

A Closer Approximation: Draft 1

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Introduction:

We live in a vaguely Christian culture in which Christianity has been subverted to serve the needs of the powerful. When we read the scripture we read it through the lenses we have been given by this culture. These lenses form and inform our understanding of Christian scripture whether we are "conservative" or "liberal." It worth noting how often both liberals and conservatives subscribe to the same interpretation of a scriptural text - only the liberal goes on to reject the scripture because they sense something they don't like in that interpretation. But make no mistake, both interpretations have been deeply informed by the lenses given by our culture. Most of us assume that there can be no other view.

Thanks to the work of Biblical scholars, archeologists, historians, anthropologists, and sociologists we now know more about the culture of the first century than at any time since the end of that century. Take a moment and let this sink in. In the year 70CE, the temple was destroyed as the Romans retook Jerusalem after a Jewish revolt. Over a half a million Jews were killed and the rest were scattered to the rest of the empire. Due to this event and the early Christians move into the Greek and Roman culture of the Empire, Christian theology became ever more removed from the first century Jewish palestinian theology and culture in which Jesus led his movement.

Much of Christian theology has grown almost completely severed from the roots of the time and culture in which Jesus taught. In the absence understanding Jesus' time and culture, people quite naturally substituted their own cultural understandings to fill in the missing information. Our lenses, or to use a different word the "frame", within which we understand Jesus' goals, methods, and teachings is undergoing a significant change given this new information. This does not mean that every Christian teaching and teacher is wrong and should be thrown out. It does mean that we need to test each teacher and teaching based on this new information about the first century Jewish culture and what it

reveals about the heart of Jesus' teaching.

So we need a new lens or a new frame with which to understand Jesus' goals, methods, and teachings. But it would not serve us well if we assumed that this new lens or frame becomes enshrined as holy itself. This is why I am calling this new lens or frame is called "a closer approximation." We need to remain open to what we may learn in the future that Jesus might continue to teach us.

So first I will present a short section on Jesus' purpose and goal, a second on the heart of God as revealed in Jewish and Christian faith communities, followed by a short history of how these ideas were represented in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. I then move into a more controversial expression of the spirituality that Jesus called for to support the people and community involved in his movement.

What is Jesus' after:

Jesus' goal, purpose, and mission is to announce and participate in the healing and restoration of this planet earth, its plants and animals, and its people and cultures by a God who is committed to bring this healing and restoration about, and to invite our participation in that healing.

The Heart of God as revealed in Jewish and Christian faith communities:

God loves and is committed to healing the world.

God brings healing to us in part by inviting us to participate with God in loving and healing the world.

God lives out this commitment to love and heal the world by:

- proposing ways for humans to live in mutual freedom, responsibility, and shared meaning with one another as a part of the creation
- turning upside down any culture that demeans, exploits, or oppresses any people
- resisting the human tendency to use God to bless cultures that fall short of God's vision
- creating communities that seek participate in God's vision for humankind that others might be drawn to that vision
- one day bringing God's vision to completion

How did the Jewish and Christian faith communities express Jesus mission and this heart of God in Bible?

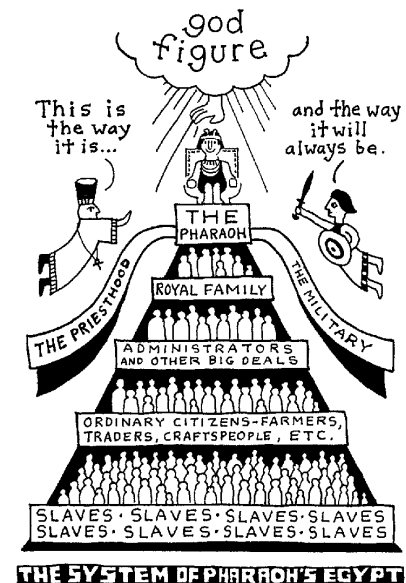
The earliest writings of what we call the Bible were about the experience of the Jewish people being freed from slavery in Egypt. In Egypt they were held captive by a powerful system of control that the Egyptians had worked for centuries to perfect.

The most powerful part of this system was religion. The Pharaoh wore a sun disk on his head, a sign that he was the agent of the sun God Ra. The upshot was this: if you fight against Pharaoh then you were fighting against the gods. From this religion people “knew” that the social order was created by the gods, that it was therefore eternal, and that Pharaoh was given authority by the gods to keep it well ordered. This created what many call a theology of despair: the way the world is, with slaves and taskmasters, the exploited and the oppressors, is the way the world was created so get used to it. The god’s were the authors of domination.

You can see this social order pictured. This social order is often called the “domination system.”ⁱ Domination can take many forms: governmental, economic, cultural, interpersonal, etc.

