



*A Generous Orthodoxy*

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## **THE SEVEN JESUSES I HAVE KNOWN**

I am a Christian because I have a sustained and sustaining confidence in Jesus Christ. I've lost and rediscovered that confidence a few times, which is a long and messy story worth simplifying and boiling down to manageable length in these first chapters.

I know my original attraction to Jesus came as a young child. In my home and at Sunday school, I heard stories about Jesus. I remember a children's picture Bible that had a simple but beautiful picture of Jesus, seated, in a blue and white robe, with children of all races gathered around his knees. Some were leaning on him. Some were seated at his feet. Some had their arms around him. His arms were opened in an embrace that took them all in, and his bearded face carried a gentle smile a boy could trust.

Looking back, I realize the illustration wasn't historically accurate. It was influenced more by a popular Sunday school song that I also loved ("red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world") than by ancient Middle Eastern realities. But in a way, the picture was even truer than a

historically accurate picture would have been; it probably would have had no red, yellow, black, or white children at all, but only brown Middle Eastern ones.

The picture Bible was augmented in my imagination by flannel graph stories about Jesus. Flannel graph was a kind of 1950s high-tech precursor of overhead projectors, laptop video projectors, videos, and DVDs. The teachers were always kind women, sometimes even my own mother. Each would tell stories with an easel behind her. On the easel would be a piece of flannel cloth with a scene drawn on it with markers—a countryside, a storm at sea, a courtyard with marble columns, a home, a roadside with big boulders beside it. As the story unfolded, cut-out figures backed with felt would be stuck on the flannel background (felt and flannel being a gentle precursor of Velcro®)—blind Bartimaeus, Zacchaeus, a woman near a well, a nameless leper and his nine friends, a Roman centurion, or a Syro-phonician woman with a sick child. Through these stories, Jesus won my heart.

When I reached my teenage years, though, I lost that Jesus as one loses a friend in a crushing, noisy, rushing crowd. The crowd included arguments about evolution (which seemed elegant, patient, logical, and actually quite wonderful to me, more wonderful even than a literal six-day creation blitz), arguments about the Vietnam War (which made no sense to me—even if communism was as bad as everyone said, were people better off bombed and napalmed to death?), arguments about ethical issues like civil rights and desegregation and a hundred other things. I wondered if women were really supposed to be submissive to men and if rock 'n' roll was really of the devil. Were Catholics really going to burn in hell forever unless they revised their beliefs and practices to be *biblical* like us?

After a short foray into doubt and a rather mild (all things considered) youthful rebellion, my faith in Jesus was revitalized, largely through the Jesus Movement. For those who were part of it, especially in its early days, the Jesus Movement was a truly wonderful thing. There was a simplicity, a childlikeness, a naïveté, and a corresponding purity of motive that I have seldom seen since. In fact, this book may simply be an attempt to articulate what many of us felt and “knew” during those years.

But all too soon the Jesus Movement was co-opted. It was to a different Jesus that I was gradually converted.<sup>14</sup>

The first new Jesus I met had a different face, a different tone, a different function. “Jesus was born to die,” I was told again and again, which meant his entire life—including the red, yellow, black, and white children around his knees...Zacchaeus in the sycamore tree (which gave me a lifelong love for sycamores)...Bartimaeus by the road...the one grateful leper returning...the woman by the well...the caring parents who begged him to heal their children—was quite marginalized. Everything between his birth and death was icing at most, assuredly not cake. This marginalization was unintentional, but in my experience it was very real.<sup>15</sup> I was losing something but gaining something, too: the conservative Protestant (or Evangelical) Jesus.

## The Conservative Protestant Jesus

For conservative Protestants, the good news centers on the crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus saves us by dying on the

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<sup>14</sup> Several forces, I think, cooperated in the co-opting of the Jesus Movement, including Classic Pentecostalism, the Religious Right, parachurch Christianity, the contemporary Christian music industry, and the religious marketing machine.

<sup>15</sup> Have you noticed that our great creeds tend to do this, too—to affirm Jesus’ birth and then skip to his death? What does that say about us? What unintended consequences come from this focus on the beginning and end of Jesus’ life and neglect or avoidance of the middle?

cross. “Jesus was born to die,” I heard again and again. By dying, Jesus mysteriously absorbs the penalty of all human wrongdoing through all of history. The cross becomes the focal point where human injustice—past, present, and future—meets the unconquerable compassion and forgiveness of God. Jesus, hanging in agony, says, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” We are given confidence that at our worst moment, the moment at which we humans behave as badly as is possible in this universe by torturing and killing God’s ultimate messenger and representative to us, his prayer is answered. His innocent self-sacrifice somehow cancels out human guilt.

At the cross, the powerful horror of human evil and the more powerful glory of God’s mercy meet, and human evil is exhausted, but not God’s mercy. Exactly how this happens is understood through various metaphors, with the following four perhaps being most popular.<sup>16</sup>

*A legal metaphor:* God is judge and humanity is guilty, deserving the death penalty. Jesus, a perfect representative of humanity, willingly takes the death penalty deserved by all humanity. Justice is satisfied, and evildoers can be forgiven. In this metaphor the forensic language of law, guilt, punishment, penalty, and justification is all-important. Sometimes the cool, impersonal guilt pronounced by the law is replaced by the hot wrath erupting from the Judge, but both styles reflect the same legal metaphor.

