

# Holistic Theology

An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy  
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## The Questions

The Artistic Director looks at me curiously and asks.

"You believe in God?"

"Yes." I reply.

"You pray?"

"Yes." I reply.

"You believe that God answers prayer?"

"Yes." I reply again.

"That must be a weird world to live in." He reflects.

I am slightly taken aback. How do you reply to that? I have always accepted that my beliefs as a Christian were weird. But I have never thought that prayer was the weird part. I have always thought that believing that Christ died for my sins and rose again on the third day was the weird part. I thought that prayer was normal, even characteristically human. But my friend, the Artistic Director, thinks that communicating with God is weird. He expresses the philosophical assumptions that he was trained up in as a child, and that were reinforced when he went to University. We live in a godless society, and think that being godless is normal.

Since I differ from the teaching of my culture, it is therefore incumbent upon me to explain why I believe in communicating with God.

## The Purpose of Theology

The purpose of theology is to reconcile the gospel to current philosophy. The gospel is the same yesterday, today and forever, but philosophy changes. It changes from time to time and place to place. If you want to preach the gospel to people then you have to speak

their language, and their language is filled with philosophical assumptions. The problem I am concerned with is how to preach the gospel to Canadians in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Canadians are a varied group of people from a variety of cultures and countries, but the culture that is enshrined in our Charter of Right and Freedoms is Western Enlightenment Liberalism. This is what is taught in our schools, universities and courts of law.

There is a problem. Western Enlightenment Liberalism is a functional atheism. The teaching that I learned in Grade Eight Science was the philosophy of "materialism" that the world is made up of atoms. If it isn't made up of atoms then its not real. Young Canadians are taught to bang on the desk or the door or some other piece of wood and say "This is real." One of my professor friends told me that he would prove that only matter and energy are real by punching me in the face. We were taught that matter and energy are objective reality, and are governed by universal and unchanging laws of science which can be expressed mathematically. Which meant that the world is completely deterministic, and if you know the current state and the forces acting on it you should be able to deduce any previous state and predict any future state. We were also taught that scientists don't understand all those forces, but Science is in the process of discovering all those forces, and the scientific method will, in the end, produce a unified field theory that will describe and integrate all the laws of the world mechanism into one equation.

What about God? There are two different responses to this question. One is Deism. God created the great mechanism that is the world but then wandered off and does not interfere. For purposes of understanding the universe then God is an unnecessary hypothesis. Since God is irrelevant, you may believe in God, but in the real world you have to function as an atheist. You find the scientific laws that control the universe and you use those to get what you want.

The second response is slightly more complex. The human brain, by a mechanism we don't understand yet, gives people the illusion that they are thinking, and planning, and making decisions. These are personal and private illusions, but they have no significant effect on

the real world which is determined by the laws of matter and energy. Everyone is entitled to these personal fantasies, but since these are just personal opinions, in the real world you have to function as an atheist. You find the scientific laws that control the universe and you use those to get what you want.

Both roads lead to functional atheism.

So modern theology has devoted itself to reconciling the gospel to functional atheism. One prominent modern theologian commented that he went to university and became an agnostic. Since there is no proof of the existence of God, the sensible thing is to suspend judgment. Then he went to seminary and became an atheist. In life you have to function, and that means you have to either function as if there is a God or as if there is no God. Seminary taught him how to function as if there is no God. It taught functional atheism. The seminary I went to prided itself on destroying the faith of their students and replacing it with a more sophisticated faith. The more sophisticated faith was functional atheism.

One of the ministers in my denomination, the United Church of Canada, is a self-professed atheist. Her congregation doesn't seem to have a problem with this. She has even written a book on prayer for atheists. This is almost the definition of functional atheism, how to engage in religious rituals without actually believing in God. People keep muttering that the church should do something about it. It did. It affirmed her ministry. I attended a retirement ceremony for one of our chaplains. He expressed his profound gratitude that he was able to have a career in a church that did not require him to believe in God. Our atheist minister insists that all her ministry colleagues are atheists too, they just don't have the guts to admit it. In this she is wrong. Most are only functional atheists. They believe in God and they engage in routines that they consider holy, but they don't think it makes any difference because God isn't listening. We are all prone to getting caught up in the routine of ministry and the mechanical application of traditional techniques, and the search for new spiritual technologies, and we need to be reminded of the presence of the living God.