The conflict between the God and Pharaoh, was perceived as a battle between gods. The Jewish God was not against order, but against any order in which people do not live in equality, mutual responsibility, shared meaning, and share resources for the benefit of all. The story of the Exodus is the story of God who subverts the idea of god when it is used to create a theology of despair (any theology or narrative that tells people that it is pointless to work for a better future) and justify oppression and inequality.

God then works in the world to take the current order, bring some disorder, and then bring a new order or greater equality. We could say that God’s work in the world is catalytic: God in the Jewish



and Christian tradition is a catalyst that transforms the world from violence to peace, from despair to hope, from alienation to mutual relationship.

When the people of Israel were first in the wilderness, God wanted to teach them another way to be human which begins with the Ten Commandments. Before these commandments begin, God shares God's character with us:

²I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt,
out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me.

Idolatry was not so much the worship of statues, but buying into the official theology of Egypt or some other kingdom - which used theology to say that domination was eternal. The true character of God is to free people from domination. This same character would need to be at the heart of the people of God. The People of Israel did not always live out this other way to be human, but often conformed to domination. This is why God sent truth-tellers (called prophets) to remind them of the character of God and therefore the character of their society God desires. As they spoke, they used Egypt as a symbol of domination, as well as Sodom and Gomorrah, Babylon, and in Jesus' day the Roman Empire.

One terrible test of this faith in an catalytic God was the Exile in Babylon beginning in 603BCE. The Babylonians believed that human beings were made for the express purpose of being slaves or slave masters. Their creation stories said that the world was the rotting body of the gods' mother, Tiamat, that one of the god's had killed in battle. The gods made humans from the dead body of Tiamat to be slaves and work the irrigation fields. Their agent the king was to keep order and conquer those nations that did not live out of this reality. Enslaved in Babylon, the Jewish people wrote the first story of creation (Genesis 1) and so remembered their trust in the God who had freed them once before, and who would free them once again. The God they knew created people to be God's agents in caring for one another and the creation as a whole.

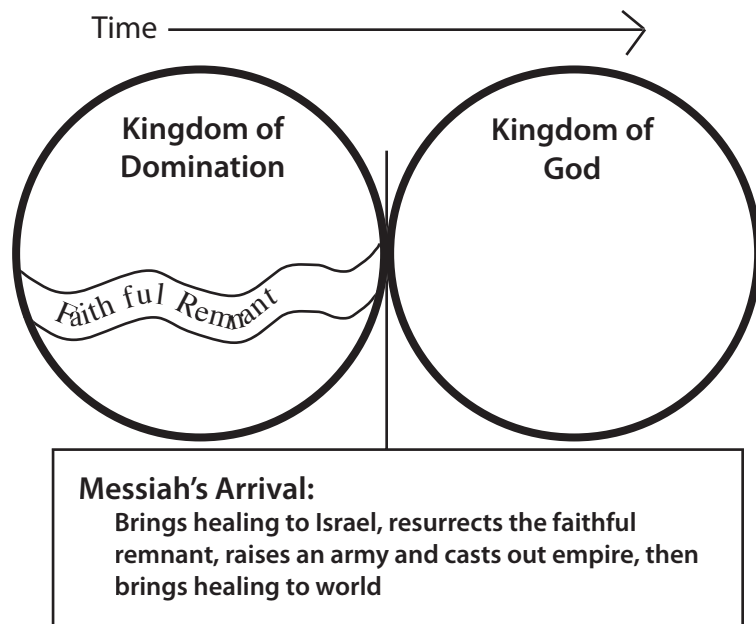
In the first century BCE Augustus Caesar used many of the same tools that the Egyptians and Babylonians did. He claimed that he was born of a virgin mother and the god Apollo. While he respected

the local customs of Roman occupied lands, he usually expected others to worship him as well. Caesar gave the Jews special permission not to worship him due to the Jewish unwillingness to worship multiple gods. This sounds rather nice. It must be noted, however, that the Romans chose the Jewish High Priest and held his vestments under lock and key. On their way to Jerusalem for the Passover, people would have seen their fellow Jews hung on crosses as a reminder that this time a more powerful Egypt had come to them, this time an exile like the one in Babylon had come home.

When the gospel writers said that Jesus was born of a virgin they meant that Jesus was in tension with Caesar: that the true God of the universe worked among those oppressed to set them free, as God had with Moses. As the primary symbol of the church, the cross reveals the tension between Jesus' community and Empire. The cross was an instrument of terror and intimidation aimed at keeping a population quiet: see what happens when you get "uppity." Jesus death and resurrection, said the early church, transforms the cross from an instrument of terror and intimidation to a symbol of victory: you can give us your worst Caesar, and God still is bringing the kingdom - even to Romans!

