

From Conquest to Freedom Continued

Part 7 “Relationship”

followed by

“From Conquest to Freedom” “Conclusion”

Theologies of conquest are those theologies that serve to set one people group over and against another, claiming for their own group legitimacy, mandate or destiny to violate the sovereignty, autonomy or self-determination of others.

Theologies of conquest have been and continue to be used time and again to encourage and excuse theft of lands, military and political subjugation and/or wholesale slaughter of human beings, as well as subtler forms of cultural, spiritual, social and economic oppression. It is the nature of theologies of conquest to claim exclusive ownership of universal truth and/or special status as *the* chosen people. Others are alienated and dehumanized as pagan, heathen, unsaved or heretical. Theologies of conquest serve to develop and maintain hierarchical systems of government and church structure, as well as racial and socio-economic caste systems.

Theologies of freedom are those theologies that encourage harmony – the same harmony (unity in diversity) that is the very nature of Creator as mirrored in creation. Theologies of freedom encourage harmony between human beings and other human beings, on both individual and group levels, as well as harmony between human beings and the rest of creation, through loving the other as oneself – giving self in quest of freedom *for all* from bondage and oppression of every sort.

Theologies of freedom encourage recognition of giftedness and chosenness as well as neediness of *all* peoples (one’s own as well as others). They encourage the understanding that there is no place where Creator is not already made known through Creator-Offspring, no place where Creator-Spirit does not already move. In regard to the sharing of good news, theologies of freedom encourage an attitude of watching and listening first for the good news already there. They encourage an expectation of seeing Creator-Offspring’s presence already evident in every aspect of creation, including each and every human people and culture.

Far from encouraging attempts to recreate others after one’s own image, theologies of freedom encourage a humble attitude of seeking, respectfully and with permission, to help with what Creator is already doing in and through others while accepting reciprocal help *from* others. Theologies of freedom yield an understanding that reconciliation and proper relationship with Creator and

reconciliation and proper relationship between individuals and groups on earth are interrelated and inseparable, with greatness measured not by ability to control others but by the active giving of self that the people may live.



Robert and Janet Francis
Photo by David Hughes

This is the fourth in a series of talks on what I call the Four R's: the four essential and interdependent values of respect, reciprocity, reconciliation and relationship. These values are essential to living balanced lives, lives characterized by harmony and love – lives that value true freedom. This talk was originally shared in the Mid American Indian Fellowships in November 2005. Minor revisions have been made.

What follows is an old story, told with some variation by Cherokees and other tribes as well.

The Bear Who Gave Himself

Long ago, there was a man who was angry with everyone. I don't know what he was angry about, but he left town one day. He stormed off across the fields and out into the forest and kept walking right on up into the mountains. It was a cloudy day in the late fall of the year, and the man didn't pay attention to where he was going. Finally, the man started cooling off, not just his temper; I mean the weather was turning cold! An icy wind was blowing. Then it began to snow. The man was a long way from town by now, way up in the mountains. He wasn't exactly sure where he was or how to get back to town. It was snowing harder and getting dark. The man was on the verge of panic. He would surely freeze to death, lost and alone.

Looking around for any sort of shelter, the man saw the low opening of a cave in the side of the mountain. It was warm inside the cave.... unusually warm. It was too dark to see anything, so the man began to crawl around, feeling the walls of the cave to see just how big it was. As he got toward the back of the cave, the wall changed from hard rock to soft, warm fur. "Oh no! There's a bear in this cave!" said the man as he crawfished toward the door.

Suddenly the man heard a deep voice speaking to him. "Don't be afraid," said the bear, "I won't hurt you. You can stay here with me. It's a warm, dry place. There is plenty of room for two. Food and water are nearby. You can stay all winter if you like." So the man stayed there, in the cave, with the bear. All winter he stayed there.