*An economic metaphor:* God is the good master, and we are God’s servants, but we run away (or are lured away, perhaps kidnapped) by the Evil One, who makes us his slaves. Jesus offers himself to Satan as the representa-

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<sup>16</sup>Too few Christians realize how metaphorical our language about God is. See Chapter 9 for more on this subject.

tive of the human race: “Take me and let them go,” Jesus says, offering himself as a kind of ransom payment. Satan takes Jesus, and as a result, we are potentially set free. (And Satan gets double-crossed in the end because after killing Jesus and thinking he has triumphed, Jesus triumphs by rising from the dead.) In this metaphor the business language of selling, buying, price, and payment is paramount.

*A governmental metaphor:* The human race has rebelled against the King. To be forgiven and restored as citizens in good standing, humanity must repent and resubmit itself to God’s will. But humans are so distorted by evil that they are unable to sincerely repent and resubmit to God. Jesus, through his obedient life and voluntary death, acts as a representative for all humanity and enacts repentance and submission to God’s will for all humanity. As the representative of the human race, his perfect obedience and submission extend to all who will trust Jesus. In this metaphor, political terms like *representation*, *reconciliation*, and *citizenship* are essential.

*A military metaphor:* The human race has been conquered by an alien power or powers (Sin, the Devil, and Death are the most common antagonists, although Paul’s more ambiguous “principalities and powers” could also be included). Jesus goes to battle with the alien power(s), and appears to be defeated in death, but his death turns out to be the undoing of the antagonist. In this metaphor, military terms such as *battle*, *defeat*, and *conquering* are predominant.

Many conservative Protestants develop little analogies to explain, on a more popular and less technical level, how the death of Jesus “works” to bring us forgiveness within these metaphorical contexts. There are well-circu-

lated stories, for example, about an impending train wreck averted by a man whose son is killed in the process, a bad boy in school whose punishment is taken by a good boy, etc. There's a diagram about a chasm and a bridge. I used to share these diagrams and stories enthusiastically, although over time each analogy presented logical and ethical problems that dulled my enthusiasm.<sup>17</sup>

Ultimately, most thoughtful conservative evangelical Protestants will agree that none of these explanations, metaphors, or theories perfectly or completely explains how the death of Jesus brings good news to the world: the full answer includes and yet eludes all these metaphors, analogies, and diagrams.<sup>18</sup> However it happens, conservative Protestants agree that by dying, Jesus opens the door, not just to heaven beyond this life, but to true communion and relationship with God in this life—whoever you are, whatever you've done. This good news captured my heart in my late teenage years and recaptured my allegiance to Jesus.

In particular, it meant (and means) a lot to me because I don't think I've ever gone very long without sinning in some more or less obvious way: pride, lust, greed, untruthfulness (exaggeration, excuses), ungratefulness—not to mention the subtler ways. This understanding of Jesus focuses directly, and nearly exclusively, on the problem of individual moral guilt.

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<sup>17</sup> For a helpful overview of problems with the most popular conservative Protestant understanding of Jesus' death, see *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* by Joel Green and Mark Baker (Baker, 2000) and its sequel, as yet unpublished.

<sup>18</sup> Sadly, some conservative Protestants unwittingly reduce the gospel to a theory of atonement. Dallas Willard calls this "the gospel of sin management" and says it produces "vampire Christians" who want Jesus for his blood and little else. See *The Divine Conspiracy* (Harper, 1998).

But as precious and indispensable as this perspective is for me, over the years a feeling grew within me, usually vague but sometimes acute, that I was missing something, perhaps something important. Jesus' cross in the past saved me from hell in the future, but it was hard to be clear on what it meant for me in the struggle of the present. And more importantly, did the gospel have anything to say about justice for the many, not just the justification of the individual? Was the gospel intended to give hope for human cultures and the created order in history, or was history a lost cause, so that the gospel only could give hope to individual souls beyond death, beyond history—like a small lifeboat in which a few lucky souls escape a huge sinking cruise ship?

And did the conservative Protestant emphasis on the death of Jesus necessarily marginalize Jesus' life—his wise teachings and his kind deeds, which had captured my childhood imagination? Over time I began to feel as though, from my perspective, the gospel became simply an individualistic theory, an abstraction with personal but not global import. It became about the solution to a cosmic legal/business/political problem, real and serious, but a bit dry, a bit removed from real life. In my heart grew a deep, subtle, unspoken sense that something was missing, which gradually opened my heart to search for other ways of seeing Jesus.

I should add that this dissatisfaction with the conservative Protestant Jesus intensified just last Christmas when one of my children was home for the holidays from college. I asked him how he was doing spiritually.

“I'm struggling, Dad,” he said.

