich, Simone Weil, Thomas Merton, Bede Griffiths, - - -. This list of breakthrough men and women is still unfolding – Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox – European, North American, Latin American, African, Asian. An ecumenical and planet-wide Christian reconstruction is taking place. It will be diverse, but we can also expect a deep synthesis. We can expect these witnesses to reveal the oneness of our essential humanity of Trust, Love, and Freedom. We can expect from them a fresh grasp of the Oneness of the Triune experience: (1) The **Awesome** Final Eternal Reality directly experienced, (2) The **Awed** portion of humanity, a New View of the Body of Christ, and (3) The flow of **Awe** that is our essential humanness, our Trust, Love, and Freedom.

This emerging Christian reconstruction is different from the everyone-a-Christian approach of the Middle Ages. It seems certain that those who practice this revived Christianity will be limited in number, compared to the past. The Next Christianity appears to be taking on a more monastic quality – less withdrawn than classical monasticism but still small, disciplined cells of people yoked in planetary networks. Though such Christians will be fewer in number, these networks of Next Christianity promise to be more disciplined, intense, and challenging to the world. In the United States, for example, we might expect these reconstructed Christian practitioners to be no more than one percent of the population – three million people in a disciplined network of nurture and mission. But if they drink from the deep well of Christian origins and minister to the whole body of contemporary humanity, we can expect this disciplined network to have more constructive impact upon the course of planetary history than all the decaying congregations of Christendom. They may be few in number, but they will be mighty in inward and social impact.

And who will these people be? We can expect them to be men and women, straight and gay, every race, every fragment of religious upbringing. They will take the ever-deepening journey into their true humanity and will be willing to pay attention to the actual course of history and to take initiatives that are relevant. They will study, know how to study, and teach others to study. They will be able and willing to master the core of the Christian heritage, yet open to all religious wisdom from whatever source. They will have the resources to learn leadership skills and will be willing to live among and assist the poorest and least privileged, as well as willing to live among and assist the most wealthy and talented.

We who are this new formation of Christian practice must not revert to the old ideal of everyone-a-Christian. In the future there can be no Christian nations, no Christian empires. Not only are such ideals oppressive in this interreligious era, but they dilute the intensity of what it means to be members of a Christian community. We need to

inspire and enrich a small number of disciplined “saints.” If we think that having great numbers is important, we are still trapped in the hangover of Christendom. Quality, not quantity, must be our focus.

Yet, this does not mean being a closed circle. A post-Christendom Christian practice must be as open to welcoming more people as it is “realistic” to do so. Indeed, we must overcome any fear we may have of larger numbers. And these are real fears: our fear of dilution; our fear of strangers; our fear of responsibility for more people; our fear of the creativity it will take to organize large numbers of people, to nurture them, and to prepare them for mission to this troubled age.

We confront a paradox: Jesus and Paul taught us intensity and small-group enthusiasm, but they also taught us that this redemption is for the whole of humanity. We who join this redemption will be few in number, but we will be joining a mission that envisions a universal redemption.

So, let us be grateful for deep qualities of soul, however small this renders our assembly. And let us be grateful for any increase in the numbers of great souls that our reconstruction of Christianity attracts to the Christian branch of the Universal Body of Christ. And let us never forget that there are other-than-Christian branches of the humanity we call “the Body of Christ.” In John’s gospel we hear Jesus say, “I have sheep who are not of this fold.”

But some of us who remember Jesus, and who understand the revolution in inner being that he initiated, need to rebuild the fold of those who remember him and honor him as their portrait of human authenticity. Some of us need to do this for our times. Perhaps it is me. Perhaps it is you.