

REBUILDING CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Steps Toward a New Vision

Charles S. Gourgey, Ph.D.

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Note: All biblical quotations in this study are taken from the New Revised
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Part 1: The Old Vision

The Need to Rebuild

Christianity is broken. And at least in the United States, it has become a menace.

I know many will not agree. And many will say this presentation is one-sided. And it is. But there is a reason for that, which I will explain.

There are many Christian churches doing good work and trying to be faithful to Christ and to scripture. There are some (though not enough) courageous ministers speaking out against the abuses Christians are committing in the name of Christianity. There are many conscientious individuals deeply disturbed and upset about what is being done in the name of their faith and the effect it is having on this country, its democratic institutions, and especially on the most vulnerable among us.

But as a movement, Christianity is doing immense damage to this country. Donald Trump would not have been elected without evangelical support, and Donald Trump is all about stimulating rage and hatred of people who are different, who don't support what he stands for, and especially who don't support him personally. Too many self-professed Christians were not only silent but supportive when Trump made virtues of divisiveness and cruelty. As this is being written, he openly associates with white supremacists and antisemites. The Republican Party is no better. It has given tacit approval to everything Trump does and has failed to stand up to him. The husband of the speaker of the House was almost killed by a partisan crusader, and too many Republicans treated it like a joke. With no objection from conservative Christians.

Conservative Christians have given religious cover to the hatred that now defines our politics. It seems we can no longer have honest disagreements

¹ What follows is a very brief prototype for a much larger project planned for sometime in the future.

with each other. If you are not on the “right” side, on God’s side, you are a demon of Satan. Christ taught us to work to increase love in the world. Instead, the Republican Party, with widespread Christian acquiescence, has legitimized hatred, against poor people, against nonwhite people, against gay people, against women, against non-Christians, and especially against the hated “liberals.” It is pushing toward an authoritarian – and even a theocratic – state where any election a Republican does not win might be declared illegitimate. Support for Christian nationalism, a fusion of the Christian religion with political power and the abolition of the separation of church and state, while not universal, has been growing. What happened? And why do I keep saying “Christianity”?

My description of “Christianity” is one-sided for three reasons:

1. The side I am criticizing, the conservative side of Christianity, has become dominant and growing in its ambitions to Christianize the nation at the expense of religious tolerance and pluralism. It is also fond of defining itself as the only legitimate form of Christianity, especially against theological “liberals.” It is a throwback to the times when Christianity wielded the power to control people’s lives, including non-Christians.
2. The other side, sometimes called “Mainline” (a misnomer if there ever was one), is not doing enough to stand up to the orthodox betrayal of Christ.
3. Possibly most important of all: the theological assumptions that have fostered intolerance throughout the history of the church are not confined to conservative Christianity, but permeate Christianity as a whole. As a result, all of Christianity bears responsibility for the theological structure that has enshrined antisemitism in Western culture, encouraged the denigration of other faiths, and supported the present push toward authoritarianism in the United States. Yes, there are exceptions to the traditional theological framework, but they have minimal political significance.

This essay will question those assumptions and propose an alternative. Taking apart an old, outworn structure must never be an end in itself; it is done to make way for something new, which will be described. But Christianity as a whole must be confronted, or no meaningful change will

be possible. The development of orthodox church theology, the theology taken for granted by what seems a wide majority of Christians, has made this deterioration of Christian values, and the substitution of cruelty for love, possible if not even inevitable. This has been demonstrated throughout the history of the church.

It is also often not recognized that Christianity as we now have it, in the form the vast majority take for granted, is not the only form of Christianity that ever existed. During the first three centuries there was a variety of Christian thought, with different Christian theologies sometimes competing with one another. One of them, now called orthodox, won out over the others; the key historical event was the Council of Nicaea. That council was more a political than a spiritual process. Constantine wanted one form of one religion to be considered legitimate, to serve his purpose to unify his Empire. He put his weight behind the one he judged most likely to fulfill that end, which today we know as orthodox or Nicene Christianity, and made sure that view was adopted. And even Nicaea did not definitively settle the issue. The conflict between the Nicene view and the opposing Arian view continued for years, until Nicene Christianity finally prevailed as the result of a protracted power struggle, rather than any conclusive divine revelation.

In other words, orthodox Christian theology as we know it was not ordained by God. Had Constantine thought a different view would have better served his purposes, and had the opposing faction (Arianism, which saw Jesus as exalted and unique but not fully God) prevailed, then what became orthodox Trinitarian faith would have been dismissed as a polytheistic heresy. In the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) Jesus and God are clearly distinct, and Jesus makes no divine claims. Even in the Gospel of John the evidence is equivocal; Jesus is at most an exalted being subordinate to God (John 5:19, 5:30, 8:28, 14:28). Claims of orthodox Trinitarians notwithstanding, the Gospel of John lends far more support to Arianism than it does to the Nicene Trinity.

There were other views, all subsequently declared heresies and suppressed, some deservedly so. But one of these might have served a purpose had it survived. It was the view of the earliest Jewish Christians, sometimes called Ebionites (from the Hebrew meaning "poor"). They accepted Jesus as the Messiah, observed the Jewish law, did not believe in the divinity of Christ, the Trinity, or the virgin birth, and rejected the authority of Paul, following James instead. Most likely these were the views

of the original Jewish Christian community led by James. They provide a viable alternative to the “Messianic Jews” of today, since they are the truly authentic Jewish Christians. While they should not be followed in every particular – they believed followers of Christ needed to become Jewish first – it is unfortunate that their voice was silenced, since they might have contributed to a sounder Christian theology than what we have now. They represent an earlier strand of Christian thought, modified greatly as Christianity became a predominantly Gentile movement. During the course of this development, in which Paul played an early and significant part, the growth and elaboration of church theology began to obscure Jesus’s original message.

Historically, two things happened that led to Christianity’s corruption of Christ’s teachings:

1. Christianity, originally a movement within Judaism, became dominated by Gentiles, who completely misunderstood the scriptures they appropriated from the Jews, including both the Hebrew Bible and the writings of the New Testament.
2. Christianity acquired state power when Emperors Constantine and Theodosius made it the unifying religion of the Roman Empire. (And you know the famous saying about power and corruption.)