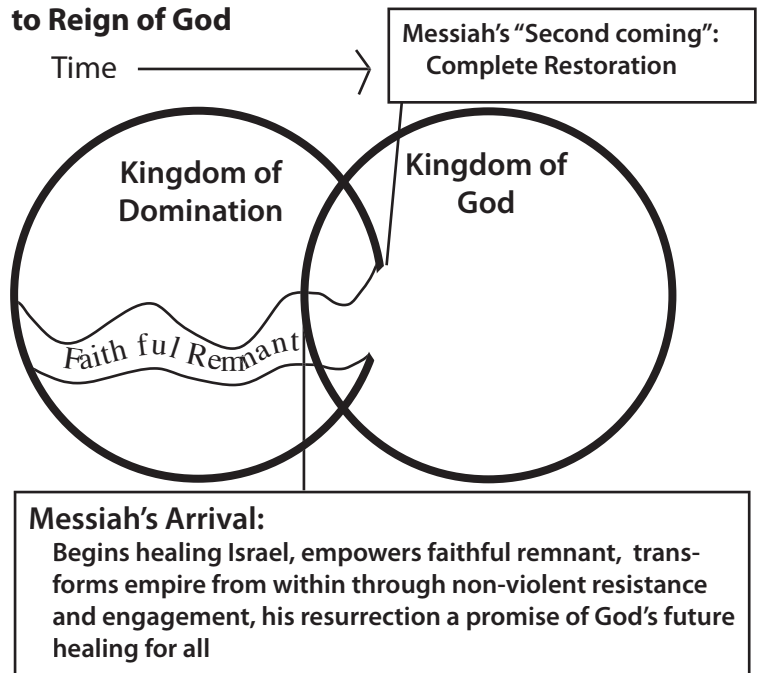
In Jesus' day, many believed that the transition from domination to the kingdom of God would come rather suddenly. The messiah would come to heal the sick, raise the faithful who had died under domination, gather an army as a priest-king to kill and cast out the Romans and end the Exile at Home (Isaiah 63), and then would implement the kingdom of God so that all the nations would come to learn how to live that way. The ultimate purpose of this was to fulfill the promises of God to Abraham,

A Typical First Century Jewish View of Transition from Domination to Reign of God



that his descendants would be a blessing to all nations – the people of Israel would live in such a way that others would want to come and emulate their non-domination way of life. (Isaiah 2) It is nice to see that even their vision of violence had as its goal the healing of the world. The Messiah would heal the sick, raise the faithful remnant new life, release the political and religious prisoners, bring sight to the blind, and cleanse the lepers. (Isaiah 42:5-7) He would gather all the faithful to a wonderful feast (Isaiah 25).

Jesus' View of Transition from Domination to Reign of God



Jesus' vision, according to the synoptic gospels, was that a new order (the kingdom of God) was breaking into and transforming as leaven transforms bread the order of domination the Romans and so he was named by many to be the messiah. Then he would lead the people to live as God had envisioned. Jesus did not fulfill this expectation of the messiah in several ways.

First, he believed that the kingdom was near (Mark 1:14-14) and among (Luke 17:20-21) his followers who we might call a servant community. People were not called to wait powerlessly and passively for the kingdom, but to begin living out that kingdom right in the midst of the Roman Empire and a Jewish nation warped and compromised by domination. This means that they were to live in healing conflict with their Jewish sisters and brothers. When Jesus heals his is fulfilling a part of the expectation of the messiah. But he challenges these expectations in how, when, and who gets gets healed. When Jesus eats with sinners, tax collectors, gentiles, and he likewise evokes these expectations in a way that expanded who was invited to participate in the kingdom.

Second when resisted by his Jewish and Roman contemporaries, he refused to resort to physical violence and furthermore used what we today call non-violent means to raise issues, expose the tensions, and change people's minds.

Thirdly, by stating that the kingdom was near and among us instead of our possession he put a limit on the perfectionist dreams that usually lead to resentment and anger at those who "don't get it."

This new worldview and society Jesus called the kingdom of God. For now let's call this community a Servant Community. The Servant Community has a shape: it is an open circle - open so that others can join it. This open circle is centered in the cross, now a symbol of the victory



of God over empire and domination and a reminder of the methods and means that Jesus intends us to use when resisted by empire.

He called a community to continue after him and gave them the same mission that he was given. That God's new order is emerging from and breaking into the existing order of domination so that humanity might learn to live in a new way. Salvation, as used by Jesus was not going to heaven when you die (although the fate of people after death is an important issue) but rather salvation was people participating in the emerging kingdom of God.