My denomination is dying, literally dying. I know because I've been burying them. We've lost our children to atheism, and the old believers are dying off. You can't blame the children for not wanting to participate in rituals that don't make any difference, and to recite creeds they don't actually believe.

### The Doctrine of God: Do you believe in God?

Consider the United Church's New Creed (1968). For the United Church of Canada 1968 was the last good year. The creed begins:

*We are not alone,  
we live in God's world.  
We believe in God:  
who has created and is creating,*

It is easy to recite, but hard to believe especially if you are taught in Grade Eight Science that it's not true. Young people form their religious opinions at 14, before they are capable of abstract thought. They are taught that we are alone. The Universe is an infinite, meaningless void filled with lifeless rocks. Science fiction then teaches that if we are not alone then it is because there are extra-terrestrial space aliens. God may have created the universe, but She or He certainly isn't creating anything these days.

Although I was taught in Grade Eight that materialism is the one truth faith, when I got to University I discovered that there is an alternative philosophy, called "Existentialism." It taught that we do not live in a deterministic universe, that we make decisions about how we are going to live. I have since read books by materialists trying to explain how all the things that look like they are making decisions are just random events with no meaning or purpose. That is a weird world to live in. As an existentialist I had to make a decision about God. Either I could live as if there is no God, or I could live as if there is a God. I decided to live as a believer. It was what some existentialists call the "leap of faith."

Since then I have found that there is an even better philosophy called "Holism." Simply put Holism argues that there are larger

realities to which we belong. We are not alone. We are not isolated individuals. We belong.

On Martin Luther King, Jr. Day the radio was on and playing one of his old speeches. In it he was saying that people accused him of breaking the law, but he believed that there was a higher law, the Federal law. He belonged to a larger reality, the State. But he also belonged to a reality that was higher, the country. President John Fitzgerald Kennedy is famous for his exhortation "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." The sentence only makes sense when there is a larger reality called "your country" to which you belong. It assumes a holistic world.

Environmentalists have been demanding for sometime that we see ourselves as belonging to Nature. There is a reality that we belong to that is higher than our country. We belong to our environment. Ask not what your planet can do for you, ask what you can do for your planet. They appeal to native spirituality and the concept of "all my relations." We are not just a part of the nuclear family. We are part of a larger family of cousins, and animals and the elements of nature. When St. Francis spoke of Brother Sun and Sister Moon he was thinking holistically.

If we are part of this planet then the planet is part of a larger reality called the Universe which is part of a larger reality called God. A holistic philosophy means that we can say and believe.

*We are not alone, we live in God's world.*

But to say the second part

*We believe in God: who has created and is creating,*

we have to believe in creativity. The materialism we learned in Grade Eight tells us that there is no such thing as creativity, there is only matter and energy. But in order to create you have to make decisions.

If the only real things in the universe are matter and energy then there can be no creativity because matter and energy are constants. They never change. All of the equations you learned in physics are based on that assumption. It is the law of conservation of matter and energy.

But we see change around us all the time. If matter and energy are constants then what changes? Their form. Matter and energy remain constant but their form changes. There is something else in the universe besides matter and energy. The universe has matter, energy, and form. There are different words for form: relationship, formulae, mathematics, logic, ideas, information. Form must be real, because if form is not real then all those scientific formulae are not real, and Science is a delusion. Even the most hard core materialist will admit that mathematics is real. But they will then insist that it may be real, but it doesn't do anything. The universe is like a clock work mechanism. It moves, but those movements are simply a response to previous causes. Clocks may move, but they don't do anything creative.

Actually information does do things. It can be communicated. So there is a fourth thing in the universe. Not only is the universe made up of matter and energy, it is also made up of information and communication. The wholes that we have been talking about: the family, the community, the environment, and the universe, are not atoms, but they are still real because they are forms. They are relationships, and the relationships are based on communication.

Holism is an integrated understanding of matter/energy, and information/communication. In the old terminology holism is an integration of mind and body. If you have run across the term "holistic" before it has probably been in relation to various forms of therapy. Materialism denies the existence of mind, but since mind is the basis of our everyday experience it is hard to ignore. The classic example is the placebo effect. Patients are given a sugar pill and told it is a medicine, and they get better. In order to be licensed a drug has to prove that it is marginally better than a placebo. One of my favourite stories is the fellow whose healing consisted of watching comedies. Another witness tells of having her pain relieved by watching the more heart warming episodes of the TV series Northern Exposure. This is anecdotal evidence. The actual theoretical basis of holism comes from the study of telecommunications, cybernetics, and gestalt psychology.