Gentile Christians interpreted the Hebrew scriptures, which they called the “Old Testament,” completely differently from how Jews traditionally understood them. Their readings of scripture tended to be rigidly, even pathologically literal. They also took the Jewish scriptures totally out of context, and construed them as a compendium of predictions about Jesus. Worse, they persecuted Jews when the latter refused to agree with those misinterpretations. This animosity between Christians and Jews was never completely resolved, even to this day.

There is no such thing as enough political power. Almost invariably, anyone who acquires it wants more of it. Granted power by the Roman Empire, Christian authorities came to love that power, and became far worse than the religious authorities Jesus criticized in his own day. (I am reminded of Orwell’s *Animal Farm*: a revolutionary movement, once it acquires power, becomes the very thing it hated.) Wars between Catholics and Protestants, not to mention persecution of Jews and other non-

Christians, became commonplace, all in the name of Christ, the “Prince of Peace.” Hopelessly complicated theologies and Christologies evolved, all obscuring Jesus’s simple message and serving to cement the church’s control instead of advancing Christ’s teaching of self-transcending love. Christian theology turned Christianity into a monstrosity Jesus would not recognize if he came back to us today.

When asked about the path to eternal life, Jesus answered very simply: Love God with all your heart, and your neighbor as yourself. What more needs to be said? Yet something in the human heart insists on resisting this message. So the church invented theology as an effective way of making Christ’s message invisible. What better way to obscure Christ’s teaching than to complicate it beyond recognition, covering it in debates about substance vs. person, same substance or different substance, and how many of which one. *Hypostasis*, *prosopon*, and *ousia*, how do they relate and which contains which? and on and on and on. Many councils were devoted to such debates, and much blood shed over them, so this is no idle matter. Imagine Jesus returning to see what people made of his legacy, burying it in this web of theological verbiage. Most likely he would have thought his followers had gone mad.

If Christian tradition consisted only of the Synoptic Gospels and nothing else, its message would be much clearer than it is today. But two thousand years of theology and Christology have effectively disabled that message, a message Christ derived from the Hebrew prophets who preceded him, and ultimately from Mosaic law. A message he extended for the healing of all humanity. We need to recover the purity of that message. We need to rescue Christ from Christianity.

When Christianity very deliberately cut off ties to its Jewish origins, it lost the key to understanding its own scriptures, all written by Jews, including both testaments. Instead, Christianity distorted those scriptures, weaponized Jesus, and pointed that weapon straight at the Jewish people. Christ became an agent of his own people’s condemnation. The history of Christian hatred and persecution of Jews, from the early church fathers to enabling the Holocaust, is a matter of record. I plan to cover the details in a subsequent project, but the story is already well documented.

What Must Be Rebuilt

So what options does this leave me, as one who is Jewish yet inspired by Jesus's life and ministry to the point of wanting to be his follower? I believe it should be possible to be both Jewish and Christian without compromising either. Today that is considered impossible. But in the very beginning, there were only Jewish Christians. "Christianity" began as a movement within Judaism. The character of this movement changed once the dominating presence became Gentile. The question of Jesus's divinity proved a wedge dividing Jews and Christians, the focal point of a separation that became unbridgeable.

One proposed solution to this separation is so-called "Messianic Judaism." These are Jews who claim they can still be Jews while subscribing to orthodox Christianity. This does not solve the problem; actually, it makes it worse. These "Messianic Jews" or "Hebrew Christians" (they go by a variety of names) accept the same theological assumptions that have corrupted mainstream Christianity, making it authoritarian and intolerant, and fostering the belief that they and only they have a corner on salvation. To label these movements any form of "Judaism" is a misnomer. No system of thought can call itself Judaism that demands, upon penalty of eternal condemnation, the worship of more than one divine being. With abundant justification Jews consider the mission of these groups to proselytize them highly offensive. These movements are no form of "Judaism"; they are evangelical Christianity masquerading as Judaism. Calling Jesus "Yeshua" may sound trendy but it cannot make Judaism out of orthodox Christianity.

Before proceeding further it must be said that many Christian churches do preserve the spirit and teaching of Christ. We are, after all, fortunate to have the Gospels, and particularly the Synoptic Gospels, in which Jesus states his message most clearly, and that has not disappeared, in spite of years of faulty exegesis and obscurantist theology. This is what I call Christianity's *dual legacy*: the light of Christ coexisting with religiously sanctioned attempts to put it out. Unfortunately, the latter have often been dominant in Christian history and are dominant in America today. But fortunately, that light cannot be overcome. It must be brought back into the center.

So what are the theological assumptions that obscure the light of Christ? The answers may sound surprising. Here they are:

1. The Divinity of Christ.
2. The Trinity (“Triune God”).
3. The Atonement: the belief that Christ died to pay the price for our sins.
4. Soteriology: the emphasis on personal salvation and the belief that salvation depends on accepting numbers 1, 2, and 3.

These doctrines are considered essential to Christianity. Yet they are arguably not even biblical. A full discussion of that is beyond the scope of this limited article, but I may take it up in another, larger project.

Let’s take a quick look at each:

The Divinity of Christ. At least in the Synoptic Gospels there is no evidence that Jesus ever considered himself to be God. In fact, he discouraged such a view (Mark 10:18). As noted earlier, even in the Gospel of John, with its higher Christology, there is no clear evidence for Jesus’s equality with God. At the very most, he is perhaps considered a being of exalted stature, but clearly subordinate to God the Father (John 5:19, 5:30, 8:28, 14:28). A verse often quoted to “prove” that Jesus is indeed God is “The Father and I are one” (John 10:30), but actually it means no such thing. Being one with God has been the claim of many mystics throughout the millennia. And in that same Gospel Jesus is reported to have said: “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be [one] in us.... The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one” (John 17:21-23). Surely this cannot mean that all who follow Christ have become God!

It is also claimed that John’s Jesus declared himself God by saying “I am” (*ego eimi*) a lot, supposedly echoing Exodus 3:14. But in that same Gospel the blind man Jesus healed says exactly those same two words “I am” (John 9:9), and no one construes that as a claim to divinity. Even in the Gospel of John Jesus makes a clear separation between himself and God the Father, saying that the Father possesses authority he does not (John 8:28), and that “the Father is greater than I” (John 14:28).

There are two serious problems with the doctrine of the divinity of Christ: first, it is a challenge to monotheism (see on the Trinity immediately following), and second, making belief in Christ's divinity the criterion for eternal salvation violates both the spirit and the letter of what Jesus actually taught.

