

# Rethinking Some Things II

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Within my life-time I have found myself constantly rethinking some things. It is good intentionally to examine one's understandings and presuppositions, but often rethinking is forced upon one by new insights, life experiences, or the failure of previous thinking to make sense and equip for life. I have rethought many things in the course of my life and this collection of individual articles is the start of collection II. While early on in life rethinking seems a difficult and frightening task, it eventually transforms into an exciting and invigorating part of life's dynamic and becomes a deeply spiritual process. Since rethinking is a process, the description of rethinking can often seem somewhat open and unfinished, but that is in the nature of rethinking and perhaps in the nature of life.

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## **A Model of Human Existence**

There is a need to interpret existence so that when one experiences life one knows what one is experiencing. Then one can to some extent deal with its components, and distinguish one's unique and persistent self from the processes of individual and total existence, thus maintaining a spiritual, psychological and even biological center and identity. If one is not aware of one's persistent self and identity, then existence overwhelms and one cannot retain oneself within it and make one's contribution to it.

Total existence and individual existence can be interpreted from a simplistic perspective expanding to perspectives which include increasing complexity. Increasing complexity in life makes our engagement with and understanding of total and individual existence more difficult and the maintaining of sufficient self identity more crucial. Confusion and anxiety may result from a complex world often beyond comprehension and description -- or trust may develop. Without some level of trust anxiety and confusion can rob one of the ability to function and stress can physically and mentally debilitate.

A major question is the internal and interrelated constitution of the complex of personal and world reality: what shapes reality and does it include meaning and order, or is its shape due to randomness, the interplay of the available? Is there a "mist of meaning," to use a phrase which itself expresses the difficulty of ascertaining meaning.

Also, how do we regard the seemingly negative and potentially destructive components of existence. Are they merely due to their destructive possibilities or do they have any interrelated structure and "purpose"? Beyond this, are they in any sense intentional and therefore not just following inherent principles but varying and distinctive according to what is intended in particular contexts?

The question of the destructive intentionality of components of existence raises the larger question of the participation of intentional and conscious beings. It is not difficult to affirm the role of human intentionality in the course of events, and one might even argue the influence of a collective or archetypal human consciousness. But what about a reality which one might call spiritual, the reality of God and spiritual beings. Whenever any reality is personal and intentional the possibilities of its influence and action in any context become complex and cannot be guessed -- though one would expect some consistency of personality and adherence to values and what it would promise, so important in the biblical tradition.

In the midst of this complexity, what best enables the well-functioning and well-being of the person? Helpful would seem to be self-awareness and self-image which clarify one's being, place and boundaries within the complexity of existence. Valuable also is a meaningful comprehension of the existence one must live, such as is attempted here. Its helpfulness is only partially determined by the accuracy of its description, for beyond accuracy there is the human need for comprehension and the making of meaning within the limits of what it is possible to understand.

The relationship and comfort of the person with her/his world is important. When anxiety is raised to a certain level attempts to manage and control interfere with normal human functional mechanisms. Many functions have been learned by practice and experience, have become habituated, and so run when called upon. Others are inherent within the design of our biological organism. We cannot be much aware of the mechanisms by which we function before we function, only of the mechanisms *as* they function; and of some (such as our biological functions) there is no awareness. Anxiety produces attempts to control and intervene which either interrupt and interfere with the mechanisms or produce harmful stress.

It is an important question as to whether reality is construed from within and by itself or from beyond itself. In a sense both world and person are constituted from the history that has happened to them and the inherent dynamics which constitute their inner structure (e.g. quantum mechanics, genetics, societal and political structures). From this perspective person and world are what they have become or are programmed to become. Elements of newness may emerge but are not really expected. Things are judged to be what they seem to be. And the existent systems within person and world both facilitate and limit life. It is seldom realized how the human system tends to homeostasis, to maintaining the balance it has learned because the extant systems become normative.

And yet nature has produced the new, revolutionary times have produced radical new visions which have transformed the present, and personal and historical crises have often helped to produce the new and a willingness to be formed by the new. Would it not be better to see the world and human possibilities as always having the potential of being shaped by the new and this new creating a reality, though it is not yet, just as real as that which now is?

Psychological analysis of a person often tries to be helpful by understanding the dynamics of the psyche and effecting changes through awareness, emotional discharge, and by treating a person's history selectively and interpretively, thus enhancing the more creative and positive elements. Yet the power of the new is often not within its theoretical framework.

Religion has often only partially understood the power of the new, that which transcends one's present. Though thinking to free a person from his/her past by such elements as forgiveness and new understanding, religion's constant rehearsal of the problems of the person and being human (which were theoretically forgiven and transcended in God) often reinforces the past so that one does not really gain a separation from it. And the constant understanding of the human in him/herself apart from the gifts of God reinforces the problematic nature of being human. Thus the new is not really seen as a truly human possibility, but only a possibility in God which cannot be realized within history or humanity *in se*.

Seldom have religions or therapeutic theories fully seen the human possibility beyond its present condition and begun their perspective with a vision of the new. Freud was certainly guilty of his own form of original sin and fall in seeing humans as primarily biological and determined by the Oedipus complex. It should be recognized that one cannot not be human, but there is more. The present stasis of the person is not the limit of the person.

One element which creates confusion is the persistence of human and world systems within the structures in which they remain significant and which they continue to influence. Thus it often seems that the basic stuff of life cannot much change. In the human system the tendency to homeostasis will always initially return the person to his/her previous state, even when the new and change have been experienced. Change only persists when the human system is given the opportunity, within its limits and possibilities, of the development of new structures and systems. To make this a possibility it is important to take seriously the vision of new possibility as a powerful constituent and not to identify the person primarily with existing biology, history, and psychic structures: with what she/he has been and presently is. Though one might ask what a person is if not described in terms of history and biology, it is important to recognize that this merely constitutes the person at present but not in essence and not in terms of future potential. There is even a "stream of personhood" which cuts through and transcends the historic particulars of the person and, from my perspective, there is a spirit or soul within the person which transcends the particulars.

Thus there is a transcendent element to the person which is central to the person, though the person may not always be aware of it. There is also in Christianity the emphasis on the identity of the person being constituted in the acceptance of the meaning of the Christ event as symbolized in Baptism. This means that the story of Christ is more constitutive for the person than their own story. One has died with Christ to the old life and risen with him to new life. Yet the church struggled with whether being raised with Christ to new life was a present experience or an anticipation of a future experience. The more the possibility of the new is removed from human actuality, the less it is possible within this life, even though one may see it as possible for the future new world (e.g. the biblical and Apocalyptic view of receiving a spiritual body in the future world which can then facilitate the life of the person in a way not now possible). The new and change are always limited by the possibilities of human nature, but the new must be possible in some sense to be effective. If we do not believe in it as possibility, the human system cannot appropriate it as part of its operative structures.

Life is  
an experiment  
to discover  
what is there

and how  
it might be lived,  
with passion.  
It's hardly worth

the effort  
to merely endure,  
to live without some love  
for living.

Once others told us  
what was there,  
and we believed  
until

it did not all come true.

Then we began  
to learn, unlearn,  
name, unname, that  
by which we'd understand –

And live.

### **A Comprehensive Model of Life's Complexity and the Nature of the Spiritual in the Context of a Concern for Human Well-being**

[This was originally written for a book on healing and human well-being.]