## Integrating Mind and Body

Much of our understanding of information came from the study of telecommunications. It was from Bell Labs that we got the definition of information. Information is “a message selected from a set of possible messages.” In other words **information is a choice, a decision.**

This definition takes the refutation of materialism a step further. It is bad enough that there is something in the universe besides matter and energy, that information is real, but to suggest that information is choice shatters the materialist assumptions. We were taught that the universe is a complex machine driven by forces. There is no choice involved because all the mechanical movements of the great mechanism of the universe are governed by scientific laws. Everything is rigidly determined. For the materialist, choice cannot exist except as a subjective delusion of human beings.

Telecommunications people ignored the materialist assumption that there is no choice, because defining information as choice had three profoundly useful effects. The first advantage was that it was logical. The basic binary choice of  $x$  or not  $x$ , true or false, is the foundation of logic. So computers are programmed with logic. Fortunately Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead had written the *Principia Mathematica* showing how mathematics was derived from logic.

The second advantage was that it allowed us to count information. Since any complex choice can be coded as a series of binary choices you could count the number of binary digits needed to code the information to get the number of bits, and bytes.

Finally, it allowed for a simple definition of communication. If information is choice within a set, then communication is the translation of choices in one set into choices in another set. It can be understood as coding. Thus the letters of the alphabet could be translated into the dots and dashes of Morse Code and transmitted across the telegraph lines or the air waves.

Telecommunications showed that you could use matter and

energy to transmit information. Thus matter and energy are related to information and communication in the following way. Matter and energy are the **media** of information and communication.

## Design Choices

This requires a slight change in our understanding of communication. Take for example the chair. The chair is the embodiment of an idea. The chair you are sitting on began as an idea in the mind of a chair manufacturer. Of all the things a manufacturer could do with material, he chose to create a chair. The chair is thus a medium that expresses his idea. We are familiar with this from architecture. Buildings can be mechanical engineering products in which case they are very boring. Or they can be a creative expression of the architect. If we look at the design for the Museum of Human Rights in Winnipeg, we see that it is not just a box for artifacts. It is an expression of the architectural imagination. It is a medium for the mind of the architect.

In the same way the universe is a stunning and remarkable design. The matter and energy of the universe is an expression of design choices. Scientists study the form of the universe and develop scientific theories that express that form. They are translating the message of the universe. The only reason that science is possible is because the universe expresses an idea.

The problem for the materialists was that materialism is an atheism, and the existence of a universe of choices brought back the old argument from design. Since the universe exhibits an exquisite design, it could not have happened by chance. There must be a designer. Similarly if the universe consists of choices then there must be a chooser, a creator.

*We believe in God: who has created*

## Control Systems

But there was worse news to come for materialism. A group of scientists, who called themselves “cyberneticists” and who studied



control systems in the machine and in the animal, found that control systems are information systems. We were taught to think of information as data, but information can also function as a command. Suppose I say to you "Raise your right hand." That sentence is information that functions as a command. Since information is a choice therefore control systems are decision making systems. A control system processes information in order to make a decision and generate a command.

We were taught that only forces can cause change. What the cyberneticists discovered was that commands also cause change. Control systems control matter and energy. The term "cybernetics" comes from the Greek "cybernete" or steersman. The force of the wind or the rowing slaves moves the ship, but the steersman at the rudder controls the direction of the ship. Similarly with your automobile. The electromagnetic force of your battery moves the car, but your steering wheel and accelerator control the speed and direction of the car. Your ideas and plans control where the car goes. Similarly with a jet plane. The force of the huge jet engines moves the plane, but it is the pilot at the controls who makes the plane fly by controlling the shape of the wings. The airplane is controlled by the pilot's ideas, and choices about where he wants to go. Those ideas are then communicated to the plane through the controls.

This is the second key to the relationship between matter/energy and information/communication. Information and communication **control** matter and energy.

### The Figure-Ground Gestalt

For many years the mind/body problem was considered to be unsolvable. Philosophers had been looking for a common ground for mind and body. Materialists argued that ideas were just atoms. Idealists argued that matter was just an idea. But there is no common ground. Ideas and matter are totally different. Gestalt psychology allows us to understand this relationship as a figure-ground gestalt. When one is the figure the other is the ground. Thus if we are looking at information and communication then they are seen against the

background of matter and energy. Matter and energy are the media. You see this essay on a piece of paper or a screen. The paper or the screen is the background against which you perceive the words.