On sunny, warm days the man and the bear roamed the mountainside, looking for food. The man got used to eating the same sort or food the bear ate - berries, acorns,

mice and grubs. On cold, rainy or snowy days, they stayed in the cave. Sometimes, they talked quietly together. More often, they just slept. The man got used to that too.

Then one day, the bear said, "Spring is coming. When spring comes, men will come from the town. They will come up on this mountain. They will find this cave in the side of this mountain. They will find me here in this cave. They will kill me and drag my body out of the cave. They will strip off my skin to make a warm covering for their children. They will cut up my flesh to take back and feed their families."

"No Bear!" the man shouted. "This will never happen! We will leave this place! We will run! We will hide!"

"HUSH!" said the bear. "It *will* happen, just as I have said. I give myself freely, that the people may live. And when the men come, they will want you to go back to the town with them. And you should go! It is time for you to be reconciled with your people. But before you go, there is a favor that I ask of you."

"Anything, Bear," the man said. "You are my friend."

"Before you leave with the men," said the bear, "go to the place where they have butchered my body, and cover the blood with leaves. Then, as you are walking down the mountain, look back over your shoulder. You may see something."

Spring came. Flowers bloomed. The trees began to leaf out. Birds were building nests. Animals were giving birth to their little ones. It happened just as the bear said it would. One day men came to the mountain and found the cave. They killed the bear in the cave and dragged his bleeding body out into the sunlight. As the men were busy skinning and quartering the bear, the boys were busy exploring the cave. All of a sudden, a boy shouted out, "There's another bear in this cave!" then, "No, no, it's a man!"

The man was pulled from the cave into the sunlight. Immediately, everyone recognized that here was their brother. "We thought you were dead!" they cried, and they wept as they hugged him close. "You must come back home with us," they all said.

"Yes," answered the man. "I'll come with you, but first there's something I must do." With that, the man went to the place where the bear had been butchered. Gently, reverently, he covered the blood with leaves. As they walked down the mountain, the man glanced back over his shoulder. To his amazement, he saw his friend the bear rise up from the leaves, shake himself and walk away.

Of the Origin of Bears

There is more than one Cherokee story of the origin of Bears. I'll relate one of them here, as it was told to me. Now, at times, I have told old stories only to have someone comment, "I've heard that story before, but it was different." Or, someone might say, "You didn't tell the whole story." Well, there are different versions of stories, but the teaching is the same. And yes, often a storyteller will only tell part of a story. In reality, many of the old stories we tell are but parts of larger epics that would take days to relate. Anyway, here is one story of the origin of Bears.

Long, long ago, as Creator was making all the different kinds of people, the spirits of the peoples were first made in the heavens before being sent down to become who they

would be in the earth. It is said that, at that time, Creator made eight clans of spirits who were to become the Cherokee people. But as Creator was getting ready to send these spirits down to take form in the earth, one of the eight clans approached Creator with a strange request.

“We want to help the people,” these spirits said. “We ask that you not send us down as Cherokees. Rather, we would have you send us down as Bears. In this way, our skins will provide warm coverings for the children of the Cherokees. Our flesh will feed the Cherokee families. We will give ourselves freely, that the people may live.”

It is said that, honoring this request, Creator sent down only seven clans of Cherokees. The eighth clan was sent down as Bears.

When Did We See *You*?

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

“The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

“They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

“He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

- Matthew 25:31-46

Relatedness and Relationship

Now, there is relatedness and then there is relationship. Relatedness is a principle. I am related to those with whom I share ancestry. This is so whether I know it is so or whether I want it to be so or not. If we have the same father and mother or the same grandfather and grandmother or the same great-grandfather and great-grandmother, we are related. Since all the elements in our bodies are of the earth, we are related to the earth. The earth is our mother. Since all life on earth is dependent on the energy of the sun, we are related to the sun. Cherokees generally refer to the sun as Grandmother. Since Creator made us and enlivens us with his Spirit, we are related to Creator. Creator is our Father and also our Grandfather by virtue of the fact that Creator also made the earth and the sun. Also, everything on earth is related. Every human being, every animal and bird, every plant, the streams, the rocks, the thunderstorms – all have the same mother and all have the same father. We are all brothers and sisters together. Whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not, still it is so. And since the earth and the sun and the Creator are also related to everything in the entire universe, so are we. Relatedness is a principle. We *are all* related.