Within several centuries several things happened that forever changed the understanding of Jesus' mission and therefore the church's. First, after several generations Christians lost access to the specific Jewish cultural context of Jesus' ministry. They began to do what Christians commonly do today: we interpret the words and deeds of Jesus through our own needs and cultural frames. The second major change was the adoption of Christianity into the Roman Empire. Thousands of baptisms took place without any education or conversion process from the ways of domination to the ways of servant community. The effect was that Christianity was subverted, one might say baptized, into the ways of the Roman Empire. Since then, it has most often been used by the powers that be in much the same way as the Pharaoh, Babylonians, and Caesar used religion. The modern evangelical and fundamentalist

movements are expressions of the same use of religion. Certainly mainline churches such as Lutherans, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, etc. have played their role as the priests of empire. When President Bush claims “born again” status, he is making a modern version of the same argument by the aforementioned leaders: that he has special status with God and has God’s blessing and so to resist him is to resist God. Moses, the prophets, and Jesus would certainly have resisted and deconstructed this kind of claim. Coupled with the pseudo-Biblical story-line of the end times, many Christians are led to dismiss the consequences of failed policies as “just in the script” of God’s soon-to-come destruction of the world.

The earth is, in our vaguely Christian frame, the Titanic. It is doomed to hit the iceberg. Work on the world is just “re-arranging deck chairs on the Titanic.” The only option is for us to “get right with Jesus” so that we have access to the lifeboat of personal salvation, and hope to get our friends on one too. This theology of despair tells Christians and the culture as a whole that any meaningful action to bring greater healing and justice to our world is a waste of time.

This theology of despair is rarely countered in the corporate media because a theology of hope or engagement with the world would inevitably lead people away from the critical activities of shopping and media consumption.

Nevertheless, a thin tradition remained in Christianity that held on, sometimes tenuously, to the catalytic faith of the Jewish nation, and to Jesus’ vision for servant community working catalytically within culture. In recent times, many mainline denominations, pastors, and theologians have begun to more clearly understand the subverted mission of Jesus, and to see themselves as participating in a recovery of Jesus’ mission. With the aid of scholars of many disciplines we are gaining insight into the culture of the first century and for the first time in nearly 1900 years, now have a close enough approximation of the context of Jesus’ ministry to begin, and only just begin, to express Jesus’ mission with some clarity.

Of course expression is not enough. To announce the kingdom is an essential part of participating in it, but only one part. The challenge of this closer approximation for North American and European Christians cannot be underestimated. God loves us. God’s love is a gift. But if this closer

approximation is in fact closer to Jesus' true intentions, then Christians and the church are called to reorder our mission to better reflect Jesus' mission. We are called to be a catalytic servant community, participating in God's healing kingdom.

This reordering will be quite painful. Human beings enter relationships based on a mutually agreed upon (or often just assumed) set of expectations. When these expectations are not met, humans lose commitment. Many if not most Christians are a part churches based a very different set of expectations. Most expect that Jesus' mission is to rescue as many souls for heaven before God finally destroys the earth. Most expect that the church is here to affirm the basic views of whatever culture, with the exception of some personal morality issues. Most expect the church to be here to help us through this vale of tears, so that we can endure to see the joys of heaven. These and other basic beliefs are what others have called "civil religion."

A Christianity that proposes engagement in hopeful activity in participation of God's healing of the world is different enough to be called a different religion from Christianity as civil religion.

What kind of spirituality informs this perspective?

One could say that what precedes does not go deep enough in addressing the universal questions which give rise to religion. This is most certainly true.

This perspective requires a deep spirituality that addresses our experience of the central issue in human existence: consciousness of death.

It is terrifying to be human.

It is glorious to be human.

Both of these statements are true to our experience. The fact that both of them are true at the same time makes it worse. If we were god's who lived forever we could deny the terror of our lives. If we were simply animals we could forget that the butcher's truck will arrive tomorrow we could chew our cud in peace.

But we aren't gods and we can't forget. This is what Ernest Becker called the "impossible situation" of the human being: we can imagine being god and living forever, but we know that we aren't and that we will die and must face this fact each moment.

We deny and repress our vulnerability and death because they terrify us. Becker spends a lot of his book describing the ways that we deny and repress the terror of our death and mortality. Unlike our animal friends, we have to carry the burden of the foreknowledge and foreboding of our own death.

This is the paradox: He (humans in general) is out of nature and hopelessly in it; he is dual, up in the stars yet housed in a heart-pumping, breath-gasping body that once belonged to a fish and still carries the gill marks to prove it. His body is a material fleshy casing that is alien to him in many ways – strangest and most repugnant way of being that it aches and bleeds and will decay and die. Man is literally split in two: he has an awareness of his own splendid uniqueness in that he sticks out of nature with a towering majesty, and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet in order blindly and dumbly to rot and disappear forever. It is a terrifying dilemma to be in and to have to live with. The lower animals are, of course spared this painful contradiction, as they lack a symbolic identity and the self consciousness that goes with it. . . . [Animals] live and disappear with the same thoughtlessness: a few minutes of fear, a few seconds of anguish and it is over. But to live a whole lifetime with the fate of death haunting one's dreams and eve the most sun-filled days – that's something else.ⁱⁱ

The core of it is this: we do not want to be human which means to be both powerful and vulnerable, alive and mortal. In my previous book I wrote that sin is the human desire to be anything but human: we want to be God or less than human. Sin is human beings breaking relationships by trying to escape the tension of being powerful and vulnerable. We avoid this tension by pretending to be powerful only by exercising power over others. We avoid this tension by pretending to be vulnerable only by claiming to be a victim of others' aggression.