The Trinity. This doctrine has led to no end of controversy. It clearly entails a logical contradiction – three cannot equal one – that is supposedly resolved in the doctrine of three persons, one substance. But this circumlocution does not remove the contradiction. Either the three constituents of the Trinity are the same, or they are different. If they are the same, the result is modalism (the heretical view that God is only one “person” manifesting three different ways). If they are different, the result is tritheism (the heretical view that there are three Gods). Both of these views were denounced by the church. The Trinity in its classical form may have made sense to people in the fourth century, but it cannot make sense today. Even if one calls it a “mystery,” it is still a contradiction, incompatible with our God-given capacity for reason.

Justifying a tenet of faith that appears to contradict reason by calling it a “mystery” is extremely dangerous. This way of thinking (Tertullian: “It is by all means to be believed, because it is absurd”²) has led to a variety of abuses, from the persecution of non-Christians to the strong anti-science sentiment (creationism and denial of climate change are only two examples) permeating conservative Christianity. The invocation of “mystery” has even been used to justify sending good non-Christians to hell forever. There *is* an element of mystery in the sacred; nevertheless, no faith should require us to turn off our God-given capacity for rational thinking and to abandon reason. History amply demonstrates the dangers of doing that.

Despite the insistence of orthodox Trinitarians, the Trinity doctrine is not biblical. In the Gospels Jesus clearly has a separate identity and will distinct from God the Father (Matthew 26:39, John 5:30), and he prays to God as his God, as separate from and greater than himself (John 17). There is no biblical passage, not even Matthew 28:19, that supports a doctrine of one essence in three persons. (The Trinitarian statement in 1

² Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ*, chapter 5,

John 5:7-8 in the King James translation is not found in the best manuscripts, and no responsible scholar considers it authentic.)

The Atonement. The idea that “Christ died for our sins,” that Jesus died to assume the punishment due to us for our sins, is actually not biblical. It is false both to history and to common sense. Historically, we know why Jesus was killed. The Roman authorities considered him an insurrectionist. This is indicated by the sign placed over his cross: “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” The notion that without Jesus we all deserve to be crucified is absurd. No doubt some of us do, but there are also many kindly and saintly people, and not all of them Christian. Furthermore, the notion that God’s justice demands the sadistic murder of an innocent being is barbaric.

Salvation. This is Christianity’s most pernicious doctrine, the idea that all non-Christians will be consigned to an eternity of suffering in hell. Also justified as a “mystery,” it has led to widespread persecutions and brutal murders in order to “save people’s souls.” It is ironic that many who believe this doctrine will also tell you that the “Old Testament” deity is a God of anger and vengeance, while the New Testament gives us a God of love. A good example of cognitive dissonance.

Again, these foundational assumptions have nothing to do with what Jesus really taught, and have produced a religion he would not recognize and most probably would condemn.

The Critical Shift

Christianity made its most critical mistake when it substituted a different ultimate concern for that of Jesus. Jesus’s highest priority was *non-self-interested love*. For Christianity, it became *personal salvation*. The consequences of this shift were seismic.

- It shifted emphasis from care for the other to care for oneself.
- It relieved people of the burden of cultivating non-self-interested love. Just believe and you are saved.

- It made Christianity a new exclusivism: God favors only those who are “born again.”
- It made Christianity intolerant: if there can be a path to salvation outside Christianity, then Christ died for nothing. Therefore Christ must be the only way, for everyone. For this reason Christianity especially demanded the delegitimization of Judaism, a path to God that does not require faith in Christ.

The history of Christianity is littered with violence committed in defense of this faith. This would have been inconceivable had the church stayed faithful to Jesus’s program, and never made that shift from love to salvation. Unfortunately, this shifted version is pretty much what Christianity was until the Holocaust. Since then we are seeing a greater variety of Christian expression, with more dedication to social values by some churches. But it has not been enough to counter the influence of orthodox Christianity on the U.S. and on the world.

So far I have not mentioned Paul. His role in this matter is complicated. While the doctrine of penal substitution (“Christ was punished instead of us”) cannot rightly be attributed to him, apparently he did believe that accepting the death, resurrection, and “lordship” (not necessarily divinity) of Christ was necessary for salvation. But we need to keep in mind that salvation did not mean for Paul what it means for most of us. We tend to think of salvation as escape from a never-ending hell. For Paul, salvation meant acquittal at the final judgment, which he expected would occur very soon, possibly even within his lifetime. A common view at that time was that those who pass through this judgment successfully will continue participating in the new resurrected life, while those who do not will simply be destroyed, their existence ended. Paul never speaks about hell. Paul does not really fit within the framework of the faith as it is usually defined today, even though he is often claimed as its champion.

Paul himself is not so much the problem as the way religious authorities have used Paul. The Protestant Reformation made Paul its standard bearer, based on misreadings of his letters, especially his Letter to the Romans. While the Reformation did correct many abuses in Catholicism, it also took a giant and fateful step backward. Its doctrine of salvation by grace through “faith alone” represented a radical break with Jesus’s authentic teaching. No longer did it matter what you did, how you lived your

life, or what kind of person you were. All you needed for salvation was to profess the right faith. An honest reading of the Gospels (Matthew 7:21, 22:37-40, 25:40) will show this is absolutely contrary to what Jesus taught. For Jesus, what you believe will not get you into the kingdom of heaven; far more important is your treatment of others, especially the poor.

The consequences of the “faith alone” doctrine have been disastrous. Treatment of others, so important to Jesus, no longer had any necessary connection to being right with God: it does not matter what you do, how you treat others, as long as you are a Christian. After all, God’s forgiveness is unconditional and not tied to our behavior, so why worry? It is this kind of thinking that justifies supporting people like Donald Trump, who can be as cruel and abusive as he likes, but can still be forgiven because after all, we all are sinners, and all forgiven in Christ no matter what we have done.

Some try to justify the severing of faith from works by saying that faith always shows itself present in the bearing of “good fruit.” Christian history, however, has demonstrated this to be a total falsehood.

And so Christianity, the religion built upon Jesus’s foundational *Jewish* teachings of love of God and love of others, largely became a force for intolerance and oppression. I remember many times as a child interacting with Christians and being threatened with hell because I was not one of them. I believe Jesus would be appalled to think such a thing could have become his inheritance. I believe it would have broken his heart to see how Christians have treated his own people.