Relationship, on the other hand, has to do with how we act on our relatedness or with what we do with our relatedness. My definition of relationship is this: Relationship: the state of affairs, actions or dealings between related parties.

The value we want to get at is the value of *right relationships*.

In the Bible, life – eternal life is defined in terms of right relationship. To the question: “How may I gain eternal life?” the answer is given. Be a neighbor to your neighbor (Luke 10:25-37). Be a brother or a sister to your brother or sister. Be a husband to your wife or a wife to your husband. Be a parent to your child. Be a friend, and you will have a friend.

Death, in the Bible, is defined in terms of separation: “...a great chasm has been fixed...” (Luke 16:26).

Eternal life is experienced in the here and now, not simply in some future state of being. Once I spent 20 minutes outlining American Indian spirituality to a group of social workers. When I paused for questions, one person asked, “Do you have any concept of an afterlife?”

Realizing I had said nothing at all about the afterlife in my talk, I said, “Good question. Generally speaking, American Indian spiritualities tend to have well developed understandings of life after death. However, this is not the primary focus. The primary focus is life lived in the here and now, life lived in right relationship with Creator, the helper spirits and all of creation.” Eternity is now. If eternity does not include the now, then it is not eternity.

Not all relationships are good. Some are bad. The story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 1:1-17) is the story of bad relationships. In that story, because of envy, Cain murders his brother Abel. When Creator comes to inquire, “Where is your brother Abel?” Cain gives the reply, “I don’t know; am I my brother’s keeper?” Many times,

from church pulpits, I have heard this question answered affirmatively: “Yes! I am my brother’s keeper.” But what *is* a keeper? There are jail keepers, and there are zoo keepers. Creator does not dignify Cain’s smart-aleck question with a reply. Even so, the answer to Cain’s question is obvious. No! I am not meant to be my brother’s keeper. My brother does not need or want a keeper any more than my brother needs or wants a murderer. What my brother needs and wants is a brother. Cain goes on to build a city east of Eden. In effect, Cain goes from being his brother’s murderer to being his brother’s keeper, the original builder of empire within the Hebrew origin epic, yet Cain remains a wanderer and a vagabond in the earth, non-indigenous, non-connected, living as if he has no relatives.

There are murderous relationships. There are relationships where one brother cuts parts off another brother. There are relationships where one party presumes to control or take charge of or be the keeper of another. These are *not* good relationships.

Aside from keeping in mind the other three R’s of Respect, Reciprocity and Reconciliation, the key to proper relationships is a little thing called love. “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39b). “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34b).

Love Is

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails.

- 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a

Why am I to love my neighbor as myself? Because my neighbor is me, and I am my neighbor. We are related, all parts of the whole, members of the same body. “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it” (1 Corinthians 12:26). If my right hand cuts my left thumb with a knife, my whole body cries out! My neighbor is me, and I am my neighbor. This is true regardless of real or supposed differences in culture, ethnicity, race or religion. Sometimes we don’t remember this. Sometimes we don’t understand this. Envy and the tendency to control others interfere with and prevent right relationships from developing and growing as they should. Behind both of these is fear. Fear is the enemy of love. The two cannot co-exist (1 John 4:18). When we are overcome with fear, we may mistake our neighbor, our brother, our relative, for something else. The following dialogue illustrates this point:

Sally Ann

“Sally Ann?”

“How’s Joshy? Is Joshy gonna be OK?”

“Sally Ann, my name is Mrs. Stoner. I need to ask you about what happened today.”