Similarly if we are looking at matter and energy they are seen against the background of form. You cannot talk about matter and energy without using mathematics. Mathematics is a set of forms. It is an aspect of information and communication. Or to give a simpler example: when you look at a cup what you perceive is information about the cup. The colour, shape, texture, smell, warmth, or sound of the cup is information. The empirical data about the cup is not matter or energy, it is the information background that allows us to perceive the cup as matter and energy.

Consider the following image.



You can see this image as either a vase or as two faces. It depends on which you put in the foreground and which you put in the background. You will see the vase if you look at the black against a white background. You will see the two faces if you look at the white against a black background. You will see either one or the other. You cannot see them both at the same time, but both are real. They are both in the image.

In 1956 Frances Crick and George Gamov enunciated the Central Dogma of Microbiology. The important processes in a cell are not the energy processes, but the information processes. If you believe that the DNA molecule is a **medium** for genetic information, and that

genetic information **controls** the development of the body then you are operating from a holistic perspective. You see two different aspects of DNA but accept both as real.

Materialism had survived by arguing that information, communication and decisions making are only found in the human brain, and are subjective illusions. What telecommunications and cybernetics showed was that information, communication and decision making are characteristics of the universe.

The idea that not only were information and communication real, but they also control matter and energy was unthinkable to the hard line materialists. If information and communication cause change and information is choice then creativity is possible. The universe is not deterministic, it is filled with choices, and those choices control the universe.

## Power

This definition of information changes our understanding of power. God is referred to as the "almighty." In materialism that means that God is "The Force." In the beginning was the Big Bang. In other words God can force things to change. In Holistic terms, on the other hand, power is the ability to make a decision. God is "The Word." In the creation story in Genesis God speaks and a decision is made that forms the universe. The creation of light is the creation of a distinction between the light and the dark. It is the creation of a relationship, of form. "Let there be light." is both decision, communication and command.

Information, communication, decision making, and planning are not subjective opinions limited to the human brain. They are the very substance of the universe. As communication continues, so creativity continues. The universe continues to create. The universe is alive. Because of our early training in materialism where we were taught that the universe is dead, it is difficult for us to get our minds around the idea that the universe is a living thing.

Instead of looking at the universe as an empty void filled with dead rocks, we can look at it is a body, a world of form and

communication. Just as we are part of a human community in which we live and move and have our being, and part of a planet in which we live and move and have our being, so we are part of a universe in which we live and move and have our being. Living things make decisions. Living things communicate. The reality of the universe has a personality that makes decisions and communicates, a spirit that we call God.

*We believe in God: who has created and is creating,*

Meeting the creative God means meeting a subject, a person. This is that Martin Buber was talking about in his book *I-Thou*. Being a person means having ideas, feelings, plans, and a voice. It means having a morality, knowing the difference between good and evil. It means making judgments. Facing the judgment of God explains the terror evoked by meeting the Biblical God.

### The Word Made Flesh

If we move from materialism to holism we can say the first few sentences of the creed and believe it. But what about the second part?

*who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh,*

The *Word* is the wisdom that created the universe.

*And we believe in the Holy Spirit,*

*the Lord and giver of life, . . .*

*who spake by the prophets.*

For Holism spirit is the ability to communicate, and to make decisions. The spirit is the word at creation. God speaks and the universe is created, word by word. God breathes into Adam the breathe of life and the power of creativity. It is the power to speak. It is the ability to communicate. It is the power to make decisions and to create new things. The spirit is seen in the first breath a baby takes.

For Holism, communication exists and the wisdom at the beginning of creation can communicate with us. The Holy Spirit is communication with God.

Could that wisdom be present in a human being? If you look at matter and energy as communications media then there is no problem with the *flesh* being a medium of communication. In fact that

is exactly what the latest biology tells us. The molecule of DNA communicates coded genetic information, and that genetic information controls the development of the body. The body is the embodiment of a genetic idea.

Materialism creates a fundamental opposition of the mind and the body. But holism presents an integrated understanding of mind and body so that the *word* can become *flesh*. The flesh can be a medium for the word.

But could that message be the Word that was the wisdom at creation? At creation God spoke the words that created the design of our world. In spite of their materialist dogma scientists have always believed that they could speak the word that was the wisdom at creation, that they could describe the fundamental nature of the universe. Scientists believe that they can describe the basic design of the universe in human words. They can speak the words that God spoke at creation in an English translation. Newton spoke the three laws of motion. Those three laws are the design ideas that Nature obeys. They are the ideas, the decisions and the commands that God gave to Nature about motion.