“Tell me about that,” I said.

He replied, “Well, Dad, if Christianity is true, then nearly everyone I love is going to be tortured in the fires of hell forever. And if it’s not true, then life has no meaning.” He was silent for a moment and then added, “I just wish there were a better option.”

My heart was broken. I asked, “Is that the understanding of Christianity you got from me?”

He replied, “No, but that’s the way most Christians think. They just kind of bottom-line everything to heaven or hell, and that makes life feel kind of cheap.”

My son’s insight doesn’t apply to the best expressions of conservative Protestants, but it does, I fear, apply too often to the most popular ones. He put into blunt and powerful terms exactly what I felt vaguely and inarticulately when I was his age.

### The Pentecostal/Charismatic Jesus

The second Jesus I met in my spiritual journey as a young adult—back when I was about my son’s age—was the Pentecostal or Charismatic Jesus.<sup>19</sup> If the conservative Protestant Jesus can tend to become something of an abstraction, necessary for the solution to my legal problem with God the Judge, but somewhat removed from daily experience apart from guilt removal, the Pentecostal Jesus was up close, present, and dramatically involved in daily life. If the conservative Protestant Jesus saves from a future hell by his death in the past, the Pentecostal Jesus also saves by his powerful presence in this present moment.

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<sup>19</sup> I’m using these terms interchangeably here, knowing that there are reasons to distinguish them. If these terms are unfamiliar to you, all you really need to know is that there are groups of Christians called charismatic or Pentecostal, and they celebrate the view of Jesus I am about to explain.

Sadly, much of my early exposure to the Pentecostal Jesus was clouded by a technical argument with relational implications. The argument had to do with whether all those who were truly following Jesus and therefore “Spirit-filled” had to “speak in tongues,” which was an experience of the earliest Christians on a Jewish holiday called Pentecost (hence the name of the group or movement) involving speaking in unknown (some would say ecstatic) languages. The argument, happily beyond the scope of our discussion here, doubly forced one to think in terms of “who’s in/who’s out.” Not only must one monitor who’s a Christian or “saved” or “born again” (a distinction practiced by nearly all conservative Protestants including Pentecostals), but also one must be aware of who’s “Spirit-filled” or not. I found this constant judging of in/out, us/them to be fatiguing and distracting from loving everyone I met as a neighbor, which I was pretty sure should be primary for Christians.

My Pentecostal friends wanted me to be “in” and share “the gift.” But in spite of my sincere prayers and even tears, for many years I never received “the gift of tongues” and was made to feel like a second-class citizen in Pentecostal circles. Even after I did “receive the gift” (which turned out to be quite anticlimactic after all the fuss), I never bought into the belief that there were two easy-to-distinguish classes of Christians: Spirit-filled tongues speakers and everyone else. I resisted this Pentecostal teaching for three reasons (not including the fact that I didn’t find the biblical arguments convincing).

First, by that time I had met too many certified tongues-speaking Christians who were consistently dishonest, weird, unhealthy, and mean-spirited. Any understanding of being “Spirit-filled” that didn’t include helping people to become healthy, Christlike, and kind didn’t seem to be worth much. Second, I had met too many non-tongues

speakers who were sincere and Christ-like, radiant and fragrant with the Spirit of Christ. Third, I didn't want to do to others as had been done to me by creating a two-tier, in-group/out-group status.<sup>20</sup>

In spite of this rocky start, from the Pentecostals I became convinced that Jesus is here-and-now present, active, alive and well, and that the stories of Jesus that had so won my heart as a child were not marginalized at all—and even better, they were not over, either. I began to understand and expect that Jesus would continue to intervene in powerful, wonderful ways. I realized that, although invisible, the Holy Spirit was no less than the real presence of Jesus, and that my experiences and those of my friends with the Spirit of Jesus were no less real than those flannel graph and picture-Bible stories from my childhood. Jesus is alive and active! Signs and wonders still occur! I wasn't surprised that Pentecostals often used the term *full gospel* to explain their understanding of Jesus, because it was fuller than the understanding I previously had.

But over time I realized that this “full gospel” terminology could have two dangerous side effects: pride (*our gospel is fuller than yours!*) and un-teachability (*we have it all—what more is there to learn?*). And not only that, but also I faced a problem of expectations. Jesus was present via the Holy Spirit to heal, for example—but could I expect every disease to be healed? Did God promise miracles on demand? What happens when someone prays for healing and Jesus doesn't do it? I refused to “blame the victim,” to say he or she didn't have enough faith or any nonsense like that. The person was already sick, for crying out loud! The

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<sup>20</sup> Many Pentecostals and/or Charismatics have let go of this two-class distinction and have come to see being filled with the Spirit as an ongoing way of life that may or may not have a dramatic beginning and that may or may not be accompanied by speaking in tongues. Others see this as a dangerous, liberalizing tendency.

Jesus I knew came to help them, not blame them or make them feel worse.