Interventions for well-being may deal with various aspects of human existence and will have various levels of influence and success. Here complexity needs recognition. Some religious approaches, and even medical approaches, remain within the confines of limited views and interests. The more one can deal with the whole of a person's life, the greater are the possibilities for healing. The diagram which follows seeks a comprehensive view of life in its complexity. The interpretation of life to the patient also calls for a wisdom which comes from as full a knowledge and experience of life as possible.

One aspect of the diagram deals with the reality of evil. This is a major issue. Much prayerful and contemplative approach to life presumes that the spiritual is all good, that it is unified, and somehow all related to a good ultimate source of life. If evil is real, as Christianity believed from the beginning and the experiences of this century would seem to confirm, what then does one do to deal with this when one opens oneself to the spiritual realities of life and recognizes there a possible oppositional force preventing healing? There is the problem of discerning what is "out there" or "in" our experience, but there is also the problem of our *trust of life* and existence when there is something lurking out there intent upon our harm. To be unable to trust life profoundly affects one's life (and health). Spirituality has dealt with this through discerning whether spiritual experiences were of God or some other spirit (note I John 4:1-4) and trusting in God to manage and protect one from other powers. One of the best approaches to this is that of Gerald May in his *Will and Spirit: A Contemplative Psychology*. In trust, one is forced into "the fundamental contemplative statement concerning good, evil, and God" which expresses the contemplative "leap of faith":

I DO NOT KNOW. I do not know what is ultimately good or evil, nor even what is real or unreal. But I do know that there is no way I can proceed upon my own personal resources. In this as in all things, I am utterly and irrevocably dependent upon a Power that I can in no way objectify. I call this Power God, and God is beyond my understanding, beyond good and evil, beyond doubt and trust, beyond even life and death. God's love and power and Spirit exist in me, through me, and in all creatures. But God is unimaginably BEYOND all this as well. I also know that in my heart I wish to do and be what God would desire of me. Therefore, in humility and fear, I give myself. I commit my soul to God, the One Almighty Creator, the Ultimate Source of reality. Good or bad, right or wrong, these things are beyond me. I love, but I do not

know. I live and act and decide between this and that as best I can, but ultimately, I do not know. And thus I say, in the burning vibrancy of Your Love and Terror, THY WILL BE DONE.<sup>1</sup>

There are also the many other factors which impinge on the life of the person in the center of the diagram. Though these factors could be identified and described in various ways, it would seem to me that it is barely contestable that, however they are defined, they do affect the person and his/her well-being. Once the implications of this diagram are taken seriously *simplistic answers can no longer be given*.

This would mean that whereas diagnosis of illness ordinarily takes into consideration the many systems of the body and sometimes considers psychological factors, if it were possible diagnosis should probably consider these other systems also, though that might introduce an unmanageable complexity. When efforts at healing are made on a spiritual level, this is done in the midst of this complexity. Even God in this world acts in the midst of this complexity. Thus one would expect that whereas the foundational healing of the rift between the person and the spiritual realm may be simply an act of accepting what God gives, the healing of mind, psyche and body is often more a process than a simple act --- for the complexities and established systems of our selves and our world are involved. An interesting question is how the cooperation of these other systems might be gained for the healing of a person. Another would be the extent to which the spiritual can relate to and modify some of these other systems. There is some evidence for this, besides the recognition of mind-body relationships. Then there is the importance of the *placebo* ( or *nocebo*) effect. If the complexity of life introduces conditions and uncertainties and one communicates this to the person seeking healing and the possibilities of healing are doubted, even by the healer, then the possibility of expectations influencing outcomes is diminished. My approach to this would be realistic, but confident. There are many factors in life which affect us and God and the spiritual world must work for us in this context. Yet God is there for us. That is *absolutely true*. And we are spiritual beings, having souls, belonging also to the world of the spirit as well as the material and physical. This is *absolutely true*. Knowing who and what we are (biological and spiritual beings) and whose we are (God's) we welcome what God can do on the physical level and have absolute trust in what God always does on the spiritual level. We know that no illness, not even death, can affect Whose and who we are on the spiritual level.

One element of personal existence that could not be easily diagrammed is a "tradition." A tradition consists of the stories we tell about life, God, and ourselves which give us roots and construct a world of meaning for us. Some stories come to us as part of our religious, philosophical, national, and scientific traditions. I believe that also some stories come to us archetypally through our genes, the result of human experiences the stories of which we cannot remember or tell, but which influence us. One possible construal of the meaning of a tradition is expressed in the diagram which follows and includes such items as personal history, developmental tasks, family, spiritual world and historical world. To this should be added the stories of our family before our personal history which nevertheless are part of our own history. This tradition of meaning, if it is really ours and we are in some way invested in it, tends to perpetuate its dynamics and bring to expression its implications. If we recognize little world of meaning beyond our individual life experience, then we have over simplified our life and the dynamics which inspire and explain it. Then individual experience is all we can identify amongst the hidden domains of a much broader existence. Moreover, the tradition which informs our lives is not just that which comes to us or is part of our history. We also choose traditions which by this act of choice and the process of living inform our lives. This is often the function of religious traditions. They live their reality through us and the power of their imagery shapes our lives and can empower towards well-being.

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1. Gerald G. May, *Will and Spirit: A Contemplative Psychology*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982., p 277.

To understand as much as one can of life and its dynamics does not mean ultimately to gain mastery over life nor does it completely resolve life's mystery. It does enable one to live better within life and its complexity -- and to experience more of well-being though not always of being well.

*With hope  
I live  
midst all  
I've come to see  
and know.*

*To understand  
I would;  
but to control  
my world  
I cannot do.*

*Thank God  
the mystery is  
replete with God  
so that the mystery  
within, without,*

*is not my sacred care.  
But to live and others  
help to live  
is what  
I'm called to do.*

*And  
therein  
lies  
my  
peace.*

# DIAGRAM OF THE FACTORS OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE

## SPIRITUAL WORLD

[In some sense distinct from our created world, but also present as a dimension within it.

**Not a world of space and time** as our physical world.]

**God** offers relationship with God's Self and the spiritual world. The relationship with God is on-going and interpersonal, with interaction in the life process. Relationship with the spiritual world is partially natural and belongs to being human -- though the relationship with and awareness of this grows with interaction.

A major question is whether this is a *single* world, or whether there are *several* spiritual worlds or *multiple powers* within one world. Of special concern is the possibility of powers that are *oppositional* to God and humans, such as a personal force of **Evil**.

## THE PHYSICAL AND HISTORICAL WORLD

**WORLD POWERS** which affect our lives. They are regarded as **NEUTRAL** in the N.T. since they are not bad or good in themselves, but at times support life and at other times function destructively.

**HISTORICAL, POLITICAL, CULTURAL, ECONOMIC, NATURAL** -- These were often spiritualized in the ancient world into personal spiritual powers.

### HUMAN SYSTEMS

(political, economic systems might also be considered as human systems, but they come to have power and identity beyond that of those involved in them.)

Here most important is **FAMILY**, but also other human communities and relationships.

⊖ CONSTITUTED BY ⊕

**THE PERSON**  
in continuity, process,  
and change

⊕ CONSTITUTED BY ⊖

### Personal History

one's personal history happens outside one and with it one interacts and in it one participates. It is also introjected into the psyche consciously and unconsciously.

### Biological Organism

with its own functional mechanisms  
The biological organism interfaces Psyche and Spirit. They interact and affect each other, but mind and psyche also have some autonomy.  
We live through our bodies but also transcend them.