But was Jesus the Word that was the wisdom of creation?

There are whole libraries devoted to discussing the words of Jesus, but the passage that has always summed it up for me was

*My commandment is this. Love one another as I love you. The greatest love a person can have for his friends is to give his life for them.* John 11:12

Jesus is utterly unique and radical. You cannot mistake his voice. No other spiritual leader says the things that he says. He gives only one command, "Love one another as I have loved you." When he sums up the law of Moses he quotes "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and love your neighbour as yourself." There is only one mark of the true church, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, by the love you have one for another."

The wisdom at the beginning of creation was love. The creation was an act of love, and the continuing creativity of creation is in acts of love.

If you believe that the universe is just a giant mechanism then there is no love in it. But if you believe that the universe is holistic, and there is belonging, communication, choices and values, then the universe can be created in love. I have no problem choosing to believe that.

### The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit

*And we believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the Lord and giver of life, . . .  
who spake by the prophets.*

The baptism of Jesus is a baptism in the spirit. Jesus sees the spirit descend like a dove. Jesus not only speaks a message from God calling people back to the covenant, he has the creation of a new thing, a new covenant. The covenant which comes from God and from Jesus is love. The Holy Spirit is the experience of Jesus' commandment, "Love one another as I have loved you." Communication can function as a command.

We are so used to thinking of power as force, that we have a hard time understanding the power of the word of command. The power of the word is the power to make distinctions, to make decisions, to form values, and to bind the future by making promises.

The Spirit is the Word of God. One of the problems that we have is that we are literate. We think of words as being in books. We think of the Bible as the Word of God. We think of the word of power as the printed word, but the word of power is the spoken word. We have to return to a pre-literate understanding of the power of the word. It is difficult for us to get back into the mind of the king who having spoken his word is then bound by it. His word is law. We think of the spoken word as ephemeral, and the written contract as the binding thing. I grew up in a world where a man's word was his bond. If you made a promise then you were bound by it.

The Spirit forms you. The Catholics have a term for it. They call it "Christian formation." The Spirit makes your Christianity perceptible in the shape of your life.

The prophets are formed by the Spirit. The prophets feel the

suffering of God at the cruelty of humanity. They cry out against that suffering and call people back to love. It is the Holy Spirit speaking out.

The Holy Spirit is God's love in your heart. It is just that simple. If you love people then you know the spirit of God, you are a child of God. And the spirit of Jesus is moving in you. If you don't have love then you don't have the spirit. This love is specifically the love that was in Jesus.

All the gifts of the spirit are just ways to love people and to love God. The Spirit is love and brings the fruits of the spirit: joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control. Love produces self-control because love functions as a value, and our behaviour is controlled by our values. The Holy Spirit transforms our values. It is the Spirit that gives life in all its abundance. To feel the spirit of love in your heart is to be alive in the fullest way possible. And this is what Jesus wants to share, life in all its fullness.

### Communication with God: Does God Answer?

In a holistic world we communicate with God and God communicates with us, but can God understand us, and can we understand God?

Materialists do not believe in the reality of communication since it is neither matter nor energy. Some philosophers call the age of materialism "The Great Silence." Holism recognizes the existence of communication. Christians claim to be able to communicate with God and with Jesus. They pray. The materialist argues that if you talk to God that's okay. But if God talks to you then you're crazy. There is some truth in this. Hearing voices can simply be an hallucination, and evidence of schizophrenia. St. John tells us that we have to test the spirits to see if they are from God.

Even if you can communicate with the Universe, there is a big difference between the Universe telling you that  $E=mc^2$  and God telling you to go into Macedonia and preach the gospel to the Macedonians. In other words there are general messages that are addressed to everyone, but not everyone is listening. Thus the

Universe says " $E=mc^2$ " to all of us, but only Einstein was listening. God was saying to all the Israelites "You have broken the covenant." but only the prophets were listening. Similarly God was saying "Love one another." to all of us, but only Jesus was listening.

Christians believe in the general messages. But they also believe in individual messages. There is the simple act of thinking things through. Often the voice of God is the voice of logic. There is the inner witness, the still small voice, which Christians believe to be the voice of the holy spirit. There is the wisdom of other Christians which can also be the voice of the holy spirit. There is the witness of the tradition which can also be the voice of the holy spirit.