Part 2: A New Vision

We cannot let matters rest here, for then Jesus really would have suffered and died for nothing. Critical discussions of Christianity tend to become polarized. Some would tear down the entire edifice, leaving nothing in its place but an ill-defined atheism. Then there are those who defend orthodoxy at all costs, twisting scripture to suit their purposes and calling it exegesis, and writing off their opponents as eternally condemned or even as spokespeople for Satan. Voices in the middle do exist but tend to get drowned out. Yet there must be a middle way, because Christ’s message is too important and too needed by the world to let it fall into oblivion.

So let's start from the beginning.

The Hebrew Bible

There is a reason the Bible became the best-selling book of all time – why a compendium of writings by Jews influenced the entire world. It addresses a question of fundamental concern: Is this world in which we are born defined by the pain, suffering, death, and futility we all experience, or is there something more, some higher reality that can give us hope? There is so much pain in the world, and so much of it extreme, that this question becomes for us not an academic exercise but a living reality. “Is this all there is?” The question takes many forms.

The answer to this question is not simple, and takes many biblical books, written over a great span of years, to develop. It begins at the very beginning, with the creation of the world.

In the beginning all was incoherent. The earth was *tohu va-bohu*, an odd onomatopoeic Hebrew phrase that means kind of what it sounds like: a chaotic mess. God took that chaos and infused order into it. God created a harmonious movement of stars and planets, fish to inhabit the seas and animals to populate the earth, and finally the crowning achievement, the human being, fashioned in “God’s image.” Humans and animals lived together in harmony, there was no conflict, and all was “very good.”

But this is immediately followed by a different version. Adam and Eve live in a beautiful garden, disobey God, and are expelled. Their lives become difficult; they must work hard to extract a living from the land, they suffer pain, and they know that they will die. They want to return to their idyllic existence in Eden, but they cannot; they are thrown into a world of troubles and must make the best of it. This marks the first in a series of separations: the estrangement of human beings from God.

Very soon we witness the first murder: Cain, jealous of his brother Abel, deceives him and kills him. And it does not end there. Lamech, a descendent of Cain, not only kills a man, he brags about it. This marks the second separation: the estrangement of individual human beings from each other.

Next we have the Tower of Babel, an ambitious project of people attempting to reach divine heights. God scatters them into different nations speaking different languages, so they become unable to understand each other. This marks the third separation: the estrangement of national and ethnic groups.

Many stories of conflict ensue. Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brethren: all brothers who cannot get along. But through this was a legacy, born of Abraham's encounter with the one true God, and a concern to transmit that legacy to future generations. In other words, an intimation of a higher reality that people kept searching for and trying to understand.

The search for this reality reaches its apex with the revelatory experience of the people at Sinai, where they receive the Ten Commandments and have a direct experience of God's presence.

Unfortunately things get worse after that, and keep getting worse. In weak moments people turn to worshiping idols. There is rebellion and even a mutiny against Moses that almost succeeds. Once the people enter the promised land, things get no better. There is conflict between the tribes, and much brutality. The people form a monarchy, hoping a king might unify them and make them a well-functioning nation. But that stability lasts a very short time. The kings, most of them, also become corrupt; the society becomes weak, and defenseless against foreign invasion. The people are thrown into exile, their homes and their Temple destroyed. With this we reach the end of the book of Kings, the halfway point of the Hebrew Bible. The trajectory so far traces a descent from Eden, an ascent to Sinai, and a descent into exile.

What follows are the so-called "Later Prophets": Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve. These mark an ascent from the desperation of exile to the renewal of the people's faith and life in their own land. The Hebrew Bible closes, at the end of Chronicles, with the people finally being granted permission by King Cyrus of Persia to return to their homeland and rebuild the Temple. Thus the Hebrew Bible begins with a series of separations, and ends on a note of reconciliation.

We cannot conclude this capsule summary of the Hebrew Bible without mentioning how the concept of God changed along its course. At the outset

the Hebrew God is a tribal God, asserting Israel's position over against other nations. But in the prophets especially, we see God becoming a more universal God. This God holds Israel to the same high standard as all nations, if anything, judging Israel even harder. And we see the emergence of universal themes: In Isaiah, the Temple becomes a house of prayer for all peoples; in Habakkuk, the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the Lord; in Zephaniah all nations will call upon the name of the Lord and serve God with one accord; in Zechariah, nations will come to seek the Lord in Jerusalem; in Joel the spirit of God will pour out on all flesh; in Jeremiah all nations will gather in Jerusalem to worship the Lord, and in Jonah God treats non-Israelites with the same standard of compassion and forgiveness. The Jewish God becomes the God of all.

It is also important to note that one constant throughout the Hebrew scriptures is the presence of God's voice. In all the different books and the diverse sources from which they come, God's voice can be heard. This does not mean it is heard clearly, accurately, or consistently. The Bible records a search to listen to God and to understand God's word and God's will. These attempts proceed with varying degrees of success. The point, however, is that God's voice is there to be heard, and we are faced with the challenge of learning to discern it, as imperfect as our discernment may be.

This is really just a summary of the Bible's main road. There are many offshoots, some quite dramatic, which are not recounted here. Our present point is the transmission of the "covenant," the reciprocal relationship between God and human beings, discovered by Abraham and transmitted to his descendants. But our work is not done. God told Abraham that "through him many nations would be blessed." It remains to be seen how the covenant he found came to bless many nations. And that is the work of the New Testament.

The New Testament

The heart of the New Testament is the Gospels, and of those, especially the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). While they cannot always be relied upon to provide history as we understand it today, they are the best sources we have for getting any idea of the historical Jesus. We cannot determine with certainty exactly which passages are historically authentic and which are not, but no doubt many of them are. The Gospel of John, on the other hand, presents us with a different kind of Jesus. Instead

of short parables and concise sayings, John's Jesus tends to speak in lengthy discourses, centered much more on himself than what we find in the Synoptics. Both versions of Jesus cannot be equally true to history. So how best to understand the difference?

C.S. Lewis provides a criterion by which he dismisses, not without justification, the historicity of the extracanonical Gospels. Ironically, it can also be applied to the Gospel of John:

When we look into the Apocryphal gospels we find ourselves constantly saying of this or that *logion*, "No. It's a fine saying but not His. That wasn't how he talked."³

John's Jesus just does not talk like the Jesus of the Synoptics. Lewis's criterion applies.