**SOUL/SPIRIT** which belongs to the Spiritual World and interfaces but transcends the biological organism.

**Psyche** (mind, human spirit)

#### Conscious

**Ego**-center of self-awareness, control center of person

#### Unconscious

**Personal Unconscious**  
-personal history presently unremembered, sometimes integrated but often partially disassociated

#### ..Archetypal/Collective

-structures of inherited psyche deposited by history of human experience.

Parts of the Unconscious may function autonomously unless made conscious and integrated within the psyche. In multiple personalities whole persons, not necessarily aware of each other, are formed in the Unconscious.

### Developmental Tasks:

- Biological, Cognitive
- Moral, Faith/Spiritual
- Psychological, Social
- Integrative

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#### Self

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v a deep structure of the psyche leading to integration and wholeness as part of life's process. Relig. symbols often serve it.

## EACH OF THE FACTORS CONTRIBUTE TO BEING WELL AND WELL BEING

This complex world was that envisaged by many of the writers of the New Testament and of Jewish literature of the first century CE, though they did not use all of this terminology. Both Judaism and Christianity came to see the world as complex because they could not otherwise explain their experience of life, whereas the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) saw the world as more simply in God's firm control.

## What About Evil

Discernment of the factors of life may include the discernment or discovery of Evil as a possible participant in the complex of the elements of life..

The contents and structures of the psyche, however destructive they may seem, should not be regarded as evil, though the destructive actions to which they may give birth could be so regarded. One must be as responsible as possible for avoiding destructive expression of the psyche's contents. But to regard the dynamics which come from one's own life history, one's biology, or the collective psyche, as evil in themselves only makes it difficult to heal and transform them. This results in attempts to repress or disassociate which cause these components of one's life to operate autonomously, without conscious awareness and control. In regarding this as evil we forget that the strangeness within us is what it is to be human. This usually does not produce the changed behavior which is desired.

There are also the structures of our world, as spoken of above, in biblical times often described as neutral spiritual powers. Political, social, cultural, economic structures are important to life. They are intended to provide order and context for life. Some by their character are inherently destructive and dehumanizing for many while others would seem to express human and even spiritual values. However, these structures should not merely be viewed as organizational, constitutional, legal, or economic arrangements. These structures come to have a life of their own and as living entities control the humans that are part of their system and those whose lives their system touches. It is helpful to make clear the values advocated by each structure, not only in its explicit statements but in the dynamics generated within its system.

While humans may do evil things, and social, economic, and political structures may also, consideration is needed as to whether there is a personal force of evil outside the psyche which would seek to use us, to use what is inside us, and to use the destructive possibilities of the structured contexts within which we live. The tragedies of the history of this century would seem to indicate that evil is due to more than the accidental, more than the product of circumstances, and more than a few "sick" persons or societies.

There are some principles which I think can be used when judging the involvement of Evil beyond what is intrapsychic (within the psyche) or systemic (in the systems of our world). In doing this one must look carefully at one's theology and spirituality to be sure that one has a sound basis from which to judge Evil and does not over-moralize internal dynamics which are normal for someone's history. Discernment of the involvement of Evil would not only help one to understand why one feels the way one does, why life is the way it is, but why there may be so much resistance to God and what God would call one to do.

The New Testament, and Intertestamental Judaism, took evil seriously. This was not just because of contacts with dualistic systems of thought. That seems to me too simplistic an explanation. Dualistic language was applied to life because of the way life was experienced. While hopefully we do not wish to buy into flesh-spirit dualism or world-God dualism (which results in denying the goodness of creation and human existence), we may wish to give consideration to the way the role of ontological evil was perceived in life. Satan, understood as a fallen angel, opposed God's purpose within the world and functioned as a destroyer and deceiver. As prince of this world he represented the way the values of this world were often different than God's. But however one describes Satan in terms of values, the New Testament regarded him as personal, functioning with intent and intelligence. He was a threat to life from which one needed protection, a protection understood as available from Christ's Ascension and on-going conquest of cosmic powers (e.g. I Cor. 15:24-25, Phil. 2:5-11).

As there are principles for discernment of God's involvement in life, so there can be principles for discerning the presence of Evil.

1. *The plus factor.* In some of human experience there seems to be a *plus factor*, meaning that something is there which cannot be explained from what one ordinarily considers to be the constituents of one's life and context. One knows where much of one's "baggage" and many of one's issues come from and why some things happen. However there is still an unexplainable element, either in the frequency and intensity of the problems or in the causative factors. When one attempts to deal constructively with life or engages in healing processes, there are results which would be expected. However, these results may not happen.

It is possible to explain this in various ways. In terms of personal struggles, it can mean that there are biochemical problems which distort the conscious and unconscious processes (such as in schizophrenia and some forms of depression). It also can mean that some factor has not yet been discovered in a person's life, and if it were only discovered, healing or change would be possible. However, it can mean that there may be a determining *plus factor* outside the person, if one allows for this in one's world view. Such a factor seems to "piggy-back" on the intrapsychic dynamics, augmenting them and making them insoluble. Such a factor seems to emerge in life when there is too much that is wrong, too many unexplainable events. This factor from outside must be judged in terms of what it seems to intend, and here it may become clear that the source is Evil.

2. *Insoluble resistance.* There are many reasons for resistance to what seems good, spiritual, and healthy, which can be understood in terms of intrapsychic or systemic (e.g., familial) dynamics. However, when there is unusual resistance the sources of which cannot be discovered, as implied above, Evil may be the *plus factor*.

3. *Voices, urgings and images:* The complexes and contents of the psyche express themselves to us in various ways. We may project on others what is in us so that our reactions towards others become clues to what is in us. We may dream dreams, see images or pictures within our minds, or hear voices. Some persons will feel or sense urgings. These are ways in which the contents and complexes of the psyche *normally* make themselves known, communicate themselves to us. By no means is this, by itself, a sign of mental illness. This often comes from the memory of what was once experienced or is the convenient expression of the dynamics of the psyche. One can discern from these phenomena what is within one. Now voices usually seem to sound like someone, seem to come from someplace, seem to belong somewhere. Images are usually connected with one's life history or inner process. We usually have a sense that voices, images and urgings come from inside us. However, *when there is a sense that they come from outside us and if they would urge us to destructive actions*, then it is important to consider whether this originates in Evil.

4. *Receptivity.* There are persons whose lives seem to be rich with religious or parapsychological experiences and who seem easily to pick up the experiences and feelings of others (i.e., they are receptive). I have known persons who were very receptive to such experiences and influences. This often enables a person to have significant spiritual experiences, but it also means that their psyche could be easily penetrated by Evil. Sensitivity to this is needed.

5. *Rationalization of surrender to destructive feelings, no matter what.* Destructive feelings may powerfully exist because of personal history. From the perspective of one's history and one's rights it can be rationalized that one should act upon them. I have seen this when a person in childhood was deprived of love, affection, or security, often accompanied by abuse. Such a person seeks that

to which s/he feels entitled, of which s/he will not now be deprived, in a relationship sometimes inappropriate. I have seen persons destroy their professional life, their family and that of another, because of this. Or there is the anger one feels because of what has been done to one. If only one could do to others what has been done, then one would be free and the inner turmoil would be satisfied. Personal consequences seem to become less and less important, or the compulsion to action becomes so strong that the consequences are not even in awareness. There is only the need to act. In coping with such powerful feelings, it is important to realize that Evil is an "abuser", using persons destructively for its own end. Usually persons once abused do not wish to be abused *again*.<sup>2</sup>

6. *Is it un-loving*. In the New Testament love is the primary fruit of the presence of God's Spirit. Thus a sign of Evil in life could be unloving and destructive desires, feelings, and behaviors. Here one must distinguish between legitimate anger which comes from experience of abuse within personal history and destructive feelings which seem to have the "plus factor" mentioned above.