As well, the Pentecostal Jesus didn't have much to say about God's concern for the whole world, for history, and for creation. It was focused on "the sweet here and now" as well as "the sweet by and by." But only for individuals who believed—really believed. Was that all there was? What about justice for non-Christians? Could the good news of Jesus be even fuller than "the full gospel"? Were there social and historical dimensions to the gospel that went beyond personal health, prosperity, and happiness for believers now and in "eternity"? So, for all I gained from meeting the Pentecostal Jesus, I was still unsettled. About that time, quite by accident, I met a third Jesus.

### The Roman Catholic Jesus

In graduate school I ended up writing a master's thesis on novelist Walker Percy. Raised in an intellectual and agnostic home, Percy became a theist, a Christian, and a Roman Catholic as a young adult, which is a short, bland summary of a long, fascinating story.<sup>21</sup> I loved his novels and essays, and his story and literary work reduced my ignorance and prejudice about Roman Catholicism. Through him I discovered other Roman Catholic writers—twentieth-century writers such as Flannery O'Connor, Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen, Romano Guardini, and Gabriel Marcel, as well as the medieval mystics and others.

If conservative Protestants focus on the way Jesus initially saves individuals by dying on the cross, and Pentecostals focus on the way Jesus continues to save individuals by giving the Holy Spirit, Roman Catholics focus on the way

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<sup>21</sup> My favorite biography of Percy is by Jay Tolson: *Pilgrim in the Ruins* (Simon & Schuster, 1992).

Jesus saves the church by rising from the dead. Through the resurrection, God has defeated death and all that comes with it—fear (when will death come?), hurry (how much time do I have in this short, terminal life?), greed (you only go around once in life, so you have to grab for all the gusto you can get), envy (why does her short life go better than mine?), injustice (the evil often prosper and live long while the good often suffer and die young), materialism (the one who dies with the most toys wins), despair (life is full of pain and then you die), and selfishness (in the end all you have is you). By entering life's worst—suffering and death—and breaking through it, Jesus opens the way to heaven, to life with God beyond this life. Through the resurrection, Jesus changes forever the whole equation of existence.<sup>22</sup>

Generosity, courage, gratitude, hope, and love fit as perfectly in this new equation of resurrection as desperation, greed, anxiety, and cynicism did in the old equation of death. Now, since death never has the last word, it makes sense to do right even if your just cause is, humanly speaking, hopeless. Jesus' resurrection guarantees that in the end God will win. You can spend your life caring, giving, serving, and sacrificing, unconcerned about whether you've "succeeded" or received as much as you've given or sacrificed, convinced that you will have "treasures in heaven" beyond this life that are greater by far than any "treasure on earth" in this life. And even if you live and die as a nobody here, you hold your head high, because beyond this life your true value, wisdom, and identity will shine through.

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<sup>22</sup> I realize that this is a very sympathetic interpretation of the Catholic Jesus. Less sympathetic interpretations should also be heard—for example, that Jesus is important because he establishes the institutional church hierarchy, which then marginalizes Jesus and takes the spotlight itself, assuming a powerful position in the world as dispenser of salvation. Similarly unsympathetic interpretations are possible for each group discussed in this chapter, and, no doubt, unsympathetic interpretations could be given of my interpretations here as well! For a constructively critical survey of church history to complement this one, read my friend Dave Andrews' important book *Christi-anarchy: Discovering a Radical Spirituality of Compassion* (Oxford: Lion, 1999).

This new equation confronts as well as encourages: you can fight to the top to be first in this life, only to find out that you're at the end of the line beyond this life; you can "store up treasures on earth" and fail to be "rich toward God." The resurrection of Jesus, then, puts human life in a new eternal context, and the new context calls for a whole new way of living.

This view, called the "Christus Victor" theory of atonement by theologians, is not exclusively Catholic. It celebrates that Jesus is risen and alive, intersecting with our lives on earth, and waiting for us beyond this life. In this view, Christians are especially aware of how the risen Jesus continues to encounter his followers through public worship, and especially through the Eucharist, which is one reason (among many) why the Eucharist is so important to Roman Catholic Christians and their close cousins, Anglican Christians.<sup>23</sup> The Eucharist is a constant celebration of good news, a continual rendezvous with the risen Christ, and through him, with God. That such a rendezvous is possible is amazingly good news for everyone in the church.

The Roman Catholic Church is so broad that it includes many "little churches" (*ecclesiolae*) in the "big church" (*ecclesia*). Many of those little churches in the contemplative tradition emphasize how God may be mystically experienced through contemplation, through a quiet mindfulness. Other *ecclesiolae*, such as the Catholic Worker Movement, emphasize the social implications of Jesus' life and message. I didn't discover these *ecclesiolae* until later, though.

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<sup>23</sup> The Eucharist (or communion, or the Lord's Supper) is a ritual or practice in which bread and wine are used to celebrate Jesus' death, resurrection, abiding presence, and promised return. Different tribes in the Christian family focus on different aspects of its many-layered meaning. For a warmhearted devotional reflection on the Eucharist, see my friend Dan Schmidt's book *Taken by Communion: How the Lord's Supper Nourishes the Soul* (Baker, 2003).