So how best to understand the Gospel of John? While it is not a historical document, it still has value for understanding Jesus. It provides a record of the impression Jesus made on a particular community. Jesus's imprint is discernible in many of these sayings, even if the words are not literally his. There are also dangers in interpreting John's Gospel as some kind of historical record: its anti-Jewish sayings cannot plausibly be traced back to Jesus. There are, to be sure, similar problems with the Synoptics; nevertheless, they still bring us closer to Jesus as he actually lived and taught.

Therefore the heart of the New Testament is the Gospels. Three of these give us a rough (perhaps very rough) approximation to the historical Jesus, and the fourth records the impression Jesus made on one community. All of them tell us something of Jesus's spirit, and all have value, read within their historical context.

Why is the Gospel story so compelling, the "greatest story ever told"? The Gospel story is our story. Some theologian (I cannot recall who) called the Gospels "passion narratives with long introductions." While this may be an exaggeration, it is not a huge one. We resonate with Jesus's passion because it is ours as well. Human life is inherently tragic, inevitably driving toward suffering and death. So we return to the question we encountered

³ C.S. Lewis, "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 1 (1969): 38.

earlier: “Is this world in which we are born completely defined by the pain, suffering, death, and futility we all experience, or is there something else, some higher reality that can give us hope?” While we may or may not express this question in such philosophical terms, we are all concerned with it. Thus we are all looking for faith, even if we do not think of it as religious faith.

The Hebrew Bible, as we have seen, addresses this question. The New Testament tackles it head on. We will see how Jesus does this.

Jesus as the Messiah

We are driven to this question by suffering. The long history of the Jewish people’s suffering gave rise to hope, a hope of witnessing God’s saving power. This hope gradually became centered on a figure who was called the Messiah.

The Messiah was expected to fix this broken world, to make everything right, to establish order out of chaos. Isaiah 11 gives us a prototype. A descendant of David will come to judge in righteousness and establish peace among the nations. The strong will no longer attack the weak, and those scattered afar will be gathered in again, “for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:9). Eventually, however, people began to understand the Messiah as a military figure, who would establish peace through conquest, defeating the powers of this world.

Jesus did not fulfill that expectation. He was more the peaceful figure of Isaiah 11 than the apocalyptic conqueror. It is therefore no surprise he was not universally accepted as the hoped-for Messiah. So how should we consider him?

The case against Jesus’s being the Messiah is a strong one.

- He did not overcome Israel’s enemies.
- He did not establish peace on earth.
- He died a violent and humiliating death.

It would seem absurd to think that anyone observing our world the way it is today could believe the Messiah has come.

But Jesus was not about fulfilling our expectations.

We need to understand Jesus's significance in a new way. He was not the expected military conqueror. Nor was he just a moral teacher like many others. And deifying him, making him the subject of volumes and volumes of arcane Christology, has only obscured his message. If we can suspend the unnecessary theological elaboration imposed upon scripture by the church, and read the New Testament writings through Jewish eyes (they were, after all, written by Jews), we might find a new and still transcendent view of Jesus emerging. And with it, a redefinition of our idea of the Messiah.

This point cannot be emphasized too strongly: We do not lose anything by suspending church theology. We actually gain a better understanding of Jesus, one that captures his depth and does not lead to religious intolerance. And especially one that does not divert our attention from what he demanded of us, by focusing instead on theological nit-picking and what we are supposed to believe about him in order not to face everlasting condemnation. Jesus was not just a moral teacher, although he certainly was that. He had a unique spiritual connection to God. And from that connection he imparted a wisdom that indeed could save the world – but it requires us to listen.

His story begins with his birth, as recorded in Matthew and Luke. They report Jesus being born of a virgin, and understanding this literally has become a basic tenet of orthodox faith. On close examination, however, it becomes clear that these two accounts cannot be taken literally. First, they contradict each other and cannot be reconciled; a sequential comparison of the events in each will make this clear. In addition, each has internal difficulties. There is no record anywhere outside of Matthew of the mass slaughter of innocent children by Herod, an event of unquestionable historical significance had it actually happened. And as for Luke, Quirinius did not become governor of Syria until after Jesus was born, and a census requiring everyone to return to the birthplace of their original ancestors would have been a logistical nightmare. The population shifts would have been unwieldy. So Joseph reportedly returned to the birthplace of King David, but how many would even know who their ancestors were a

thousand years ago? Even aside from these difficulties, the events in the two accounts simply do not match. I do not believe these accounts were meant to be taken literally, and reading them as one would Jewish literature of the time makes literal interpretation completely unnecessary.

This is especially clear in Matthew's version. His story is "supported" by quotations from the Hebrew Bible, most notably Isaiah 7:14, "a virgin will conceive...". It is now well known that the original Hebrew word does not mean "virgin," but rather a woman of marriageable age with no reference to her sexual history. But Matthew was quoting from the Greek Septuagint, which uses a word that can mean just a young woman, but whose most familiar sense is virgin. The original context in Isaiah has nothing to do with predicting a Messiah, and Matthew surely knew this. The same is true of all of Matthew's other Hebrew Bible quotations: they are all taken out of context and have nothing to do with the purposes for which Matthew uses them.

So what are we to make of this? Matthew was either lying, writing total nonsense, or doing something else. The "something else" Matthew was doing was actually quite common in Jewish literature of that time and following. It is called *midrash*. "Midrash" may be defined as the use of symbols and legend to express a spiritual truth. It very commonly operates by taking biblical verses out of context and giving them fanciful interpretations highlighting the meaning that the author wishes to convey. A Jewish readership versed in this culture would understand how this operates. To such readers, insisting on literal meanings would seem absurd. If you want to see midrash in action, join a Jewish family or synagogue for a traditional Passover meal or Haggadah. You will hear midrash used in retelling the story of the Exodus, and literal interpretations are simply not an issue.

The purpose of the virgin birth stories was not to report historical events. It was to express something about Jesus: notably his uniqueness, purity, and special calling, and above all, his closeness to God. He was destined to become not only the last in the line of the Hebrew prophets, but the Messiah himself, in a way not expected then or even now. The earliest Jewish Christians understood this, and did not take the virgin birth literally.

One may understand Jesus's miracles similarly. How much of those stories are history and how much are legend is impossible to determine.