It is always the Christian's responsibility to deal with evil. This was a major part of Jesus' ministry. But one must wisely discern what is operating in the events and conditions with which one deals, only concluding the involvement of Evil after the consideration of other possibilities. Usually the involvement of Evil is along with other factors. *When one believes one is really dealing with Evil, it is important to work with others who have experience and not to try to deal with Evil alone*. The invoking of the power of Christ is an important aspect of dealing with Evil. Prayer for protection from evil should also be part of a church's healing services.

#### Implications of a Relational Spirituality

When religion is seen as doctrine, institution, or ethical system, it can be described, understood and accepted as something whose terms are clear. When religion is described as a certain conversion experience, it can be described and judged as to whether it fits the norm. When religion is believing the Bible, for many the words of truth are understood as equivalent to the words on the page. In all of these approaches all is concrete and describable. God is assumed, but often seen as distant from these tangible expressions, determining things from the far reaches of heaven. Religion is something that is *about* God.

When religion and spirituality are understood to be relational or interpersonal, one presupposes that one is dealing with God as person and we as persons, and spirituality consists of an interpersonal relationship. This would also challenge the idea of God in a remote heaven, for relationship exists where the persons are – and we are here.

Though there are constants to such an interpersonal relationship (the same persons are engaged and one discovers personality constants in the persons), yet the changes occurring in each of the persons, the accumulation of new experience, and the changes wrought by time and context which give birth to different needs – all mean that two persons interacting in one situation is not completely like the two interacting in another. Where in religion viewed as theology or ethics one might supposedly construct truths relevant for all time, when the heart of religion is interpersonal relationship it is difficult to construct such eternal truths. God is eternally true, but truths may not be.

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2. Those who have been deeply hurt or disempowered may often see Evil as an ally which empowers them. This is the rationale often for belonging to a Satanic cult. However, Evil does not empower by love, self-sacrifice, and sharing life with us (as presented in the Gospel about God in Christ and the Spirit), but by using persons for its own purposes. Evil uses and abuses, performing a spiritual rape upon those who open themselves to it.

The Ancient Moravian Church said that the **Essential** was the relationship with the Triune God and the human response in faith, love and hope. All else is **Ministerial** and the variety in the way things are done is **Incidental**. For Count Zinzendorf and the Renewed Moravian Church the essence of religion is the **heart** (an inner organ of perception) **relationship** with the Savior through whom there is open to the believer a relationship with all that the Triune God is and wishes for us. Relational religion is the essence of **simplicity** and all, infant, senile and learned, may have this religion. Relational religion is the heart of the Moravian understanding of religion.

This relationship is a reality, as the Savior and God are realities. Luke Timothy Johnson in *The Real Jesus* comments on the difference that a real resurrected Jesus makes in our approach to the knowledge of Jesus:

Belief in the resurrection had important implications for our knowledge of Jesus. We deal not with a dead person of the past but with a person whose life continues, however mysteriously, in the present. This changes everything. If Jesus is alive among us, what we learn about Jesus must include what we can continue to learn from him. It is better to speak of "learning Jesus," rather than of "knowing Jesus," because we are concerned with a process rather than a product. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, HarperSanFrancisco (quoted in *Christian Century*, Dec. 2, 1998)

As we explore the complexity of life and our own experience for signs and hints of God we look for signs of relationship and the impact of this relationship upon our lives. This relationship exists in the midst of all of the other factors of life, as do human relationships. It does not overwhelm life, as we often expect God to do if God is really present. Its primary character is not power, but love. And it exhibits characteristics natural to relationship, as described in the following.

#### Elements of a Relational Spirituality

1. Relationship starts in the *gift of relationship*. Without this gift, from each involved in the relationship, relationship would not be possible. Thus relationship starts in *grace*. Thus is also understood as *love*. Love here is not a sentimental feeling or a deserved response, but the unselfish and free choice of one to give oneself to another and to care for another.
2. Faith is the human response to God: in interpersonal terms it is understood as *trust, faithfulness, fidelity*. It is *not just believing something, but believing Someone and being faithful to Someone*. One does not just trust that statements and beliefs are true, but that the person of God with whom one deals is faithful and trustworthy and that what is needed will be given appropriately in the changing circumstances of life. Faith thus has a *process and history* in which interactions with God occur and which can be described as *following* our Lord.
3. What God gives is the relationship with *the God in whom all possibilities and solutions to life's needs exist*. When God has one, or one has God, one has everything that is possible, everything that might be called for by circumstances, and the One in whom all possibilities exist.
4. In the field of knowledge the gaining of *control* may be helpful, but not in interpersonal relationship. The best happens when the other is given the freedom to be oneself and to do what is needed. *God needs the freedom to be God, which implies our relinquishing the attempt to control everything – including God.*

5. One needs to enter a *process of thinking about God*, meditating on God, getting familiar with God, entering into spiritual (interpersonal) relationship in depth: all of which are really a part of interpersonal relationship.
6. One needs to *pay attention to God*, to listen to God and give God a chance to relate and communicate. Theology, Bible and Church are then not just to be understood and accepted, but are opportunities to hear from God. When one reads Scripture one needs not only to pay attention to the words, but to what God may say using the words and what God may say beyond the words.
7. *One needs both to think about and stop thinking about God in historical terms*. This means, for example, that Jesus was a first century Jew, dressed like a first century Jew, thinking like a first century Jew, addressing the problems of his day, and speaking the Aramaic language. But he is also a contemporary addressing our needs. Knowing the historical Jesus helps us to get acquainted with Jesus so that we might better know what he is like in our time. We need to read the historical Gospels until the Jesus beyond the Gospels more fully emerges from the Gospels. The Gospels help us to do that since they are not all alike and do not agree in all aspects. Thus we are prevented from making any one Gospel the final description of Jesus.
8. Knowing and believing involves the *suffering of uncertainty and the need to trust* beyond what we know (but not beyond Whom we know) and the *suffering (and joy) involved in living with someone and being changed by someone*. Knowledge of truth may sometimes involve change and transformation, but knowledge of a person always does.
9. One does not have to know and understand everything if one is in relationship with the One who knows all. One may be patient with oneself and with life, and know and appreciate what is given one to know. One is not saved by knowledge, but by relationship.
10. *The religion of relationship is available to all from the infant to the senile because it does not depend upon understanding*. It depends upon God giving the gift of relationship.
11. Relationship is the *primary power and resource* from which human life is to be lived.

### Incarnational Presence

In the New Testament the paradigm of God's presence is established as *incarnational*. In Judaism, many ancient religions, and in much of early Christianity it was assumed that the proper analogy for God was that of a powerful emperor or king, dwelling in heavenly palaces, whose holiness and presence would immediately and powerfully transform all. The kingdom (rule) of God in the NT was often assumed to be an expression of God's power and thus most often the kingdom was seen as future, for the present world was not yet transformed by God's power. Thus all those stories within the Jesus' tradition which presented him as participating in normal human existence were often problematic to the church – such as Jesus' baptism. Matthew needs to explain why Jesus submitted to it (3:1ff). John eliminates Jesus baptism by water while retaining some of the elements of the baptism story (John 1). Jesus also debated the issue of power with his disciples, renouncing traditional messianic expectations and the use of coercive power (see Mark 10:35-45). Worst, or most wonderful, of all, he suffered and died. While Hebrews 10 has him resting in heaven, now free from his suffering and human experience, John 20 presents a Jesus who in appearing to his disciples *after* his ascension (see the conversation with Mary) still bears his wounds. *Jesus has chosen to remain wounded*. Count Zinzendorf of the Moravian tradition tells the story of a Bishop named Martin to whom Satan appeared in the likeness of the Savior, but in the form of a king

surrounded with heavenly glory. Martin said to him: "If you are Christ, where are your wounds? .... a Saviour who is without wounds, who does not have the mark of his sufferings, I do not acknowledge."