Since we cannot escape death and limitation, we seek to escape the emotional awareness of death. Culture is how we manage the escape.

Historically, as human beings increased in their self-consciousness, we became increasingly conscious of our limitedness and our inevitability of death. There is archeological evidence to support the idea that humans gathered into larger human communities, not because it increased chances of

survival, but because larger communities give us something that alone we rarely provide: a narrative that many people believe in of what it means to be ideally human (heroic) in the face of limitation and mortality. This narrative forms the basis of what we call culture. We may not, as individuals, be able to stop being mortal, but we can more or less fulfill what our culture says is ideal – that is “heroic.” The mother who sacrifices her time to feed and care for her children while being a single mother, the father who works hard to provide for his family despite his employer’s unfairness, and the student from the inner city who overcomes cultural differences and racial prejudice to excel at a university are all examples of people living within the context of limitation and death and yet are recognized as being “heroic.” At funerals, the real issue for people really is whether or not the one who died “did all they could” and “fulfilled their culturally informed roles well.” In other words, people want to know if the one who died was heroic.

Being a part of a culture also gives the individual a sense that they are participating in something that will continue far beyond their own life, and stretches back to creation.

What culture gives the human then, is a way to avoid the constant, grating emotional awareness of being limited and mortal by focusing our attention not on death and limitation themselves, but on fulfilling the cultural ideal. Cultures do not deny death itself as a reality, but serve to deny the emotional and existential consequences of the fact that we all will die and all that we do will turn to dust.

There are roughly two ways that a culture can go when developing this narrative that describes an ideal human:

- 1) A Culture of Denial and Domination: We can deny death by saying that we are most fully human when we have power over others
- 2) A Culture of Acceptance and Servant Community: we can learn a haltingly embrace death by saying that we are most fully human when we accept our limitation and mortality and as we live in mutual relationship with others.

A culture of denial of the emotional consequences of death and limitation leads invariably to the domination system. A culture which denies death does it with vulnerabilities’ opposite: power. It says that to be ideally human is to have power. But since we can’t really have power over death in any

ultimate sense, we settle for having power over each other. When we get that power we feel the rush, but we also feel the shame of other's power over us. And so we get arranged in hierarchies and ranks, striving always to climb the ladder, and fearful of those beneath us.

Domination culture is certainly a terrible to live in. Domination culture leads to an increase of actual death as humans who are weak otherwise use violence to feel, if only momentarily, what the culture says it means to be human – to have power over others. We like the “shock and awe” and feel powerful when we are a part those dropping it on others. We go out of our way to belittle others and manipulate them to our will. With all its problems, however, this kind of culture still “works” for the human: it still focuses people away from the daily emotional consequences of death and limitation and toward fulfilling the culture's expectations.ⁱⁱⁱ

There are many problems with cultures of denial and domination. Here are a few in brief.

The Powerkeg Problem: our terror of death does not really go away, it pools in us until someone taps into it. Then we are explosive, just as we were after 9/11/2001. As with anything humans repress, the more we repress the stronger a force it plays in our lives.

The Marionette Problem: those with the power to control the cultural narrative are able to control populations by presenting what makes us heroic and so give people a way to subdue feelings about death. This is powerful leverage over people. The Egyptians perfected this over thousands of years. Today marketers tell us that we are good parents when our kids can buy what they want at the mall and so we work 60 hours a week (with no straw.) It's pretty much the same deal. Dealing with death consciously makes us less susceptible to such manipulation.

Big Time Wrestling: we are locked into being dominant or submissive in relationships.

Guilt: denying limitation and the death those limitations imply, we would rather feel in responsible when things go bad. We also take some of our anxiety about death, and sublimate it into a generalized feeling of guilt. The church does not create guilt, as some have suggested. We take some of this “mortality guilt” and let off a little of its steam on Sunday mornings. Hey, it's a living!

Addictions: with all this internalized and generalized anxiety, we are constantly looking to self-medicate in one way or another.

Despite these and other problems with denial and domination culture, humans don't really want change. Humans don't typically want change in their culture because of what is at stake for them. Culture, again, provides insulation for us from the emotional consequences of our human condition. To engage in change means to remove or weaken this insulation which works to subdue our emotional awareness of mortality. When we do engage in change, we have to face our mortality and limitations more consciously and since we don't like that so we fight like hell to protect and defend the status quo. This is called world-view defense. Anyone who proposes such a change is seen as a threat to people's survival. This is why prophets often get killed: bringing death to consciousness, they come to represent death and so are perceived not only as a change agent but an agent of destruction.