Then there is the strange area of providence and signs. I remember one evening at a retreat with Jean Vanier and sitting around with a group of people sharing the ways that God had provided. At the crucial moment the right person, or the right donation, or the right supplies appeared in answer to prayer. If the materialists are right and there is only the great machine of the universe, then this makes no sense. But if the universe is like a body then you have the argument from the body. The body cares about each cell in the body and provides for it. I have no idea how the body does that, but it does it. I know that it operates by a process of communication. I don't understand that process. Similarly the Government of Canada cares for me as an individual. It even gives me my own personal Social Insurance Number. Similarly I believe that we are the children of God and God provides for us. It too is a process of communication and coordination that I don't understand. It does amazing things that I don't understand, and it also has limits that I don't understand.

There are moments when I look for a sign. There are moments when I want a personal relationship with God, and not a general one. I want guidance on a specific question, and I do not trust, reason, tradition, advice, or inspiration. "It is an evil and adulterous generation that seeketh a sign." But there are times when my faith is weak and I want a sign. I want assurance that what I am seeking is the will of God. John Wesley wanted to believe that his sins were



forgiven, but his faith was weak. Then one evening he received an assurance that his sins were forgiven, even his, and he went on to an evangelistic work that created the Methodist Church. In a Holistic world there is a personality that guides creation, and that personality can speak to me if I am listening.

When Jesus is baptized the heavens open and he hears the voice of God saying to him, "You are my son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased." Jesus calls God, "Abba," father. Abba is a nursery word. It is the father who loves and cares for his child. Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, "Abba" father, to pray to a God who loves us and cares for us. This is for everyone. At the heart of the universe there is a loving God who cares for us.

That word touches me. My life has been a mixture of joy and sorrow, success and failure, good times and hard times, but throughout it all I sense the providence of a loving God.

### The Doctrine of Reconciliation

But what about the weird part of Christianity, that Jesus died for our sins and on the third day rose again?

*who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh,  
to reconcile and make new,*

The phrase is a 1968 interpretation of the traditional formula in the Apostle's Creed.

*I believe in . . . the forgiveness of sins*

Jesus is a prophet. He speaks for God. But Jesus is more than a prophet. Jesus does not just deliver a divine message, he embodies it. He is not just telling people about the love of God. He is the love of God. The crucifixion of Jesus is not just the silencing of a prophet, it is the death of God. For Christians the crucifixion is a crime against God because Jesus is God. It is because he is God that he has the authority to forgive sins.

### Reconciliation

Communication requires a fundamental harmony. The word that I speak corresponds to the word that you hear. Hopefully the idea

that I communicate is the idea that you understand. But not necessarily. God may command us to love one another. We may even hear that command, but we have to decide to obey. If we decide not to, then the fundamental harmony with God is broken. That breaking of the harmony can be seen as a separation from God, as sin, or it can be seen as disobedience to a divine command.

Sin differs from doing wrong. Sin is an offense against God. The reason usury is a sin is not because it hurts other people, but because it is a violation of the covenant with God. People today have a hard time understanding the difference between a criminal act and a civil wrong. A criminal act is an offense against the Queen. It is disobedience and thus an attack on the authority of the sovereign. Thus the Queen has the right to pardon criminals. In the same way sin is an attack on the authority of God, and only God can forgive sins.

Science understands living in a world of law. The Israelites understood living in a world of law. What Jesus reveals is that human being cannot live in a just society. Justice is not enough. There has to be love, and love entails forgiveness.

Restoring the relationship is the goal of reconciliation. Restitution is an attempt to achieve reconciliation and maintain social harmony.

To reconcile people and God requires the forgiveness of sins. But there is a problem with the forgiveness of sins. You cannot forgive yourself. You can only be forgiven by the person you have wronged.

The prayer that Jesus taught us has the line "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." or in a different translation "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." If you forgive a debt, you turn what was a loan into a gift. You accept the cost as your cost. Forgiveness entails a gift. Similarly if someone trespasses on your property, then forgiving them means that you accept responsibility for repairing any damage that they may have done. Forgiveness entails a gift.

The love of Jesus enables us to love our enemies. Our enemies can be political, military, economic, and even our family. In all the places where we find conflict and suffering. In the world we have suffering,

but it is only love that can make our suffering redemptive and meaningful.

The crucifixion is the central sign of the radical nature of forgiveness. In the crucifixion Jesus accepts all the hatred and violence that is poured upon him. He pays the price.