The presentation of Jesus as Son of God and Son of Man (who in Jewish mythology was the heavenly man according to whom earthly Adam was created) portrays him as one from heaven who submits himself to world, history and the conditions of human existence. The story of the Spirit in the early church is the story of God's continuing incarnation in real and often problematic persons and communities (note that in I Cor. 1:1-9 Paul affirms the spiritual gifts of the Corinthians in spite of their all too evident human nature). Although Luke in Acts seems to make the experience of the Spirit more a matter of pure power, Paul clearly knows that spiritual experience occurs in the midst of the realities of life which are sometimes harsh (II Cor. 11:22-12:10).

This means that the presence and activity of the resurrected Jesus who goes with and before us in life (Mark 14:28, 16:7) is not to be found in the magical and powerful experiences of life where God somehow clears away the realities of life, but in the midst of life's realities. We need to hear his voice within, not apart from, life.

Inasmuch as the ongoing presence of Jesus and God in the Spirit is portrayed as intimately connected with persons who bear the Spirit's gifts, serve the Lord and are energized by God (I Cor. 12:4-6), a primary place to look for the activity of Jesus would be in the lives of committed persons and communities and sometimes even in the life of an unsuspecting uncommitted person. The Bible is the story of persons, responsive and unresponsive, aware and unaware, committed and resistive, whom God somehow uses.

To take the Incarnation seriously is to have a sense of where to look in life to find God. To be able to find something of God in life is so important, for if there is no reality to which our words about God point, then perhaps we are fooling ourselves. But we do not want to miss God by looking for the wrong things.

## **The Nature of Scripture**

Scripture has often been understood as an infallible conceptually true expression of religious experience and revelation. If this cannot be affirmed persons feel that somehow Scripture's value and authority has been lost. The very variety within Scripture makes it difficult to affirm conceptual coherence and infallibility. Here one only has to examine the variety within the Gospels where the sayings and stories of Jesus exist in different forms and to acknowledge Paul's recognition of a need to speak and write contextually to different audiences (I Cor. 9:19ff). It is intriguing to speculate as to whether Jesus might also have spoken contextually and that this might account for some of the differences in his sayings.

There are two major presuppositions about revelation in the NT that decidedly affect our approach. The first is that though Matthew presents Jesus as a teacher, with his transmitted teachings having special authority, the experience of and faith in the resurrected Jesus make Jesus more the focus of revelation than his teachings. Though some of the NT traditions see Jesus as ascending to heaven, after his ministry and resurrection, where he will remain until the end, some of the traditions see him as remaining within the world and continuing to be involved. In Mark he again leads his disciples in the world as a Shepherd leads his sheep (14:27-28, 16:7). Even in John with its Departure Discourses (14-17) which emphasize Jesus' departure and the sayings about the Spirit which would seem to indicate an alternative presence, the heart of Johannine spirituality is to invite to come, see, and stay with Jesus (John 1:39, 46) and in the late resurrection experience of John 21 Jesus is still in the midst of his disciples. In fact there seems to be debate in the early church as to the constitution of their post-resurrection spiritual experience. Luke is intriguing here. In Acts he describes the spiritual experience of the church as centered in the Spirit. In the

Gospel the Spirit is mentioned through chapter 4 and then recedes in favor of the person of Jesus. [Acts, though the second volume in Luke's two volume series, is earlier than our present Gospel which is likely the second or a later edition. Thus Luke's earlier Spirit focused spirituality contained in Acts changes in his later revision of the Gospel into a Christ focused spirituality.] But even when Jesus resides in heaven and the Spirit (or the Father – see Heb. 10 and I Peter 4:10ff) acts on his behalf, he remains central and the claim to possession of the Spirit is rooted in a confession of him.

The involvement of Jesus in the ongoing life of the church then means that Jesus still has things to do and say with the church. This is to be presupposed unless it would be possible to think that Jesus in his brief ministry of 1 ½ years provided all that would be needed for all time. What he would say is not merely limited to what he once said. He is not the slave of his own historic words. The same should be said for the Spirit. Though the Spirit is clearly tied to the historic Jesus, the role of the gifts of prophecy and speaking in tongues indicate that God will address contemporary issues in ways that contemporarily will give guidance and are not just tied to Scripture or the historic Jesus tradition (see I Cor. 14). Interestingly, the Jesus of Revelation is certainly not tied to the historic Jesus tradition. The eighteenth century Moravian understanding of Jesus as Chief Elder (in relationship to the governance of the Church), as Lord or "Housefather" (in relationship to the household and community of the Church), and as Savior (establishing the personal relationship with God), and the Spirit as Mother of the Church, stress the ongoing participation of the Triune God in the lives of individuals and Christian communities.

The second is that revelation is contextual and historical. Paul explicitly discusses speaking in different ways to Jew, Greek and the weak (I Cor. 9:19ff, Rom. 14). [Here "weak," a term used in Stoic philosophy, means someone whose understanding is limited and who still counts to be important what no longer is important. In Romans 14 Paul discusses how Christian converts have brought into their Christian communities dietary and worship practices which are not essential to the Christian faith.] The variety of approaches in the Jesus tradition, and the variety of early Christian communities, may be due to the fact that Jesus did the same, addressing the elements of his Jewish society in contextual and personal ways.

Jesus' teaching method also has an "openness" to it for often what he says is not stated as a final answer but an invitation to engage the meaning within his teaching. This is particularly true of his use of stories/parables. How much within a parable does he intend to be taken seriously (the point or points of the parable)? Contemporary scholars wrestle with the central meaning of a complex parable, distinguishing parable from allegory. His use of irony and hyperbole should also be considered, as should his use of teaching as a starting point or contribution to dialogue [as in Synagogue debate over interpretation of the Law], not as a completed argument no longer open to discussion.

This would mean that in each moment of revelation there is involved the Person (Revealer) who provides the revelation, the historical and cultural context, the personal character and style of both the recipients and the Revealer, and the process between the Revealer and the recipients. In regard to the latter, the attainment of understanding is usually something that takes time and needs discussion along the way, including preliminary stages of understanding, to arriving at a goal of understanding. One can clearly indicate process of understanding in Jesus' work with his disciples and in their spiritual and theological development. In both Paul and Peter it is possible to indicate this. With Peter this took years, beginning with his difficulty coming to terms with Jesus' teaching as presented in the Gospels, his differences with Paul recounted in Gal. 2:11ff, and his final acceptance of Jesus' perspective as presented in I Peter (written through his friend Silvanus/Silas). For Paul, one must remember that there is a period of "three" years after his conversion before Paul went to Jerusalem to speak with Peter and a period of "fourteen" years that he was in Tarsus before he returns to Palestine and before we have any correspondence from him (Gal. 1-2). There must have been some process in this. What we can imagine as Paul's process over these

early years (of which we have little record) seems to have softened Paul's view on those who disagreed with him and brought over various elements from their background into Christianity (the weak in I Cor. 8 and following and Rom. 14), though he would not tolerate difference on the essential of the Gospel (Gal. 1).