Here we can begin to see the linkage between the change the kingdom of God brings to the way we are humanity, and the challenge of being human. To make such cultural change possible, Jesus would have to promote a spirituality that would enable people to handle our human condition well enough to not need denial and domination and so be able to participate in changing it.

Jesus Response:

What Jesus did, as a part of the long tradition of the Jewish people, was to propose a school of humanity he called the kingdom of God in which people would begin to repent of denial and domination: to begin living out servant community.

²¹He sternly ordered and commanded them not to tell anyone, ²²saying, "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

²³Then he said to them all, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. ²⁴For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. ²⁵What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?"

(Luke 9:21-25)

His command to take up his "cross daily and follow me" has two major implications. First he is proposing a **daily spiritual practice**: to spend some time daily being conscious of their mortality and limitation – symbolized by the cross. Consciously feeling the emotional implications of death and limitation lessens their need for culture of domination and denial. This will prepare them to live as a Servant Community of the reign of God living in mutual relationship rather than in dominance or

submission. Second, it would prepare them for the consequences of non-violent **revolutionary activity**: the inevitable and potentially violent worldview defense of those living in the Roman culture of domination to those living out the new humanity in their midst: persecution and rejection. Because they had sufficiently dealt with the emotional consequences of death, they were less likely to be overwhelmed by the mere threat of force, leading them to either retreat or violence.

This increased emotional capacity to deal with death and violent worldview defense nonviolently is critical to their participation in God's catalytic reign. Because culture is our way to avoid focusing on the emotional consequences of death, when culture is challenged humans tend to feel that death is somehow closer. It is as if those challenging culture have suddenly created death out of nothing. Those challenging the culture will be resisted in the most emotionally charged and violent way. If those challenging culture can respond in an emotionally balanced way, show no aggression, and receive aggression without resorting to it they have a chance to break the cycle of denial and domination. It is **only a** chance, but is **the only** chance.

Jesus was quite clear that there would be casualties in such transformative work, but that they like him would be raised from the dead and their risking-love vindicated by God.

Jesus calls his disciples in the midst of a culture of denial and domination to live radically different: to be heroic is to accept our death and limitation, share the gifts we have been given by God, enjoy relationships of depth, and live with one another in mutual responsibility and mercy. He called this the kingdom of God. He said it was near and among us. We do not have to wait for the messiah to come and fix everything before we can begin to live out the kingdom with others. We are invited to start now, and to see that we are not required to do it all ourselves: God is doing the heavy lifting. God is making the kingdom emerge from within our current culture. We live between the beginning of the kingdom of God and the time when it is fully realized. Jesus' called his disciples to hold God's vision for the world in one hand, and the real world in the other. The tension between these two is painful - it forms us into a cross.

How this perspective is reflected in the Epistles and later theology

I think Paul meant something very similar as he said that we are to die and rise daily in our baptism. Denial of death and all its latent problems no longer have dominion over us because we are consciously dealing with our human condition. We no longer have to “obey passions” because we have less death terror pooled up inside us that we must cover with addictions.

³Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

⁵For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷For whoever has died is freed from sin. ⁸But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. ¹¹So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

¹²Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. ¹³No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. ¹⁴For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

“Justification by grace apart from works of law” in this approximation means that we are freed from the “law” which is the culture’s idea of what it means to be an ideal or heroic human (the Jewish “law” was just one such ideal). Justification by grace means that we are set free from the demands of cultural heroism to live the by Jesus’ vision of the kingdom of God – so we are free to be deviant and revolutionary as Jesus himself was in service of the kingdom of God.

Facing death every day is what Luther meant by a theology of the cross, note especially the last sentence.

He, however, who has been emptied [Cf. Phil. 2:7] through suffering no longer does works but knows that God works and does all things in him. For this reason, whether man does works or not, it is all the same to him. He neither boasts if he does good works, nor is he disturbed if God does not do good works through him. He knows that it is sufficient if he suffers and is brought low by the cross in order to be annihilated all the more. It is this that Christ says in John 3[:7], “You must be born anew.” To be born anew, one must consequently first die and then be raised up with the Son of Man. To die, I say, means to feel death at hand.^{iv}

And so Luther calls a culture of denial and domination a theology of glory.

A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is. This is clear: He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore he prefers works to suffering, glow to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil. . . . God can be found only in suffering and the cross, as has already been said. Therefore the friends of the cross say that the cross is good and works are evil, for through the cross works are destroyed and the old Adam, who is especially edified by works, is crucified. It is impossible for a person not to be puffed up by his good works unless he has first been deflated and destroyed by suffering and evil until he knows that he is worthless and that his works are not his but God's.^v

Certainly most Christianity is a theology of glory: see especially Rick Warren's *Purpose Driven Life*.

Now a few readings from Dietrich Bonhoeffer that certainly seem to resonate with the perspective both in terms of the mission and purpose of Jesus, and the deep spirituality that sustains it.

