

# Nodes of Transcendence

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It is tempting to imagine that the Bible simply “dropped out of the sky” into our contemporary environment, and that we can understand the essentials of the Christian faith with little or no in-depth inquiry into exactly what that faith meant for the “saints” to which it was “once for all delivered” (Jude 1:3). Failure to engage in this inquiry can lead to a shallow, inaccurate apprehension of what Christianity really is, with the result that the version of the faith we believe and practice has more in common with the trends and ideologies of our era than with the faith of the apostles. Penetrating New Testament historical scholarship helps us get back to what Christianity was really “all about” from the beginning. Such scholarship can help us to redirect today’s church toward an authentic witness to the work of Christ—one which addresses the culture of the twenty-first century with more transformational power than the shallow versions of Christianity so frequently promoted in pulpit or media.

Recent reading we have done in New Testament historical scholarship, particularly works by N. T. Wright and C. F. D. Moule, has strengthened one key insight into what Christianity really is. It is impossible to explain the phenomenon of the New Testament, or the existence of the church, without accepting the reality of the resurrection of Christ as an event in the history of the people of God. Furthermore, Jesus’ resurrection life is ongoing, embodied in the community of those who belong to Him.

## The Embodiment of the Resurrection

The risen, *transphysical* (to use Wright’s term) life of Jesus is corporeal; that is, His life is embodied in a people who are His body, and who therefore share in His story of witness, death, resurrection and vindication. *Justification* is the term Paul uses for the vindication of Christ’s followers as God’s true covenant people, in whom the promise to Abraham is realized in the blessing of all nations, and in whom God’s creation, marred by the sin of Adamic revolt, is being restored. All this depends on the continuing embodiment of the life of Jesus, through the Spirit, in the community of those who are His Temple. In short, as I have become fond of saying, “Christianity is Jesus.” It is not a belief *about* Jesus, it is the Lord Himself at work in the world.

Such an understanding of the faith — and I believe a consistent, probing exegesis of the Scriptures will sustain it — may call into question the way we “do business” as a church. When our Christian identity is wrapped up in a belief *system*, a set of traditions, an organizational structure or a pattern for successful living, then we have missed the point of New Testament witness. Apostolic Christianity is the operation of the Spirit of Christ as embodied in a community — a community whose life transcends the “flat” world of the four dimensions because it is the life of Jesus, in whom God’s creation is being restored.

The community functions at the intersection of the “mundane” and the transcendent, and its witness points to “nodes of transcendence” that manifest Christ’s living presence. The New Testament spokesmen function in a manner “larger than life.” People falling under Peter’s shadow are healed, as are those to whom patches of cloth are taken from Paul’s body. The secret of the devious Ananias and Sapphira is exposed, an expired Dorcas is brought back to life, a demonic spirit is driven from a slave girl, the outcome of a shipwreck is revealed in advance. All of this is an extension of the work of Jesus, who promised His followers they would do “greater works” (John 14:12) than His mighty deeds, and gave them His same “glory” (John 17:22).

## The Church’s Flattened Perspective

The Western church of today operates in a flat world where these intersections with transcendence are rare, and when present are usually suspect. The co-opting of the Christian movement by the Roman Imperial system imprisoned the faith in the confines of an organizational structure that suppressed the living organism of the Spirit. The “Enlightenment” of the seventeenth century confined our perception of reality to a closed system of cause and effect. What could not be comprehended by such a system was relegated to the “unnatural” or “supernatural,” an amorphous realm of mere speculation, opinion or preference. To accommodate itself to changed cultural perceptions the church devolved into a plethora of denominational organizations distinguished by their ethnic origins, historic traditions, structural

patterns or rationally devised statements of faith. So ingrained has been the tendency to view the faith as an enterprise of human activity, rather than the transcendent life of Jesus manifested in a living organism, that even movements to overcome denominational fragmentation became, simply, one more denomination. And movements seeking to recover the operation of the Spirit of Christ in the life of the modern church lapsed into mere frequencies on the denominational spectrum.

Today's Western church, then, operates in a "flat" world of organizational competition for a shrinking market. It offers itself as a product for consumption, an entertainment for spectators, a promotional venue for some cultural or theological agenda, a pandering to stylistic preferences by the few for whom "style" in religion still has some appeal. The church operates within the closed system foisted upon our perception by a culture influenced by Darwin, Marx, Freud, Dewey and other shapers of the public thought world. (We are speaking generally, of course, allowing for possible exceptions where nodes of transcendence are indeed present.)

But why is the church's "market" shrinking? In part because it has not challenged the presuppositions of modern culture that rule the transcendent out of court. It has not engaged in the intellectual task of retraining people's perceptions of the universe so they can once again perceive the nodes of transcendence that manifest the life of Jesus today.