The significance of historical context affirms that whatever God does, and God as Person is in the center of revelation, it is done in ways that would be meaningful and relevant to persons within their context and in their process. Thus each moment of revelation and each piece of revelatory literature is right for its time, but not *per se* completely right for the time of another, though the Person of God within the revelation is right for all time.

Related to cultural and human perception is the possibility that the personal and cultural elements of the perception will lead to misunderstanding as well as understanding. There is no way of purifying a moment of revelation so that all that is within the culture and within the human mind and psyche will not color and even distort the revelation. An interesting example here is the early church's perception of Jesus in the light of a number of eschatological schemes, particularly Jewish Apocalyptic, varying from Mark's portrayal of the coming end in his time (to coincide with the destruction of Jerusalem – see Mark 13) and the book of Revelation (much of which can be paralleled in Jewish Apocalyptic). And then there is the Gospel of John where futuristic expectations play little role because eternal life is possessed in the present. The different and contradictory views in NT literature on the end of the world and the kingdom of God indicate how the church struggled with the truth of Jesus in the light of contemporary expectations for history. Thus discernment becomes important, discussed in the NT specifically in I Cor. 12-14 and I John 4. One needs to have standards by which to judge whether it is the Spirit of God speaking or another spirit (or the human unconscious). In John and Paul this included acknowledging the authority of Jesus, insisting that love validated and self-interest made revelations suspect, and that individual spiritual experience needs validation by the Christian community.

Though we often think of revelation as conceptual, God sends persons to embody it, enable it, and speak, it and it becomes difficult to separate the person from the revelation. God does not send a system of theology but Jesus and the Spirit and we bearing the Spirit. And we respond to God's revelation as persons -- besides seeking an understanding of it. Thus it is profoundly interpersonal and relational and becomes the occasion of interpersonal encounter. If relationship with God is established in the revelation, then one has everything in the Person who within Himself has everything and all possibilities. Then there is the possibility of living and working life out so that eventually one will understand the essence of what needs to be understood.

If revelation is primarily interpersonal and relational, then it is also true that all may have religion and revelation even though it may not be possible for some to understand (e.g. the infant, the retarded and the senile). Seeing revelation as primarily conceptual and capable of being systematized can exclude those who cannot conceptualize or do not conceptualize the way we think they should.

Although there were also those in the early church who thought that religious truth should assume certain forms, there is much evidence that, whether understood or not, there was a dynamic process at work in which persons and communities stood within "the stream of the interplay of humans, life, and God," and were struggling with and arriving at understandings which differed. But they had profound commonalities since they were engaged with the same spiritual reality.

However, there must be some conceptualization in Scripture which expresses what we need to know, even if the conceptualization at times differs. Paul's treatment of the impact of the Gospel upon persons argues

that there is no other Gospel than the Gospel of Christ (Gal. 1) but that its effects may be understood and described differently in different cultures. In the Jewish culture it can be seen as freeing one from the Law and its judgement (Gal. 3) while in the Gentile culture it may be seen as freeing one from flesh and the cosmic powers (Col. 2). Thus one's old world comes to an end, whatever constituted that world with its struggles, and a new world comes into being which is constituted by God's grace.

In the Moravian Church 18<sup>th</sup> century tradition the primary conceptualization within Scripture was what Count von Zinzendorf called the Fundamental or Basic Truth.<sup>3</sup> God had cared for this in Scripture, in spite of Scripture's historical conditioning, in order that the matter of salvation be adequately clear to those who could read. However, Scripture's basic system was not ultimately conceptual but the person of Christ whom one could meet in Scripture. There were also Matters of Knowledge which needed the expertise of the scholar to understand and interpret. Then there were the Mysteries. One could live with their reality while their conceptualization would always remain varied and evasive, which variety needed to be respected. Here one has such matters as the understanding of the Lord's Supper and Eschatology. This is similar to the Ancient Moravian Church's division of truth into three categories: the Essential (God as Father, Son and Spirit responded to in faith, love and hope), Ministerials (that which served the Essential such as church, sacraments, Scripture, preaching, etc.) and then Incidentals (representing the different ways various Christians did things – such as in the Lord's Supper). There was only one Essential, the relationship with the Triune God and the gifts of God's grace, responded to in a triune way (faith, love and hope).

Some will find the effect of history on Scripture to be disturbing, arguing that this means that God was not able to provide clear concepts and unambiguous truth. But Zinzendorf argued that the consequences of history were in the biblical materials not because God could not make things clear but because "in history" was where people were. God chose to disclose in personal, contextual and relevant ways, speaking to us in the language by which we could respond to the Essential or the Heart Truth of the Savior (Zinzendorf's description of the Essential). Scripture is the way it is for the sake of a humanity that is always historical. Because the ultimate truth of Scripture is the Savior, God Godself, in relationship to life, we need intentionally to stand within "the stream of the interplay of humans, life, and God" both within Scripture and within contemporary life. Within this stream or dynamic we experience life, God, and the directions in which God would move us. Especially because of conceptual uncertainty, as we try to describe this, ecumenism becomes important, for it is here that we discover the variety of response and varied richness of wisdom that we find in the biblical materials themselves (which also represented various communities and individuals). And there is this interesting correspondence between contemporary Christian communities and the various biblical traditions which they prefer. Thus each community can provide insight into the experience of the tradition which it prefers.

To briefly illustrate "the stream of the interplay of humans, life, and God," let us look at the NT portrayal of Jesus' baptism. There is sufficient evidence in the Gospel tradition to indicate that Jesus had a significant interaction with John the Baptist and that he was baptized by John. This encounter between Jesus and John occurs in all four Gospels. In the earliest, Mark (65) and Luke (Protoluke 62) the story of the baptism is simply told, without excuse, and it is Jesus private experience ("You are my beloved son" says the voice). But the communities and individuals who conveyed the tradition struggled with this story, pondering its relationship to their own experience and their developing theology. The Baptism was probably placed first in the tradition (except for Infancy Narratives which were not part of the earlier

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<sup>3</sup> Arthur Freeman, *An Ecumenical Theology of the Heart: The Theology of Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf*, Bethlehem, Winston-Salem: Board of Communications, Moravian Church in America, 1998, pp. 139ff.

tradition) because the religious experience it represented was similar to their own and paradigmatic for it. Mark has no Infancy Narrative and it is likely that ProtoLuke did not (much of Luke's thought presupposes no story of the Virgin birth, for after the Baptism we have the genealogy and there is no apology for the Virgin Birth as in Matthew). In Matthew (3) and John (1) the Baptism of Jesus has become a problem. Baptism by John the Baptist was a Baptism of repentance. What did Jesus have to repent of? In Matthew there is a discussion as to who should baptize whom. Jesus argues that John should baptize him "to fulfill all righteousness." In other words, Jesus' Baptism fulfills all righteousness of the people of God required by the Law. Thus he did it not for himself, but for them.

In John 1 there is an encounter between Jesus and John the Baptist, but no Baptism. John, who here appears quite different than in the Synoptics (without camel's hair garb and strange diet of locusts and wild honey) understands Jesus' identity from the descent of the Spirit upon him, but there is no heavenly voice or Baptism. Later in 4:1-6 it is said that though John baptized and Jesus' disciples baptized, Jesus himself did not baptize. Thus according to the Gospel of John Jesus was not baptized nor did he baptize. The closest thing to Baptism in John's Gospel is the story in chapter 4 of the woman by the well to whom Jesus would give living water, as the closest thing to Eucharist in John is the Feeding Miracle in chapter 6 which has within it Eucharistic language. The Gospel of John has no account of Jesus' Baptism as it has no account of the Lord's Supper, the place of which is taken by the Footwashing in John 13. It can be argued that the Johannine community did not use sacraments and therefore did not record the specific stories which substantiated them. They did not use sacraments because all in Jesus' life was a sign (a favorite term in John to describe what Jesus does) of spiritual meaning.