So by my mid-20s, I had met the conservative Protestant Jesus, the Pentecostal Jesus, and the Roman Catholic Jesus. And by the grace of God, I didn't think of them as different saviors, requiring a lateral conversion to a new denomination each time. Rather I believed that each was a new facet, a new dimension, of the Jesus I had met as a child and rediscovered as a teenager, and that each could enrich my ongoing conversion in my spiritual journey. But I was still unsatisfied, especially because I sensed that if Jesus were truly the Savior, he wasn't just my personal Savior, but was the Savior of the whole cosmos. The Eastern Orthodox Jesus would lead me into this new territory.

### The Eastern Orthodox Jesus

I think I was first introduced to the Orthodox way through the writings of Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy in college. Years later I came across a book on prayer by Metropolitan Anthony Bloom (*Beginning to Pray*, Paulist, 1988). I had read a lot of Christian books by my early 30s, especially books on prayer; and with most, after reading a page or two, I could predict what they'd say, how they'd say it, etc. But this book surprised me on page after page. This Eastern tradition, of which I had known little beyond stereotypes, turned out to have rich resources that attracted me and sparked my curiosity.

In particular I became intrigued with the way the Eastern Orthodox family (which includes the Greek, Russian, Serbian, Antiochian, and several other communities) celebrated the Trinity—not as an abstract exercise in theological hairsplitting, but as an introduction to a powerful and dynamic view of God.

I learned that the early church leaders described the Trinity using the term *perichoresis* (*peri*—circle, *choreisis*—dance): the Trinity was an eternal dance of Father, Son, and Spirit sharing mutual love, honor, happiness, joy,

and respect. Against this backdrop, God's act of creation means that God is inviting more and more beings into the eternal dance of joy. Sin means that people are stepping out of the dance, corrupting its beauty and rhythm, crashing and tackling and stomping on feet instead of moving with grace, rhythm, and reverence. Then, in Jesus, God enters creation to restore the rhythm and beauty again.<sup>24</sup>

If the Evangelical Jesus saves by dying, the Pentecostal Jesus by sending his Spirit, and the Catholic Jesus by rising from death, the Eastern Orthodox Jesus saves simply by being born, by showing up, by coming among us.<sup>25</sup> In Jesus' birth, these Christians believe two wonderful things happen. First, God takes the human life of Jesus into God's own eternal life, and in so doing, Jesus' people (the Jews), species (the human race), and history (the history of our planet and our whole universe) enter into—are taken up into—God's own life. God's life, love, joy, and power are so great that all our death, hate, pain, and failures are eradicated, swallowed up, cancelled, extinguished, and overcome by being taken up into God. In this way Jesus will ultimately bring blessing to the whole world, to all of creation.

Second, as humanity (and all creation) enters into God through Jesus, God also enters Jesus' people, species, and history. And by entering all creation through Jesus,

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<sup>24</sup> For those who are tired of abstract arguments about the Trinity that seem to box God into a mathematical equation, listen to Chesterton: "For to us Trinitarians (if I may say it with reverence)—to us God Himself is a society. It is indeed a fathomless mystery of theology... This triple enigma is as comforting as wine and open as an English fireside; this thing that bewilders the intellect utterly quiets the heart" (*Orthodoxy*, 145-146). In the last few years, there has been a hopeful, heartwarming, and mind-expanding resurgence of interest in the Trinity—a wonderful contribution to a generous orthodoxy. See, for example, Colin Gunton's *The Triune Creator* (Eerdmans, 1998).

<sup>25</sup> If you're wondering where these different streams of Christian faith arose, here's a brief historical sketch. Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism officially split about 1000 AD; this was roughly speaking an East-West split. Protestants in Northern Europe (including Anabaptists) split off from Roman Catholics in Southern Europe in about 1500 AD. Liberal and Conservative Protestants began to diverge in the 1800s, and Pentecostals arose from within Conservative Protestants—also called Evangelicals—about 1900. These latter divergences were conceptual, without geographical correlates.

God's heart is forever bound to it in solidarity, faithfulness, loyalty, and commitment. God will never give up until all creation is healed of its diseases, cured of its addictions, retrained from its foolishness, reclaimed from its lost state. Jesus saves by coming, by being born. It's no wonder that, for the Eastern Orthodox, Christmas is celebrated with such profound joy and rich, sustained intensity. It's the celebration of God's saving (rescuing) of the world—that God has entered creation through Jesus (*incarnation* is the theological term for God's embodiment in Jesus) and creation has been taken up into God so that all will be well. This is surely good news!

How does this happen? A powerful story was told in the fourth century by Athanasius, one of the most important theologians in Eastern Orthodoxy, to illustrate how, in Jesus, God came as a human to save all of creation. I'll adapt and expand his story here:

Once upon a time there was a good and kind king who had a great kingdom with many cities. In one distant city, some people took advantage of the freedom the king gave them and started doing evil. They profited by their evil and began to fear that the king would interfere and throw them in jail. Eventually these rebels seethed with hatred for the king. They convinced the city that everyone would be better off without the king, and the city declared its independence from the kingdom.