First, his critique of the church

Christianity stands or falls with its revolutionary protest against violence, arbitrariness and pride of power with its plea for the weak. Christians are doing too little to make these points clear rather than too much. Christendom adjusts itself far too easily to the worship of power. Christians should give more offense, shock the world far more, than they are doing now. Christians should take a stronger stand in favor of the weak rather than considering first the possible right of the strong.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Sermon on 2 Corinthians 12:9

Then his understanding of the deep spirituality of Jesus:

The cross is laid on every Christian. The first Christ-sufferings which every man must experience is the call to abandon the attachments of this world (again worldview of the old adam). It is that dying of the old man which is the result of his encounter with Christ. As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death – we give over our lives to death. Thus it begins; the cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.^{vi}

Bonhoeffer sees that consciousness of death, the school of anxiety, or the way cross is at the very heart of discipleship of Jesus of Nazareth. The attachments that he speaks of here, is not a way to say that the world is not important. Rather he is alluding to the cultural stories of heroism that we use to keep consciousness of death at bay, a strategies that lead to violence and destruction.

The method by which violence is unmasked is through non-violence:

The followers of Christ have been called to peace....And they must not only have peace but make it. And to that end they renounce but make it. And to that end they renounce all violence and tumult. In the cause of Christ nothing is to be gained by such methods....His disciples keep the peace by choosing to endure suffering themselves rather than inflict it on others. They maintain fellowship where others would break it off. They renounce hatred and wrong. In so doing, they overcome evil with good, and establish the peace of God in the midst of a world of war and hate. Dietrich Bonhoeffer – The Cost of Discipleship

The only way to overcome evil is to let it run itself to a standstill because it does not find the resistance it is looking for. Resistance merely creates further evil and adds fuel to the flames. But when evil meets no opposition and encounters no obstacle but only patient endurance, its sting is drawn, and at last meets an opponent which is more than its match. . . . by willing endurance we cause suffering to pass. Evil becomes a spent force when we put up no resistance. By refusing to pay back the enemy with his own coin, and by preferring to suffer with resistance, the Christian exhibits the sinfulness of (violence and insult). Violence stands condemned by its failure to evoke counter-violence.^{vii}

Jesus revealed in his life and death revealed the true character and power of God: God's character is of a Servant God who suffers with and for a hurting and incomplete creation and seeks to make it whole. God suffers because the only way to respect the autonomy of a person, and yet seek to heal them, is to suffer with them. Raw power always overcomes the subject it seeks to serve – it always points a finger at the weakness of the one suffering and says, "If you were really worthwhile you would have power yourself." Raw power consumes the vulnerable person and makes them disappear if it's not convenient to keep her around.

Thomas Merton wrote in his book *Seeds of Contemplation*.

We must be saved from immersion in the sea of lies and passions which is called "the world." And we must be saved above all from the abyss of confusion and absurdity which is our own worldly self. The person must be rescued from the individual. The free son of God must be saved from the conformist slave of fantasy, passion, and convention. The creative and inner self must be delivered from the wasteful, hedonistic, and destructive ego that seeks only to cover itself with disguises.^{viii}

The term "the world" here does not mean the earth and its creatures. The term the world in

Merton and much of the new testament is a term to describe human culture or worldviews.

Conclusion:

The only way that Jesus could possibly follow his strategy of living God's kingdom of righteousness, compassion, and worship **within** the Roman Empire is if he has consciously accepted his death as a part of life, and found a trust in God in the midst of that awareness. If he did not have this awareness then he was incredibly naïve and even stupid. The consequences of living the School of Humanity in the midst of the Roman Empire were inevitably severe as others sought to defend their worldview. Jesus told his disciples that to follow him was to daily take up their cross. This means to daily

- 1) become conscious of their own mortality and limitedness and vulnerability
- 2) entertain the very real possibility of being killed by those defending their worldview
- 3) AND to trust that God's promises to restore the world to wholeness would inevitably come true.

Jesus realized that our repressed fear of our mortality and limitations was what gave the empire power over his people, and kept them enslaved.

In a more systematic way, we could say that Jesus called his disciples to

- 1) Join God in healing kingdom for the world through the School of Humanity
- 2) See the lie of the Domination System with its domination myth
- 3) Accept the resistance of both the dominators and the dominated
- 4) Recognize their own limitedness and mortality every day
- 5) So that we could respond non-violently and consciously to this resistance
- 6) Trust in the inevitability of the God's healing Kingdom
- 7) And in the Creator's promise of resurrection

These things made it possible to entertain living and teaching the School of Humanity and being a servant community in the midst of the Exile at Home.

Because they did not have to deny death, but daily dealt with its terror, they could live out God's vision of a world in which the sword and spear were turned into farming tools. Violence comes from the terror of death and our unconscious attempts to avoid it. Striving for consciousness of death and dealing with the terror of our situation means that violence does not have to be an automatic reaction, but rather a decision that one can say "no" to. The power of nonviolent engagement in a

culture is to help people see past their projection of fear to a human being who loves them and is no threat.