Nor is it even necessary. Orthodox theology presents these miracles as proof of Jesus's divinity, but they are not that at all. Jesus was not the only one of that age reported to have worked miracles. Similar stories were told of Apollonius of Tyana, Hanina ben Dosa, and Honi the Circle Drawer, to name just a few. The prophets Elijah and Elisha also performed miracles as dramatic as those of Jesus, even raising people from the dead. Their miracles did not make them God. Neither did Jesus's. What those miracle stories do for Jesus highlighted, in very impacting language, the fact that many found his presence healing. The healing effect of his presence may have been profound; each individual believer will find a way to understand it, but history cannot help us here; it is a matter of personal faith.

So what then is the justification for calling Jesus "Messiah"? First, he continues the line of Hebrew prophecy. Much of his teaching comes right out of the Hebrew prophets, and especially Isaiah: the reaffirmation of the covenant, the call for social justice and attention to the needs of the poor, the condemnation of religious hypocrisy, and confidence in the redeeming power of God. His core teaching, that the path to eternal life is to love God and one's neighbor as oneself, comes straight out of Hebrew scripture (Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19). Still, his major contribution to this prophetic line is encapsulated in these words:

For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:46-48)

We may call this Jesus's teaching of *non-self-interested love*. This is the true saving power for the world: we are to learn to love beyond self-interest, and not only those who are like us or who can pay us back. We are to learn to love beyond the boundaries of the familiar, beyond family, beyond tribe, beyond our nation. This Jesus called "the law and the prophets": it is the point to which everything in Hebrew prophecy and the Jewish search for God has been leading. And now, because of Jesus's ministry, it belongs to the entire world.

And thus while Jesus did not transform the world itself – no messianic figure is going to do it all for us – he gave us the right instruction on how to do it ourselves. It is love beyond the tribalism that divides people and that is

the root cause of conflict and war. No messianic figure can realistically be expected to give us more than that.

And so calling Jesus “Messiah” gives to this saving message its proper recognition and respect. His vocation went beyond that of a prophet. He drew Hebrew prophecy to its ultimate conclusion, and extended its healing message to the world.

At first Jesus thought he was sent only to preach to his own people. But then he met a Canaanite woman who so impressed him with her faith, and even her faithful response to his insulting comments, that it broadened his own concept of the scope of his ministry (Matthew 15). Jesus indeed became a universal figure, fulfilling God’s promise to Abraham that he was to be “a blessing to many nations.”

Jesus therefore represents the capstone of Hebrew prophecy. He did not conquer the world himself, at least not militarily, but he did bring a teaching with the power to transform it all. It is now 2,000 years and counting since his death. There will be no other Messiah to follow him. If indeed the Messiah was real, it would have had to have been Jesus.

And this is not all. Jesus did something else that made him singularly significant. He redefined the theology of his time to reveal perhaps the most important of all spiritual truths. And this, together with his teaching of non-self-interested love, makes him the saving figure we would call the Messiah. Let us now consider exactly what this is.

Jesus and the Kingdom

Jesus started out as a disciple of John the Baptist. John preached the urgency of the baptism for the forgiveness of sins, because he believed the end and its final judgment were approaching. John was an adherent of the very influential theology of the time, known as apocalypticism. It spoke of the kingdom of God, as God’s reign on earth that would arrive when the Messiah finally sets the whole world in order. This is how people understood the kingdom: a new political order to be achieved through a conquering Messiah, finally to judge the wicked and put an end to innocent suffering. But that judgment will be harsh, and so we need to be prepared, through repentance and baptism.

Jesus completely redefined the kingdom of God and transformed its meaning.

Jesus gave many hints about the kingdom, and these were all at odds with the image of the kingdom people were expecting. For Jesus the kingdom was like a tiny mustard seed, or a little yeast that leavens a loaf of bread, or a treasure hidden in a field, or a hidden pearl. Children will understand it before grownups do, and will enter it first. It is also not something off into the future, but right here and right now, only so subtle that people don't see it. Jesus said all these things.

Nobody else spoke about the kingdom this way. For apocalypticists, the kingdom was exactly the opposite of what Jesus described. It would be big, it would be cataclysmic, and it would come with violence at some time in the future. Jesus took that kingdom language, turned it upside down, and pointed it toward something else.

Jesus was calling attention to a higher reality, beyond time, space, and suffering, which we call *eternal life*. Eternal life is not heaven waiting for us after we die. It is the "very good" creation of Genesis 1, which gives rise to our creation and to which we will return. It is always present, surrounding us and even influencing our lives here on earth. It is God's felt presence.

Jesus was telling us that eternity is here right now, and that through a life of prayer and devotion to non-self-interested love we may realize its presence as a felt reality. This was indeed the saving good news that Jesus brought. It is right there in the scriptures, unlike the doctrine of the Atonement, the notion that Jesus died to take upon himself the punishment that we should have suffered, a doctrine read into scripture by later theologians and translators and that is usually taken to be the "good news." The brutal punishment of an innocent victim is not good news. The real good news is Jesus's revelation of the true kingdom of God, a life and reality beyond suffering and death, whose influence may be felt even here in the worst of our circumstances.

It is for all these reasons: Jesus's teaching of non-self-interested love that indeed might save the world, his representing in his very being the compassionate essence of eternal life, and his drawing forth all of this as the endpoint of Hebrew prophecy, that he deserves to be called the Messiah. Jesus provides a signpost to faith for those searching for faith.

That indeed is a saving accomplishment. *Jesus had a keen sense of the eternal, and lived it as his present reality.* And so he brings awareness of the eternal to us as well. This indeed is a saving accomplishment.

What about the Resurrection?

This treatment of Jesus would not be complete without considering the resurrection. Christianity has traditionally defined itself as standing or falling on the belief in Jesus's literal physical emergence from the tomb after his death. However, a case can be made that the gospel writers did not intend their accounts of the resurrection to be taken literally.⁴ It is hard to imagine what saving power there might be in the emergence from a tomb of the physical body of one who was presumed to be God, far beyond anything to which we can aspire, and so of course could do anything he wished. It is hard to understand how, even if that were possible, and even if it actually happened, it could help ordinary human beings. So far no one is known to have emerged from the grave to ascend as Jesus is said to have done, and it does not seem likely to happen anytime soon.

So how should we understand the resurrection?

First, we need to understand the symbolism in its historical context. Physical resurrection is a symbol of redemption with its roots in the Hebrew Bible, going back at least to Ezekiel's vision of the Valley of Dry Bones (Ezekiel 37). It was not meant literally then, and there is no reason to understand it literally since then, although people did come to believe it that way. Apocalyptic theology included a belief in a general resurrection to take place at the end of time and the culmination of history, in which the dead would be raised to face a final judgment. Jesus was understood by many as the "first fruits" (to use Paul's phrase) of that general resurrection, which was expected to happen soon. Many years later it has not happened, and so Jesus's resurrection came to be understood apart from its original apocalyptic context, as a unique event similar to no other. Its literal interpretation became the ultimate criterion of Christian faith.