But soon, with everyone doing whatever they wanted, disorder reigned in the city. There was violence, hatred, lying, oppression, murder, rape, slavery, and fear. The king thought: *What should I do? If I take my army and conquer the city by force, the people will fight against me, and I'll have to kill so many of them, and the rest will only submit through fear or intimidation, which will make them*

*bate me and all I stand for even more. How does that help them—to be either dead or imprisoned or secretly seething with rage? But if I leave them alone, they'll destroy each other, and it breaks my heart to think of the pain they're causing and experiencing.*

So the king did something very surprising. He took off his robes and dressed in the rags of a homeless wanderer. Incognito, he entered the city and began living in a vacant lot near a garbage dump. He took up a trade—fixing broken pottery and furniture. Whenever people came to him, his kindness and goodness and fairness and respect were so striking that they would linger just to be in his presence. They would tell him their fears and questions, and ask his advice. He told them that the rebels had fooled them, and that the true king had a better way to live, which he exemplified and taught. One by one, then two by two, and then by the hundreds, people began to have confidence in him and live in his way.

Their influence spread to others, and the movement grew and grew until the whole city regretted its rebellion and wanted to return to the kingdom again. But, ashamed of their horrible mistake, they were afraid to approach the king, believing he would certainly destroy them for their rebellion. But the king-in-disguise told them the good news: he was himself the king, and he loved them. He held nothing against them, and he welcomed them back into his kingdom, having accomplished by a gentle, subtle presence what never could have been accomplished through brute force.

For the first time, through the Eastern Jesus, I began to have a glimpse of how Jesus could indeed be the Savior of not just a few individual humans but of the whole world.<sup>26</sup> I began to see the wisdom, the necessity of the incarnation,

and its expanding impact—not just beyond this life and this history, but within it. And somehow I began to see how my personal salvation was not *apart from* the salvation of the world but was *a part of* it. The more I learned from Jesus “the ways of the king,” the more I could influence others in his ways, too, and the closer we came to the salvation of the whole world. This dynamic, transcendent, and cosmic Eastern Orthodox Jesus opened the door for three more.

### The Liberal Protestant Jesus

For reasons I’ll explain later, I was deeply prejudiced against liberal or mainline Protestants (see Chapter 8). But in my mid-20s, newly married, my wife and I began attending an Episcopal church. The church was not a typical Episcopal congregation: “Evangelical in the pulpit, Anglican at the altar, and charismatic in the pew,” Rector Renny Scott, who became one of my early important mentors, would say to describe it.

While Scott himself was conservative or evangelical, he loved and respected his more liberal colleagues, and his attitude began to rub off on me. “Scratch the paint of a liberal,” he once told me, “and you’ll find an alienated fundamentalist underneath.” Over the years I found out how true that little saying was. As I began to realize how liberal Protestants were seeking to fill in the deficiencies they found in the conservative Protestant Jesus, I realized I could learn a lot from them; I was on a similar quest.

In my 30s, I got to know a number of liberal Protestants as friends. I became willing to appreciate how

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<sup>26</sup> By “the whole world,” I do not necessarily mean every individual in it, but rather, I mean the cosmos, creation, the earth in history, not just beyond history. Also, I should add here that I am unqualified to be a spokesperson for the Eastern tradition, and so my thoughts on Eastern Orthodoxy should be considered the impressionistic observations of an outside admirer, not technically precise pronouncements of an inside spokesperson.

for them, the gospel centers in the words and deeds of Jesus Christ—the story of his life, between his birth (of such importance to the Eastern Orthodox), and his death and resurrection (the focal points for conservative Protestants and Roman Catholics). His teachings and acts of love, healing, justice, and compassion offer a way of life that, if practiced, brings blessing to the whole world. Our mission, then, is to bring the teaching and example of Jesus to bear on our world—not only on our personal relationships, but also on the political structures and cultural systems of our world.

For some complex reasons that we can't go into here, some (not all) liberal Protestants will question whether some or all of the miraculous deeds recounted in the Gospels (and elsewhere in the Bible) actually happened. Instead they often read the miracle accounts as instructive fictions, parables, fables, myths not intended by the storytellers of the early church to be historically accurate or inaccurate, but intended instead to dramatically convey a deeper meaning, given by God. So, when Jesus multiplies a boy's loaves and fish to feed a multitude, we are being told in the language of poetry that if we will give whatever little we have, God will make it more effective than we could imagine. Or when Jesus heals a paralytic, we can see our spiritual paralysis more clearly and believe it can be healed. Or when Jesus heals blindness, we acknowledge our own blindness and need for enlightenment or new vision.