### **Jesus' Intellectual Challenge**

Jesus Himself challenged the perceptions of His contemporaries within Judaism regarding the kingdom of God and the role of His Messiah. His was an intellectual challenge, a challenge to perceive God's call of His people in a new way — or, more accurately, in its originally intended way. He accomplished this by retelling the story of Israel around Himself, as the embodiment of the covenantal purposes of God. Those who could not rise to His challenge and make the transition in their thinking had no choice but to send Him to the cross. Yet the cross itself was Jesus' "lifting up" into resurrection, a victory manifested to those Jews who were willing to lay aside their presuppositions and yield to the reality brought home to them by this "node of transcendence." The Apostle Paul is notable in his yielding to a reality hitherto incomprehensible to him, and in his intellectual achievement in redefining the faith of Israel around the One now revealed to be its Lord.

Perhaps, among the "greater works" that Jesus predicated of His disciples, a work of engaging the presuppositions of our culture will emerge. Such an engagement cannot take the form of competing with cultural norms on their own terms. It must be a challenge to those very norms themselves, a challenge to the way people think about their world. And the challenge must begin within the church itself, so infected is it by those twisted norms of perception and interpretation that close the mind to the presence of transcendent intersections along the highways of life. (We can behold, in very shape of the cross, a symbol of the intersection of the transcendent with the plane of history.)

Strangely, the culture of the "unchurched," or tangentially churched, is not averse to responding to nodes of transcendence. To the contrary, it seems to be seeking such intersections particularly among younger people. The widespread use of drugs, preoccupation with fantasy media (e.g., computer games) or wizardry (e.g., *Harry Potter*), fascination with the occult, the growth of oriental or pseudo-oriental religions ("New Age"), environmentalism shading over into earth-worship or reverence for animal life — all these testify to an openness to that which transcends the closed, rationalist system of Western thought.

A church that attempts to compete within that pseudo-scientific system on its own terms — with arguments, "proofs," programs or media devices that replicate the culture's own technological achievements — will not help people connect with those nodes of transcendence for which they hunger. Only a church that offers itself as the visible body of the risen Lord Jesus will be able to "say" anything to them. And this "saying" cannot take the form of another wordy discourse or schedule of events. The life of Jesus is communicated through encounter with His Person, and we encounter persons not simply through exchange of verbal ideas but through interaction at the level of emotional response, intuition, story, aesthetics, touch, even perhaps taste and smell! As the body of Christ, the church needs to communicate the transcendent Presence not through its verbiage alone but through its "body language."

### **Some Practical Suggestions**

At this point one expects some practical suggestions. Here are just a few.

- ! Change the emphasis in worship from “listening” to “doing.” Provide more moments when worshipers take part through their own words or actions, rather than passively viewing a “talking head” or musical performance.
- ! Add movement in worship. A static service sends a message: nothing is “happening.” And when nothing happens, that is synonymous with death.
- ! Replace the flatness of worship with elements that penetrate beyond the four-dimensional world: color, symbolism, visual and movement arts. When worship is opaque we see nothing through it; when worship includes symbolism we see through it to the transcendent. (A symbol is something that points beyond itself to a greater reality. Words are symbols, but many other types exist.)
- ! Emphasize the Lord’s Table (Holy Communion) not as something that helps us “remember” what Jesus did on the cross, but as an event that brings His presence into our midst now through the reenactment of our covenant with Him. It is a symbol involving movement, touch, and taste as well as words.
- ! Place a new stress on the “one another” aspects of corporate life. Find ways through which all members of the body, not only “leaders,” can respond to the hurts and needs of others. “Bearing one another’s burdens” is part of the “law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). Overcome the endemic individualism of Western culture, which has become privacy-crazed, with teaching and practice that demonstrate how being Christian means being “in Christ,” sharing with others in His embodied resurrection.
- ! Reduce church structure to the legal necessities. Attending meetings is not necessarily ministry, but it can deceive attendees into believing they have fulfilled their responsibility to the other members. The early church did not vote about decisions, but operated by the principle “it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28). Let direction emerge from consensus through prayer and study of the Word.

But no gimmicks, no “rearrangement of the deck chairs” will manifest the truth that “Christianity is Jesus.” The resurrection of Christ, who is continually creating life in us, is not something we can summon into our midst through techniques or Wizard of Oz devices. We believe the pathway to realizing the nodes of transcendence lies in the expectations we, as participants in the life of the church, bring to our participation. Is our involvement that of a spectator, like a judge at a beauty contest? Are we here to evaluate the performance of the preacher, the musicians, or even the behavior of other participants, so that we reward “good” performance with our attendance and contributions and punish “bad” performance by withholding them? Such a stance separates us from the body; it is hardly the *koinonia* or participation in the covenanted, common life of which the New Testament speaks.

When we take part in the life of the church we involve ourselves as a member of the body of which Jesus Christ is the Head. The preaching, the teaching, the music, the works of mercy and outreach to the surrounding community and world are *ours*, because they are Christ’s and we are in *Christ*. I am here not to observe and evaluate, but to meet the Lord and commune with Him, and to share in His “faithful witness” (Revelation 1:5), because *Christianity is Jesus*.

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