A literal understanding of the resurrection is untenable. It is not simply because such things just don't happen (even though they don't). The four

⁴ See my study *The Meaning of the Resurrection*, available as a Kindle book and on my web site www.judeochristianity.org.

Gospel accounts of the resurrection are hopelessly contradictory and cannot be reconciled. Even Luke's narrative in his Gospel is at variance with his narrative in Acts. Attempts to understand all of these versions literally lead nowhere. And this is even besides the conundrums one faces trying to explain how a completely decomposed or cremated and scattered body can resurrect.

Nevertheless, the resurrection is not without meaning. Some transcendent occurrence must have taken place on that first Easter, otherwise it would be difficult to explain how Jesus's followers, who should have been completely demoralized witnessing his brutal humiliation, execution, and mutilation, could have had the faith and vitality to continue his movement after his death. I don't think this can be explained, as some have suggested, simply as one disciple, perhaps Peter, having had a vision of Jesus after his death, such as many have of their departed loved ones, and telling his companions about it. Such visions are not uncommon, and none has ever led to a movement that changed the world. I suspect that whatever did take place must have been something more profound.

The movie Ben Hur is remembered mostly for its famed chariot race. But the scene I recall most vividly occurs long before. Condemned to serve as a galley slave, under harsh treatment by a Roman taskmaster who singled him out for extreme punishment, the protagonist Judah Ben-Hur finds himself practically dying of thirst, crying out for water. The Roman commander denies his request. But seemingly out of nowhere, a presence whose face we never see reaches out to him, washes his face, and gives him to drink. It is Jesus. And as suddenly as he appears, he vanishes.

There is a spiritual presence of love we may be blessed to feel, sometimes even in our darkest moments. Perhaps you have felt it, in your own private experience or through an unexpected act of kindness that came when you most needed it. This is eternal life breaking into our human experience. We can all be channels of this spiritual presence for others, in larger or smaller ways. What made Jesus unique is that he embodied (or "incarnated") this spiritual presence more purely than any other human being. He allowed himself to become completely infused with it. It is through this presence working within him that others felt themselves healed, and this healing may have expressed itself either as actually physical, or as a spiritual transformation described in physical terms.

It is possible that when Jesus died, the spiritual presence that infused him remained for a while in its pure form and affected those who knew him directly and profoundly. More than one of them might have shared this experience. In my hospice work, I often experienced what may be a tiny version of this. When someone was approaching the moment of death, very often I could sense a peaceful aura surrounding that person, as if an angel had arrived to take the person home. And after the moment of death, that sense of peaceful presence would remain for a while. I believe many have experienced this after the death of a loved one. It is as if there were a momentary break in whatever boundary may separate temporal existence from eternal life.

I believe this to be the most plausible understanding of the resurrection. Jesus embodied an angelic presence that made him an agent of healing for those who encountered him. After his earthly existence came to an end, this presence remained. The disciples who experienced it had no language to describe it, except for the language of resurrection that they already knew. So they began to think of and speak of Jesus as having overcome physical death, even as having been raised from the dead.

The notion of a literal bodily resurrection is a vestige of first-century Jewish apocalypticism, a dead theology except for those who persist in using the books of Daniel and Revelation to predict the end times. Theological thinking should not remain frozen in the fourth century. Our knowledge of the Bible and its historical context has greatly increased since then, and our times and spiritual needs are much different.

And so while that first Easter did not mark the literal rising of a physical body, it was no less real and impacting. And it has implications for all of us. Jesus was a human being, like each one of us. He just manifested this spiritual presence to a greater degree than anyone else. He carried that presence in a way that made those who encountered him feel it. That was his gift, his mission, and why he can be called the Messiah. And while the resurrection event was indeed supernatural, no laws of nature were broken.

And so this is the message of the resurrection: *the same spiritual presence manifest in Jesus during his entire life, that carried him through the agony of the cross, and that remained afterwards to comfort his disciples, surrounds us too, whether or not we know it.* And we can know it, in blessed moments of spiritual connection that may come to us in various

ways. And the more room we make within ourselves for self-expanding love, the closer we will come to knowing it. In this way the resurrection really can have relevance for the life of each one of us.

Even now, far removed in time and place, we might still get a sense of that healing presence bringing the awareness of eternal life. This should not make Jesus an object of worship – there is only one God – but seen as a prophet, teacher, and guide showing us the reality of God’s pure creation. We are estranged from that creation in our present state, but not irredeemably so. *It is only in this separated state that we can become conscious of the love drawing us back to the eternal, and to seeing each other as the image of God.* Even the most extreme suffering drives us toward the boundary between time and eternity, and the more intense the suffering, the more profound the love we will eventually behold. This is the theology of the cross, and the understanding of Jesus that appears when we see him in the context of the Hebrew prophetic tradition from which he came.

The spiritual presence that survived Jesus’s death, that comforted the disciples, and that accompanies us too even when we do not know it, *is* God as we can know God here on earth. While Jesus himself was not God, God’s presence was in him. This is the true meaning of the “incarnation,” Jesus through his own being making God visible to us.

In Conclusion

Christianity, as it developed over the centuries, is a paradox. It has preserved in its scriptures the authentic teachings of Jesus, and many try to live by them. At the same time, however, it has obscured and corrupted these teachings with a grossly overdeveloped theological structure. I have called this paradox Christianity’s *dual legacy*: its preservation of the genuine core of Jesus’s mission, expressed as unrestricted love and outreach to those who are in need, together with a dark side that has undermined his teaching and engendered much hatred and violence. The task before us is to work toward a vision of Christianity that preserves the purity of Jesus’s message unadulterated by the distortions that come with excessive theologizing. The danger of too much theology is that it can easily become a cover for the entrance of fear in hidden forms. A theology obsessed with the issue of salvation is a theology driven by fear.

Jesus told us that to enter the kingdom we must become like children. Not like hyper-sophisticated theologians with advanced degrees quibbling over minutiae that surely would have puzzled Jesus himself. Even worse is making such contentious theological matters the criterion upon which our eternal salvation depends. That kind of religion is powered much more by fear than by love.