What happens then is not only the possibility of the story of Jesus' Baptism being transmitted differently in different lines of traditions, but the portrayal of different reactions to the event and to the actions and experience of Jesus in the event. Such reactions are certainly to be seen as reactions in the context of developing community theologies. But they may also be reactions which stem back to the time of the disciples. The Gospel of John argues that it got its information from a written source produced by the Beloved Disciple who was an intimate of Jesus (see John 21:24). It is interesting that all but Matthew preserve the encounter with the Baptist as a paradigmatic spiritual experience, while Matthew must excuse the event and portrays this as not a private experience for Jesus but a time of public announcement of who he is to those who stand by and seek John's Baptism. The voice says, "*this* is my beloved son."

The event stays within "the stream of the interplay of humans, life, and God," and the richness of reaction and interaction teaches us much more than if the early church merely adopted this narrative in a single traditional form. Thus from this complex we have not one meaning but many centering around a foundational spiritual reality and experience, preserving both the reality of Christ as living and dynamic and the possibilities of varied meanings for varied persons and contexts. The possibilities for faith and life inherent in this variety are why the early church decided for four Gospels instead of one.

We may and should conceptualize for the sake of understanding and gaining a cohesive wisdom. We may and must conceptualize for the sake of preaching and teaching. But in faithfulness to the reality conceptualized we should remember that concepts and logical systems are secondary. We have to be careful that concepts do not build walls between us and the reality of God and even the reality of our own life. We need God more than concepts about God. As the poet Rainer Maria Rilke expresses in his *Book of Hours*, the light which flames within us can be wasted on the frames of our images. If only we were not so often distracted, then we would bear the reality of God in our blood and possess this reality (if only as long as a smile) to gift it back to life in thankfulness.

....

As names your images present you,  
And if once that light within me flames,  
with which my deeps perceive you,  
it wastes itself upon their frames.  
And my senses, which soon grow lame,  
bereft of you are homeless.<sup>4</sup>

If only for a moment stillness were complete.  
If the accidental and imprecise  
were stilled -- and the nearby laughing,  
if the clamor of my senses  
did not so much hinder my attention --

Then could I in thousand thoughts  
think you, to your being's edge,  
and possess you (only as long as a smile),  
to gift you back to all of life  
in thankfulness.<sup>5</sup>

Extinguish my eyes: I can see you,  
make me deaf: I can hear you;  
without feet can I approach you,  
without mouth can I implore you.  
Break my arms, I will hold you  
    with my heart as with a hand,  
stop my heart, my brain will beat,  
and if a burning brand into my brain you cast,  
still in my blood I'll bear you.<sup>6</sup>

**Jesus and Our Future: A Sermon for the Moravian Ministers Conference, Massanetta, May 20, 1999, Harrisonburg, VA**

Scripture

I Cor. 11:23-26

Mark 16:1-8

At this closing Communion I want to call to our attention the need for reconsidering the role of Christ as Chief Elder so that we might have the leadership and inspiration for the future of our church and us all.

James Fowler in his third presentation talked about the Eclipse of Providence, by which he described a contemporary loss of the sense of God's participation in nature and human existence. This is also what Marcus Borg, one of the scholars involved in contemporary research on the historical Jesus, argues in *The God We Never Knew*, published in 1997. In his book Borg parallels the Enlightenment with his personal journey from childhood faith in a small Lutheran church in North Dakota to the discovery of a new

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<sup>4</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Das Stunden-Buch enthaltend die drei Bücher: Vom mönchischen Leben, Von der Pilgerschaft, Von der Armuth und vom Tode* (Leipzig, Insel-Verlag, 1931). The poems are translated by the author, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 58.

understanding of God fueled by the challenges of our culture. Without knowing it, he was “reliving the history of modern thought” in his own experience.<sup>7</sup> Borg discovered *The God We Never Knew*, a God described by the term Panentheism, present within history and experience, answering to a relational model of the Christian life rather than a monarchical one. Spirituality is for the “hatching of the heart”. The fruit of the Christian life is compassion. “The Christian life as life in the Spirit involves a process of transformation quickened within us by the Spirit of God.” Also included is the “dream of God” for the world, informed by a “politics of compassion.”<sup>8</sup> For Borg this meant an unexpected perspective on the Jesus and other biblical traditions which, if viewed properly, actually offered these alternative perspectives.

Over the life-time of my experience my understanding of God has changed in two ways. One is the eclipse of providence for me which was only partially affected by the questions raised by the Enlightenment, but was profoundly affected by the 20 year illness of my first wife. The God "they" told me was there could no longer be found, the powerful God in control of all, or if God was in control of the all that I and my family experienced I would reject that God and his providence. Either way, the traditional understanding of the providence and presence of God was gone.

Secondly, my view and experience of Christ changed. In my early Christian experience I was Christocentric. After my first historical study of the Gospels and my gradual absorption in the Jesus of history, I found that as my understanding of the Jesus of history grew my awareness of the contemporary Jesus became eclipsed. He became so particularly a man of the first century that he did not seem to fit my century. The one who could still fit my century was God the Father who, because of his transcendent character, seemed also to belong to my time. Thus during many of my adult years I was theocentric. I approached Jesus more as a theological center than a personal center of my faith, while my study of Zinzendorf always remained in my life as a call to a more Christocentric way. Then something happened to me which produced a new Christocentrism in both my experience and theology. But as with the change in the understanding of the participation and presence of God in history, so my image of Christ changed, tying him less to the first century and allowing him to become a contemporary. His presence also became disidentified with power. I have expressed the reappearance of Christ in a poem. By what I share I do not claim a vision, though it seemed like an inner vision to me, bringing images to the attention of my mind and imagination. Zinzendorf said that the second coming of Christ was his coming to the heart. Perhaps that is what happened.

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<sup>7</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith*, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997, p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 128-129, 133.

What a surprise!  
You came!  
Friend of earlier memories,  
long gone.

What a surprise!  
A glowing light,  
scarcely a face,  
disembodied,

But suddenly  
there were wounds  
and I knew  
who.

Many times  
did I invite.  
You did not come,  
so's I could note.

You were really there!  
For years God  
was the center  
of my experience,

the One whom  
long ago  
you introduced me to,  
and then you left.

Thus I share with you a sermon calling for new appreciation of the role of Christ as Chief Elder, and I have prepared a "handout" which will enable you to pursue in greater detail the brief comments I can make here. In the sermon I will use two texts. I Cor. 11:23-26 which describes the real presence of Christ in Communion and the necessary covenantal act by which we place our life with his into the cup as a way of recognizing his participation in our lives. The second has to do with the commission as it exists in the Markan resurrection narrative (16:1-8), describing the nature of his leading us into the world following his resurrection.

Holy Communion in the early church was a time when the Christian community came together to find the strength to go back to the world with vision and vocation not supported by the culture in which they lived. Most of early Christianity had only these limited and occasional gatherings to support and inform life. Only a minority of the early church lived an extended communal semi-monastic life. The gathering for Love Feast and Communion, as reflected in I Cor. 11, was also the place where the story of Jesus' last days was narrated, probably instrumental in forming the long passion narrative which constitutes about 1/3 of the total Gospel narrative and which then set the pattern for the future development of the written Gospels.