“Is Joshy gonna be OK?”

“The doctors are doing what they can to help your little brother. Now, I need to ask you a few questions.”

“OK.”

“How old are you, Sally Ann?”

“Seven.”

“How old is Joshy?”

“Joshy’s four. Is Joshy gonna be OK?”

“We hope so. Do you and Joshy get along alright? Do you ever fight?”

“Sometimes, but mostly we get along.”

“Were you and Joshy getting along today?”

“We were playing in my room, then Joshy left, then I got scared and hid under the bed because of the monster.”

“The monster?”

“Yeah, there was a monster in the room. I heard him, and I hid under the bed. I was scared.”

“Can you tell me more about it?”

“I could hear the monster breathing and making monster noises. My bed covers come all the way to the floor, so he couldn’t see me, and I couldn’t see him, but I knew he was there. He was a really mean monster, like a big ugly man who wanted to get at me and do bad things to me, maybe kill me or cut me up. They do things like that to little girls, you know, monsters and big, ugly men do.”

“But you couldn’t see this monster. How did you know what it looked like?”

“Oh, I know what monsters look like. I could hear him making monster noises. He was just right there, right on the other side of the bed covers, just getting ready to come under the bed and get me. I was scared, but I was ready for him.”

“How were you ‘ready for him,’ Sally Ann?”

“I had my pipe.”

“Your pipe?”

“Yeah, I found it out in the shed one day. It’s a long, silver pipe, silver or steel or something. Anyway, it’s hard and long, almost long as me. When I found it, I thought, ‘This’ll be good to have under my bed, in case of monsters. I was ready for that monster; I had my pipe.’”

“What were you going to do with the pipe, Sally Ann?”

“I was gonna hit that monster when he come under the bed. But I was under the bed a long time, just layin’ there on my back, waiting, not making any noise, afraid to breathe even, afraid he’d hear it, holding tight to the end of my pipe. But instead of coming on under the bed, so I could hit him, that monster just kept makin’ those monster noises. I could hear him breathin’. I was so scared! I started shaking all over and got real weak. I thought, ‘What if he comes under here, and I can’t hit him in time? Or, what if I can’t hit him hard enough? What if I’m too weak even to pick up my pipe? What if he takes my pipe away from me and does bad things to me? I was so scared, just shaking all over. And that monster never come under the bed. He just stayed there, like my cat Fluffy does when she’s lookin’ in a mouse hole.’”

“So what did you do, Sally Ann?”

“I had to do something. I thought, ‘I have to get him before he gets me.’ I kept thinking about what I was going to do to that ugly old monster, and finally the shaking stopped. I couldn’t wait no more. I was gonna have to get him before he got me. So, I rolled out from under the bed on the other side from where the monster was. I jumped up, and with my pipe in both hands, I ran around the bed, and that monster come runnin’ around to meet me.”

“What happened then, Sally Ann?”

“I hit that monster with my pipe. I was so mad! I hit him right on top of his head. I was so mad! I hit him again. He fell on the floor, but I hit him again and again and again and again and again....”

“Sally Ann, Sally Ann, why are you crying?”

“The monster was gone, and Joshy was there. Joshy was there on the floor. I could see his head just swellin’ up, and there was blood all over, and his eyes.... his eyes.... He was staring straight ahead, and his eyes were all quivery.... Is Joshy dead? Did the monster get Joshy?”

There are many Sally Anns in the world. Sometimes a whole people, a whole country will, from fear, become a Sally Ann.