The only way that we can participate in Jesus' catalytic reign of God is by daily facing and coming to some acceptance of our mortality.

Salvation in this approximation is

1. being freed from denial of death by daily engaging our death and limitation
2. which leads to freedom from merely cultural heroism which binds us into slavery to those who control the cultural story
3. So that we can participate in the transformation of society from denial and domination to God's reign.
4. and begin to live, imperfectly and haltingly as God intends: to live as servants of God in mutual relationships and spend our lives trusting the God of life

The spiritual disciplines of the church now can take their proper place. The very act of prayer can now be seen as conscious dependency on God as a creature frail and strong and an act of imagining the kingdom of God. Worship as a part of a community is being grounded in the narrative of a God working catalytically in the world, a serving God in whose image we are made. Baptism is entrance into a way of life that includes a process to consciously accept death. The Eucharist is a meal in which we remember Jesus' death and resurrection, and our own mortality as creatures who must eat to survive. Fasting likewise reminds us of our own reliance on food for survival and the chance to become more conscious of our mortality and limitation. Calling and discernment in ministry is both the realization that we have incredible God-given power, but we do not have all gifts and endless energy.

Jesus Christ was both a non-violent revolutionary with respect to society and a revolutionary spiritual teacher who taught us how to live as both humans and humanity. He taught that God was intent on remaking the world and the worldviews of human beings so that we could embrace our human condition and learn to live in servant community with one another.

We live in a culture in which our theology has been subverted to support the current social order. In this culture we see God in Jesus as one who comforts us through the perils of life and promises a better life to come. In this life we are to do nice things and fit into the culture with the exception of a few "moral" practices.

It is estimated that 11 million Americans fall into the category of “dominionists.” Dominionists believe that domination is not the problem, but that those in power are not Christian or are limited in their Christian judgement by pesky laws and a US constitution. If we just had Christian leaders who would lead by “Biblical” laws everything would be grand. But domination that uses the Bible to support domination is still domination. Jesus resisted those in his own Jewish faith, the Chief Priests, Scribes, and Sadducees, who used their theology to serve the domination of the Roman Empire. He would resist dominionists too, even those who call him “Lord, Lord.”

Jesus called his disciples to join him in embracing our human condition with a deep spirituality while participating in God’s catalytic/non-violent revolutionary work to remake human community as Servant Community. The Servant Community continues to live between the time of the arrival of the messiah and when the earth and all its creatures are fully healed. We are called to use the same methods as Jesus used. As in the first century such participation with God is risky business. God invites us to such risky business both to help bring healing to the world and as a way that God seeks to bring healing to us.

Last Word

Christianity seems to be begging a very important question: hasn’t Jesus already had two-thousand years within which to work his revolution? Isn’t that enough? Hasn’t he failed?

After advocating for the viewpoint of this approximation at a recent Bible study, a fellow pastor asked me: If Jesus was trying to bring the kingdom, why didn’t it come and why should we pay it any attention?

The reality is that the transformation of human culture from denial and domination to acceptance and servant community is a much more difficult and dangerous and costly than Jesus’ followers have been willing been deal with. The followers of Jesus have been and largely still are, as the people of Israel were, subverted and co-opted by denial and domination culture.

I don’t know if Jesus’ vision and methodology for the transformation of the world will “work.” I do believe, however, that we cannot call ourselves his followers and follow another path.

This is only a draft.

I welcome your feedback @ tkyllo@verizon.net

- ⁱ Dan Erlander, Used with permission from Manna and Mercy
- ⁱⁱ Earnest Becker, Denial of Death, Free Press, pg. 26-27
- ⁱⁱⁱ The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium, Walter Wink (New York, Galilee, Doubleday, 1998)
- ^{iv} Luther, Martin: Pelikan, Jaroslav Jan (Hrsg.) ; Oswald, Hilton C. (Hrsg.) ; Lehmann, Helmut T. (Hrsg.): Luther's Works, Vol. 31 : Career of the Reformer I. Philadelphia : Fortress Press, 1999, c1957 (Luther's Works 31), S. 31:55
- ^v Luther, Martin: Pelikan, Jaroslav Jan (Hrsg.) ; Oswald, Hilton C. (Hrsg.) ; Lehmann, Helmut T. (Hrsg.): Luther's Works, Vol. 31 : Career of the Reformer I. Philadelphia : Fortress Press, 1999, c1957 (Luther's Works 31), S. 31:51
- ^{vi} Bonhoeffer, Cost of Discipleship, pg. 79
- ^{vii} Bonhoeffer, Cost of Discipleship, pg. 127
- ^{viii} Thomas Merton, Seeds of Contemplation, pg. 38