Jesus, according to this earliest version of the Lord's Supper in I Corinthians, says "This is my body which is for you." His body for us is HIM FOR US (as you will remember from your OT studies the body is the living expression of the person). Various texts added "broken" or "given", but these words only diminish the simplicity and totality of his being for us. Mark and Matthew even leave out "for you." The I Cor. account is clear that life always starts in his being for us, which is gift and grace. Thus our only role in receiving the bread is to receive.

Whereas the bread is presented as "him for us", the wording regarding the cup involves us in a unique way. We do more than receive. In Corinthians it is not said "This is my blood of the covenant," as in Mark, but "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." As covenant the cup involves us as well as him. That it is "in his blood" means more than his sacrifice. Life resides in the blood and his life is there for us. But this is not only gift, but covenant. Our blood, our life, is also there, placed in the cup with his life. His blood and ours flow together in an active dynamic which produces future direction and possibility. It is out of this commingling that we live.

For the completeness of this sacramental action we must decide what of our life is to be placed within the cup along with his life. In this week together we have brought to the fore the many stories which constitute us, including our personal stories. On p. 10 in the booklet it is suggested that all of these might be placed within the Eucharistic cup along with Jesus' story. One of our responsibilities then is to decide what to place in the cup. The Jesus I would present to you is the Jesus of Mark who associates with the humanity of the common person as portrayed in Mark and in the Parable of the Prodigal in Luke, not the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount who calls for perfection. Jesus can receive all that is within you and all that is you and will join this with his life and blood in the cup.

Christians have often argued about the real presence of Christ in Communion. But this is not a matter of what happens to the elements. It is a question of whether the symbols of body and blood mean that Christ is really here, it is a question of whether the heart of our religion is a historical reconstruction of ancient information about someone who lived a long time ago and therefore is foreign to us, or whether he is a living person who is contemporary as well as ancient. The understanding of religion in the Ancient Moravian Church was that its essence is relationship with the Triune God responded to in faith, love, and hope, re-expressed in the Renewed Church as the heart relationship with the Savior. When the essence of religion is relational then the nature of religion changes in profound ways, as described in pp. 7ff regarding the "Implications of a Relational Spirituality." (Here read the 11 elements of relational spirituality on pp. 14-15.)

But what the church often did with the role of the Savior after his resurrection frequently made him absent. I would guess that this was because, with their vivid memory of his historic life, they had difficulty identifying him in their post-resurrection experience. Thus this is analogous to what happens with the historical study of Jesus.

Theologically the ascension was understood as part of the resurrection. He was not only raised from the dead but into heaven at the right hand of God, the position of privilege and power. This is what might be called the essential ascension, while his going away (described in Acts 1 and the Departure Discourses of John) is the second ascension which only signifies his going back to heaven and the ending of his appearances. In the essential ascension which is the completion of the meaning of the resurrection, Jesus goes immediately to heaven, to come back for a brief sequence of appearances to the disciples. During these appearances Jesus gives the disciples a commission which is worded differently in different Gospels. We usually only think of the Great Commission in Matthew 28. These commissions have differing implications about Jesus ongoing relationship with his disciples. Because we do not have time to

discuss this all, I have included in the printed material a section on "The Markan Resurrection Narrative", p. 11f, which deals with this. Briefly, in Matthew Jesus, though promising to be with them until the end of the age, has given his commandments and so is not greatly involved. In fact, he has given a special authority to Peter (Matt. 16). In Luke (Acts) Jesus has gone to heaven and now the Spirit is active and the church will bear witness to Jesus, seemingly also implied in the Departure Discourses of John. Interestingly in Hebrews 10 Jesus, having completed his earthly work, sits down on his throne in heaven and waits for God to complete his work. Thus we have developing almost a doctrine of Jesus' *real absence*, perhaps reflecting the church's difficulty in identifying Jesus in its post-resurrection experience. Even when such metaphors as the body of Christ are used for the church, this seems to imply a presence of the church in the world on behalf of Jesus and that Jesus is primarily present through the church, thus also implying an absence of Jesus himself.

In the section in the printed material on the Markan resurrection narrative, the problems of establishing the authentic ending of Mark are discussed. Then I argue that the young man/angel reminds the women that Jesus had promised to again lead them, using the analogy of the shepherd who leads the sheep. He will not *send* them, (as in Matt.) but he will again *go before* and with them to Galilee and into the world. This is the Markan great commission. Mark argues that Jesus will again lead his disciples as he did in the past, and the disciples are confronted with the reality of the promise without having yet the concrete experience of the resurrected Christ. This is a literary device, for the readers of the Gospel stand in the existential place of the women. For Mark the way that Christ will be in life and world still needs to be discovered as Christ leads into world. Jesus will go before them, leading them to where they should go. His work is not turned over to someone else, neither church nor Spirit (although one must acknowledge that the Son is also present in the Spirit).

Now isn't it interesting that this is beginning to sound like what 18<sup>th</sup> century Moravians said about the Chief Eldership of Christ. Oddly, Zinzendorf never used the Gospel of Mark to argue this, perhaps because of the problematic nature of its ending.. If Jesus leads his disciples as he once did, then he is still subjected to forces of life and history as previously, and so he still bears the marks of his wounds (as Zinzendorf argued was clear in John 20) and so we retain a wounded still earth-bound Jesus rather than a triumphalist heavenly Jesus. The incarnation then was not a temporary way of God being here, but a paradigm of Jesus' on-going reality (also discussed in the booklet). Unless we know this we will not be able to find him among the complex factors which constitute reality.

Thus what Zinzendorf said in the poem he wrote about Christ as Chief Elder is still true and we may still say (see last page):

Welcome among your flock,  
and that with thousand joys,  
you, who here is and was,  
come, delight in your people  
who for your Cross's meaning  
surrender all other teaching;  
receive from us everywhere  
holy honor due the Elder.

In spirit we kiss your hand,  
scarred with the nail's mark,  
for us stretched on the cross  
so pale with color of death. ...

You Lord of the church of God,  
reconciler of all the world,  
chief of pilgrims,  
direct the Council of your servants,  
who now meet for you everywhere,  
at times in conferences,  
to the joy of your heart;  
let your wounds shine. ....

Tell your plan in the ear of your people  
Let them be taught aright;  
direct the conduct of your congregations;  
care for your pilgrim flock;  
give to each his particular role;  
represent us on judgement day;  
kiss the children, heal the sick;  
ease the business of the churches! ....

Beloved Lamb, dear Husband,  
you our every joy,  
of whom we truly say,  
"He shepherds his little flock;"  
what more to say? We know  
not to empty the heart.  
Who can sufficiently praise, love,  
honor you, Jesus Jehovah?

In the Cup his life and ours truly flow together as a covenant and paradigm of the future. He is really present to us, but also we become truly present to him. As a Church and as individuals we struggle much with our future, but he is with us and he will indeed direct us, if only we take his presence seriously and learn to listen to him. Moravians in the 18<sup>th</sup> century often used the lot to decide what Jesus wished. Gradually this was given up, and rightly so. The Christian church through the centuries has developed much more sophisticated principles for discernment which we must learn to use. A discussion of this is included in the printed materials.

The future belongs to him, and our future and that of our congregations is bound up with his future. And our individual futures are bound up with his future, if only we believe that he is there, that our business is his business, and that we can learn to be sensitive to the directions of his leading.