Beyond these personal applications, these stories inspire us to actually feed the hungry by sharing our bread and our hospitality, to build and staff hospitals to help the sick, to cure the blindness of ignorance through education and art, to cross racial and cultural boundaries in love, to face corrupt systems even at risk of our lives. Even for many liberal Protestants who question the literal validity of many

of the stories of Jesus, the stories' meaning or message is true and God-given, and can have an impact on us, and through us, on our world.<sup>27</sup>

While I believe that actual miracles can and do happen (though I notice they sometimes create nearly as many problems as they solve, and so I see why they aren't given "on demand"), I am sympathetic with those who believe otherwise, and I applaud their desire to live out the meaning of the miracle stories even when they don't believe the stories really happened as written.<sup>28</sup> (I find it harder to be sympathetic with those who take pride in believing the miracles really happened but don't seek to live out their meaning.)

### The Anabaptist Jesus

I think I first heard the term *Anabaptist* associated with "Christian pacifism" back in the days of the Vietnam War when I was a teenager. Nearly all the pacifists I met then were nonreligious, and nearly all the religious people I knew tended toward the "hawk" side when it came to the war. But even as a teenager, I resonated with the ideal of pacifism for Christians, and I remember hoping I'd meet some Anabaptists someday. It turns out I had already met some but didn't realize it.

In high school, our marching band (I played saxophone) did an exchange weekend with a band in rural Ohio, and I stayed with a warm, hospitable Mennonite family there. Amish families surrounded their farm. From that visit I got the idea that Mennonites were a slightly less

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<sup>27</sup> Some liberal Protestants even go beyond what I'm describing here, denying the reality of a personal, relational God. While I understand in part what they're reacting *against*, I have never been clear about what is left to be *for*, or why.

<sup>28</sup> Accidental theologian Jim Carrey brilliantly illustrates some of the problems with miracles on demand in his delightful 2003 film *Bruce Almighty*.

conservative version of the Amish, but I had no idea that together they were prime examples of Anabaptists. In my 20s, I read John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus*, and although I wasn't immediately convinced of all his arguments, I was certainly convinced that Anabaptists had a lot to teach me.

Anabaptist Christians, not unlike liberal Protestants, find the heart of the gospel in the teachings of Jesus—and in particular, the ethical teachings of Jesus. Anabaptists have (for better and for worse) traditionally been wary of too much speculation about theological abstractions such as atonement theories (which are so important to conservative Protestants), literal or figurative biblical interpretation (a.k.a., hermeneutics, which has been so important to both liberal and conservative Protestants), or rites and rituals like the Eucharist (of such importance to Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox). Instead they feel their calling is to focus on living out Jesus' teachings about how we are to conduct our daily lives, especially in relation to our neighbors. As more and more people take Jesus' teachings on neighborly nonviolence and peacemaking seriously, as more and more people live out the simple way of Jesus in their communities, our whole world comes closer to the day when God's will is done on earth—which includes the extinction of war.

For conservative Protestants and Roman Catholics, then, Jesus saves individuals through the cross and resurrection; for Eastern Orthodox followers, Jesus saves the world through the incarnation; for liberal Protestants and Anabaptists, Jesus saves through his teaching and example. But in addition, Anabaptists uniquely emphasize Jesus' role in convening and leading a community of disciples. For them the church is not at heart an institution (as it has tended to be for the other groups we have considered) with

hierarchies and policies, headquarters, and bureaucracy. Above all, the church is a continuation and extension of the original band of disciples, a group of people learning the ways of Jesus as a voluntary community.

### The Jesus of the Oppressed

Add one more key element to the Anabaptist vision, and you have the seventh and final Jesus that I have met...so far, at least. This is the Jesus of nonviolent liberation theology. In my readings and travels (especially in Latin America), I have been exposed to many committed Christians who believe that Marxism and Communism were filling in the gap that should have been filled by Christians—Christians who understood the revolutionary social and political implications of the teaching and example of Jesus, whose gospel was good news to the poor, along with a challenge toward generosity for the rich.

Because Christians failed to preach and practice this dimension of the gospel, secular movements arose to fill the gap. Sadly, because these secular movements had ideology without truly spiritual good news, the poor received from these secular movements yet another disappointment and yet another delay in experiencing true liberation. Sadly, because these secular movements often preached that violence could overcome violence, even if they had succeeded in liberating the poor from poverty, they never could have liberated the poor from violence. Nonviolent liberation theology sought to rediscover the Jesus who is the hero to the poor and oppressed, and the prophet who bravely confronts the establishments of power and privilege.

Like the Jesus of the liberal Protestants and Anabaptists, this Jesus leads a band of disciples, but the liberation mind-set gives special attention to the activism of

this band of disciples in relation to systems of oppression. Through them, with them, Jesus works for liberation of all oppressed people. Jesus' death on the cross is seen in a unique way from this vantage point: in his dying, Jesus confronts the corrupt, compromised religious system and violent, unjust political and economic powers of his day through nonviolent resistance.<sup>29</sup> He does not inflict suffering but willingly suffers. In the process, the corrupt systems show themselves for what they are, sowing the seeds for their own destruction and making way for the peace and justice of God to replace them—not just beyond history in heaven but here in history on planet Earth.

The Jesus of liberation theology, firmly rooted in the struggles of the first century, inspires Christians to continue his work and mission in all centuries throughout history, believing that history is exactly the venue into which God's kingdom comes and in which God's will can increasingly be done.