And he lives this radical love: for the outcast, for the leper, for women, for the sinner, for us. This is a radically different kind of love. Love your enemies. Be kind to those who are cruel to you. Jesus is betrayed, deserted, denied, beaten, crucified. He suffers for this love. He died for this love.

Then he rose from the dead, and you can hear his voice today, calling you to a life of love. And he repairs the damage. He rises again from the grave. Thus the crucifixion became the central symbol of the forgiveness of sins. God can accept the damage that we do, and God can repair it.

Looked at from a materialist point of view this makes no sense whatsoever. It seems to be foolishness and weakness. To the materialist the primary goal is to look after yourself, so it is foolish to let yourself be crucified. And since strength is measured by force, then being crucified is a sign of weakness and not strength.

Looked at from a holistic point of view it is the power of God and the wisdom of God. In holism power is the ability to make a decision. Thus Jesus made a decision. He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane that the cup pass from him, but in the end he decided to accept the crucifixion. It was his decision. He had the power. He felt that the decision was the will of God. Thus the decision was also the power of God. It was the wisdom of God because the wisdom at the creation of the universe is love. And greater love has no man than to give his life for his friends. Love always entails self-sacrifice. The brutal cruelty of the Empire is transformed into love, forgiveness, and self-sacrifice.

Jesus is the beloved, the son of God. But he is also the Christ, the one who brings the forgiveness of sins. We cannot believe that God loves us. It doesn't matter how many times we hear it, we still can't believe it. We find it hard to believe that anyone could love us.

It is the most painful moment of life when we have to face the

truth about ourselves. But we always know it. The greed, the pettiness, the selfishness, the small cruelties, the cowardice, the inadequacy, the stupidity. We try to cover it up with a good show. Excuses, distractions, good works, a good self-image, prizes and awards, positive thinking, successes. But we know that it's just pretend. For someone to love us, they would have to forgive us.

Jesus took everything we could throw at him. The betrayals, the denials, the lies, the brutality, the indifference, the pain of all our meanness and cruelty. And yet he loves us. He forgives us. He died for our sins.

It is not enough to forgive yourself. You have to be forgiven. It was attending a retreat lead by Jean Vanier that gave me that experience. The experience of the forgiveness of sins is the experience of Christ. It is to know Christ and to be able to say that strange new prayer he taught us, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who have sinned against us."

How to forgive those who have wronged us is difficult, particularly if we feel that the one who has wronged us is God. The cross teaches us that you can transform suffering into forgiveness and love.

## The Risen Christ

Three days after his crucifixion he rose from the dead and appeared to his disciples. St. Paul lists a number of appearances. The Biblical descriptions of the resurrection of Jesus are ambiguous. There is no doubt that Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to the disciples. This is the apostolic witness. But what that meant is ambiguous. Some descriptions emphasize the physicality of the resurrection. The tomb is empty. Jesus breaks bread with the disciples and eats. He says "Put your hand on my wounds." On the other hand, some accounts emphasize the non-physicality of the resurrection. Jesus says "Don't touch me." He appears in locked rooms. He is not recognizable, and he disappears when he is recognized. But the appearances whether physical or quasi-physical only happen for a brief time.

The hope of resurrection is a function of the resurrection of Jesus. We will experience resurrection in the same way Jesus did. He is the first fruits of the resurrection. Because his resurrection is ambiguous the nature of Christian resurrection is also ambiguous, and there has been extensive dispute and speculation ranging from a heavenly paradise to a completely new physical creation.

Jesus did not come as just a prophet to proclaim a message from God. He also came to begin a new community which we call the "church." Jesus came to present a new agreement and to create a new community.

### The Doctrine of the Church

The people of Israel saw their relationship with God as an agreement, a covenant, and when they broke the terms of that agreement they were betraying the relationship. We are so used to thinking of the Ten Commandments in individualistic terms that it is important to remember that the relationship was between God and the community. The community was one because it was a family. The people were all descended from Israel. The Twelve Tribes were the twelve sons. The prophets constantly called people back to the covenant. John the Baptizer came announcing a baptism for the remission of sins. People could be "made new" by the waters of baptism. Even though they had broken the relationship, and destroyed the harmony, the relationship could be renewed. But the relationship that had to be restored was the relationship of the community. If the community restored its relationship to God then God would send a Messiah.