Jesus himself indicated (Matthew 7:21) that what one believes about him ultimately does not matter; the important thing is to *do* God's will, by loving others and treating them with kindness. A simple message, but one the human spirit tries incessantly to resist. And what more effective way to escape what that message demands than by obscuring it with elaborate theological speculations purporting to do honor to Christ himself. If we actually are destined to encounter Jesus after we cross over, what will he most likely ask us: "How did you live your life? Whom have you loved?" or "Do you believe I am of the same or of a different substance from the Father?" That question should speak for itself.

The Protestant Reformation was supposed to have corrected errors in Christianity's development, but in one very basic and important way it made things much worse. Its emphasis on "salvation through faith alone," "apart from works" is exactly the opposite of what Jesus taught. Jesus emphasized repeatedly that what we do, how we treat our fellow human beings, is critical even to our life in eternity, and that just calling him "Lord" by itself will accomplish nothing. How ironic that Christians today preach this strange gospel of "faith alone and works don't count," even claiming it to be scriptural, when their own scriptures say just the opposite.

At this point we should say another word about Paul. Proponents of Reformation theology rely mostly on Paul for their scriptural justification. But Paul never meant to say that only faith matters and works count for nothing. Fully exploring this topic would require a book in itself, but even just a careful reading of Romans 2 will show that Paul himself was not an adherent of the Protestant "faith alone." Yet we have been tied to interpretations of Paul inherited from Augustine and Luther, who misread Paul, probably from their own psychological need to find a God who overcomes our own deep sense of inadequacy by forgiving us unconditionally no matter what we do, as long as we have the proper faith.

Perhaps the greatest mistake Christian theology ever made is the doctrine of the Atonement – the idea that Jesus Christ “died for our sins,” that he took upon himself the punishment we all deserve and should have received, to spare us the well-earned consequences of our sins. It is hard to fathom how any God who would not just countenance but require such brutality committed against an innocent victim in order to satisfy the demands of “justice” could be worthy of worship. It is also hard to imagine how God could ask us to forgive even our enemies, yet be so unforgiving toward those who might even be good people, but just not Christians. This form of religion should have been rejected centuries ago, yet is still in the Christian mainstream.

Even worse, this doctrine makes antisemitism an inevitable consequence of Christian theology. If we can only be saved through belief in the divinity and literal resurrection of Jesus Christ, then Judaism, which presents a path to God without this particular faith, must be delegitimized or else Christ died for nothing. History has shown us the horrendous consequences of this theology. Many of the early church fathers were virulent anti-Semites (I plan to document this in a larger work to follow), for this very reason. They had to show that Judaism was false, even that Jews are devils, or their own faith would have no meaning. If Christ is the only way, then any other way, especially coming from Christ’s own people, must lead directly to Satan. There is no question that centuries of this anti-Jewish vitriol prepared Europe for the Holocaust. That, ultimately, was an almost inevitable consequence of orthodox church theology, once it acquired power.⁵ And for this reason alone, orthodox church theology must be completely overhauled. The resurgence of antisemitism in our own time is just another reminder that the problem will never go away until true theological reform happens.

We need not end matters here. We have an alternative. We can rebuild Christian theology on a better foundation, one more faithful to scripture. Christianity is due for a true reformation, which will correct the flaws remaining from the previous one. This new Christianity will acknowledge its Jewish roots and recognize Jesus as the culmination of Hebrew prophecy and the bringer of a message of salvation. This “salvation” will be redefined, not as the individual’s falling on the right side of a binary heaven-

⁵ Just read Martin Luther’s *On the Jews and Their Lies*, and note how the Nazis put his harsh recommendations into practice.

hell, but as a connection to eternal life in this world, both for the individual and the community, realized as devotion to non-self-interested love. This is where Jewish prophecy had all along been heading, and it was Jesus who brought this final revelation to its clearest expression, in a form that will bless all people.

Finally, while this new vision of Christianity respects its debt to Judaism, it is not Judaism, “messianic” or otherwise. The boundary between Christianity and Judaism needs to be respected. Christians need to recognize Judaism as a legitimate path to God, and one to which they owe much. There is absolutely no justification for any Christian effort to missionize Jews. Jews rightly regard such efforts as showing profound disrespect, and it is time that came to an end.

Christians and Jews have an honest disagreement about the status of Jesus and his role in religious history. But “the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). The path to God is devotion to non-self-interested love. That is what God truly cares about, whether one calls oneself a Christian or a Jew or anything else. Christians look to Jesus as a teacher of this path, but he is not the only way to get there. Yes, he is more than just a moral teacher; he is a transcendent spiritual figure who bore God’s angelic presence within himself. And rightly understood, he can be a guide on the path of self-transcending love. But he is not God, for there is only one God, recognized both by Judaism and this new (but really old) Christianity. That is their common bond, belief in one universal God, loving all of humanity and teaching us to do the same.

It should also be possible to be both Jewish and Christian if one so chooses. Embracing this new Christianity does not mean worshiping a different God, and if one comes to it from being Jewish, there is no reason to leave one’s Jewishness behind. This new Christianity, therefore, welcomes both Christians and Jews. But out of respect for Judaism, it should not present itself as a replacement or call itself “Judaism” as some forms of evangelical Christianity practiced by Jews are doing today.

And so concludes this brief vision of what a new and truly reformed Christianity might look like. This is just a bare beginning; much still needs to be explained. Hopefully a book-length work to follow, if I am granted the time to complete it, will contribute to this end. Meanwhile it is helpful to

contemplate what Christianity might become if truly based not upon doctrines about Jesus, but on what he actually taught.

About the Author

Charles S. Gourgey, Ph.D. is a retired clinical music therapist and current New York State Certified Long-Term Care Ombudsman, advocating for nursing home residents and their families. He is the author of *Judeochristianity: The Meaning and Discovery of Faith*. A Kindle version of this book is available on amazon.com, and a paperback version (published by Parson's Porch Books) can be found on barnesandnoble.com or ordered from the publisher. He is also the author of *The Meaning of the Resurrection: A Path Toward Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, available on Kindle.

Dr. Gourgey hosts three web sites:

www.judeochristianity.org for his theological work.

www.musicishope.org for music therapy.

www.anyfc.org, the web site of the Alliance of New York Family Councils, an organization he co-founded that supports families of nursing home residents.

He may be contacted at carlos@judeochristianity.org.