Through the years I have found that there are many pictures of Jesus afoot in the Christian world. My sketches here in this chapter are just that—simple impressions drawn with a few lines; for detailed portraits you'll need to read elsewhere. Perhaps we could summarize using this table:

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<sup>29</sup> I am aware that some liberation theologians have promoted violence, but I have tended to discount them and only paid attention to those who were nonviolent.

Type of Christian	Focus/Problem	Good News
Conservative Protestant	The human race is guilty of sin and wrongdoing.	Jesus' death pays the full penalty for human sin.
Pentecostal	The human race is held down by disease and poverty.	Jesus teaches us how to receive miracles and healings from God through faith in God's promises.
Roman Catholic	The human race is enslaved by the fear of death.	Jesus' resurrection defeats death and liberates humanity.
Eastern Orthodox	The human race is spiritually sick and needs healing; it has dropped out of the "dance" of creation.	Jesus' entry (or incarnation) into humanity and history brings God's healing to the human race and all of creation.
Liberal Protestant	The human race suffers from ignorance of the teachings and ways of Christ.	Jesus' example and teachings inspire us to work compassionately for social justice.
Anabaptist	The human race is divided and violent and needs to learn the ways of Christ in community.	Jesus convenes a learning community of disciples who seek to model lives of love and peace.

Liberation Theology (nonviolent)	Humanity is oppressed by corrupt powers, systems, and regimes.	Jesus commissions and leads bands of activists to confront unjust regimes and make room for the shalom of God.
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This table is far from complete; I can think of at least one new Jesus that is arising from within the evangelical tradition in recent years. And there are many crossovers and hybrids among these visions of Jesus as well. For example, most Pentecostals share a close affinity with what I'm calling Conservative Protestants in their attention to human guilt and the forgiveness Jesus' death brings. Many Catholics share a concern for social justice with Liberal Protestants and Anabaptists and Liberationists. Furthermore, each of these groups has nuances, sub-streams, counter-streams, weaknesses, problems, and minority opinions that my simple table doesn't begin to show.

In the end, the purpose of this table and this whole chapter is not to further distinguish, delineate, or divide these various types of Christians by setting up competing independent portraits of Jesus, but rather, the reverse.

In short, I tell the story of my encounters with Jesus to say that now, after many years of following Jesus and learning from many different communities of his followers, I'm just beginning to arrive at a view of Jesus that approaches the simple, integrated richness I knew of him as a little boy—picture Bible on my father's lap, flannel graph characters on my mother's easel, and a pure, childlike love welling up within me. You could say I'm finding a new simplicity on the far side of complexity. I am a Christian

because I believe the real Jesus is all that these sketches reveal and more. Saying that, a question comes to mind...

*Why not celebrate them all?* Already, many people are using terms like *post-Protestant*, *post-denominational*, *post-liberal*, and *post-conservative* to express a desire to move beyond the polarization and sectarianism that have too often characterized Christians of the past (as we'll discuss in Chapters 6 and 7). Up until recent decades, each tribe felt it had to uphold one image of Jesus and undermine some or all of the others. What if, instead, we saw these various emphases as partial projections that together can create a hologram: a richer, multidimensional vision of Jesus?

What if we enjoy them all, the way we enjoy foods from differing cultures? Aren't we glad we can enjoy Thai food this week, Chinese next, Italian the following week, Mexican next month, and Khmer after that? What do we gain by saying that Chinese food is permissible, but Mexican food is poison? Isn't there nourishment and joy (and pleasure) to be had from each tradition?

No, I am not recommending we throw each offering in a blender, press the "liquefy" button, and try to create a gray porridge of all cuisines. That doesn't sound appetizing at all. Neither would it be helpful. Rather I'm recommending that we acknowledge that Christians of each tradition bring their distinctive and wonderful gifts to the table, so we can all enjoy the feast of generous orthodoxy—and spread that same feast for the whole world.

## Discussion Questions

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1. What to you are the strengths of each of the following:

The Conservative Protestant Jesus  
The Pentecostal/Charismatic Jesus  
The Roman Catholic Jesus  
The Eastern Orthodox Jesus  
The Liberal Protestant Jesus  
The Anabaptist Jesus  
The Jesus of the Oppressed

2. Do you have reservations about any of these Jesuses? If so, what are they?

3. What role (if any) has the Conservative Protestant Jesus played in your life? For instance, how has the focus on moral guilt affected your priorities and choices?

4. Should heaven-or-hell be the top issue on the Christian agenda? What makes you say that?

5. Do you experience Jesus as “here-and-now present, active, alive and well” (page 58)? If so, describe what you mean by that. If not, is that okay with you?

6. How important to you is justice for non-Christians? Why is that?

7. What role do you think living out the meaning of the gospel miracles (page 68) should have in your life?

8. Which aspects of Jesus (his birth, life, death, resurrection, the sending of the Spirit, and so on) do you need more of in your life right now? Why?

9. Which of the seven Jesuses do you want to learn more about?