As with John, the baptism represents the forgiveness of sins. Unlike John the Christian baptism represents entering into a new agreement with God. The new agreement is the creation of a new community, and that community is Jesus. Just as the Israelites were one in Israel, so the new community was one in Jesus. The new community is not one genetically, but one in the Spirit. It is not an exchange of promises, but an incorporation. The unity that is the law, is replaced by the unity which is the Spirit.

He selected 12 disciples, just as Israel had twelve tribes. He sent them out into the country to preach and to heal.

His appearances after the crucifixion were sufficient to give his disciples new hope and they continued meeting in the temple. On the festival of Pentecost they were in the temple when the Holy Spirit descended on them and they began speaking in other tongues as the spirit gave them utterance. They became the church, the body of Christ. And they went forth to evangelize the world.

To be a member of the church, the body of Christ, you have to first want to follow Jesus, second you have to believe in the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit; third you have to be baptized with water for the remission of sins and the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Spirit. You are then a member of the body of Christ.

For holism the church exists as a larger reality of which individual Christians are a part. When Jesus rose from the dead he did not rise as simply an individual, he rose as a community with a message and a mission. He is alive in the community of Christians.

When Jesus comes to supper he comes in the form of the Eucharist. That Jesus is physically present in the church is also the witness of the church. The Roman Catholic doctrine sees this in the bread and wine being the actual substance of the body and blood of Jesus. The characteristics are still those of bread and wine, but the metaphysical substance is Jesus physical body and blood.

The Protestant Reformation tended to see the presence of Jesus in the faith of the believer. The physical presence of Jesus was in the physical presence of the believer, but it was not the physical presence that was important. For some Protestants the Eucharist was simply a memorial meal and Jesus was present in memory.

From a holistic point of view Jesus is present in the community. Jesus is the head of the church, but more than that Jesus is the church. The community is the body of Christ. Jesus is a larger reality of which the individual Christian is a part. As we partake of the bread of the communion we affirm that we are one in Christ. It is an affirmation of the new community and the new covenant. The wine represents the blood of Christ which represents the life of Christ which is the Holy

Spirit. Jesus is alive in the community as the community continues the work of Jesus in teaching and healing.

## Evangelism

The mission of the church is to spread the good news, but it is more than just passing on information. It is to evangelize the world and make disciples of all nations.

There is no evangelism machine that you can put people through and produce a Christian. Revival meetings and catechism classes are good things but they don't automatically produce Christians. This is a problem for children who have been raised in the church. The bland childhood experience of creed and ritual often inoculates them against the actual adult experience of God. They think the words of creed and ritual refer to childish experiences. Becoming a Christian is not just being enculturated into Church culture. It requires a decision at the deepest level. It is a life changing experience.

Buddhists talk about the moment of "enlightenment." Christians talk about being "born again," or having a conversion experience. The alcoholic talks about "hitting bottom." Gandhi talked about taking a solemn vow. Native people talk about a vision quest. In these cases we are talking about a radical change in personality. There is a moment when the choice becomes stark, and the decision touches us at the deepest level. We are not simply the victim of circumstances beyond our control, we decide who we will be. To use the computer metaphor, it doesn't just add more data, it changes the program. It changes the way we see the world. It changes the things we value. It changes the things we can do. It is not the adoption of a theory or the acceptance of a new idea but an actual experience of the presence of God.

The idea of the trinity, one God in three persons, is a reflection of the three events of actually meeting and talking to YHWH. The experience of God transforms our understanding of who we are. The experience of God the Father is an experience of the wonder of creation. People who have been trained all their life to see the world as a mechanism suddenly experience life, and see themselves as a

part of life, and experience the immense love at the heart of the universe. The experience of Jesus the Christ is the experience of forgiveness. Acceptance and love comes not because it is earned, or because it is a right, but because it is a gift. Love covers a multitude of sins. The experience of the Holy Spirit is the ability to love. The love that was at the creation of the universe reaches into our depths to remind us that we were created in love, and created for love, and that love is what makes life worth living.

### A Way Forward

The way forward for the church has two necessary steps. The first is to call people to make a decision to have faith in a living God who loves the world, and to reject the materialism that we were trained up in. It is the extremely difficult task of convincing people that what they are just pretending to believe is actually true. The second is to call people to make a decision to follow Jesus and his way of love, and to reject our society's worship of greed, selfishness and economic growth. The gospel is deeply counter-cultural. Being a cultural church is not a viable option, because the values of our culture are not the values of Jesus. Many people will choose to acquiesce in the cultural path, but the church has to be a place where people have a choice.