But much fear has to do with our being self-absorbed and self-centered. Jesus taught his followers to pray, “*Our* Father in heaven.... Give *us* today *our* daily bread. Forgive *us our* debts as we forgive *our* debtors. And lead *us* not into temptation but deliver *us* from the evil one” (Matthew 6:9b, 11-13). Stories in the gospels reveal that the faith of a mother, the faith of a father, the faith of friends, even the faith of the owner of a slave may work just as effectively as one’s own personal belief and trust (Matthew 8:10, 13; 9:2; 15:28; Mark 9:21-27). Jesus said, “....whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it” (Mark 8:35). For all of this, the general focus of much of Christianity, especially of Evangelical Christianity, remains individual salvation – the saving of the individual life. No place and at no time has this focus on individuality and individual salvation ever been as extreme as in the United States during these past 200 years or so. Yet even here, a light may sometimes shine in the darkness.

The Freeing of Huck Finn

If you’re familiar at all with Mark Twain’s novel *Huckleberry Finn*, you know it’s a story of a poor white boy named Huck and a runaway slave named Jim who flee down the Mississippi River on a raft. After missing the mouth of the Ohio River, where they planned to turn north, and after all sorts of trouble with kings and dukes and other such characters, Jim winds up taken captive and imprisoned on the farm of one Reverend Phelps.

All through their flight down the Mississippi, Huck’s conscience bothers him. Helping a runaway slave to keep his freedom goes against everything he was taught about morality and good Christian living. Huck is quite sure that all who do such things eventually wind up in “everlasting fire.” In Chapter 31, entitled “You Can’t Pray a Lie,” Jim being in captivity, Huck takes paper and pencil and writes a letter to Miss Watson,

telling her of her runaway slave's whereabouts. Finishing the letter, Huck feels all washed free of sin. Then he starts thinking about the trip down the river, the good times and the bad times, the close calls and the tender moments that he and Jim shared. Finally Huck remembers Jim calling him "the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the *only* one he's got now." After that, Huck looks around to see the letter he has just written.

It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:

"All right, then, I'll *go* to hell" – and tore it up.

It was awful thoughts and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming. I shoved the whole thing out of my head, and said I would take up wickedness again, which was in my line, being brung up to it, and the other warn't. And for a starter I would go to work and steal Jim out of slavery again; and if I could think up anything worse, I would do that, too; because as long as I was in, and in for good, I might as well go the whole hog (Twain 213-214).

By my estimation, this little episode from *Huckleberry Finn* marks a high point of white American literature. Huckleberry Finn throws away his life, including any hope of eternal bliss, for the sake of his relationship with Jim. In that moment Huckleberry Finn finds true freedom and true salvation – salvation *from* the warped, controlling, ethnocentric, racist God of the home-town Sunday school teachers and traveling evangelists. In that moment Huckleberry Finn finds unity with the God whose name is Love.

The Measure of Life

The measure of life is in giving rather than in accumulating. This is the traditional, indigenous measure of life, and the teachings of Jesus in the Bible agree with this measure. Where the focus is shifted to individual success, even to individual salvation, there is no real life. Where the focus returns to relationship, there *is* life – abundant life.

Why was Jesus born? Why was Jesus baptized? Why did Jesus pray? Why did Jesus die? None of it was done for his own individual salvation, but rather for the sake of relationship, that the people may live and live abundantly (John 10:10). That's the same reason you are here – that the people may live.

Long ago in a time of dark oppression, a Hebrew prophet wrote, "For to us a child is born" (Isaiah 9:6a). We are so used to the Christian interpretation being read back into this and other prophecies that it's hard to see it any other way. It's hard to imagine anything else the prophet may have had in his mind and heart apart from the *one* baby born in Bethlehem. But here is what this prophecy says to me: "When all seems dark

and desolate, when we look around and see only death and destruction, Creator brings hope to the people. This hope comes in the precious gift of children. A child is born. Children are born, and Creator's own presence shines in the newborn face of each of these little ones. A child is born. Children are born. The life and the fire of the people will pass to them. Through these children, even through the least of these, the people will live and will walk in relationship into a new day, into a day of peace and true freedom.

“For unto to us a child is born.” *You* are that child. You are here that the people may live and live abundantly, in right relationship.

From Conquest to Freedom

Conclusion

Turning from the Ultimate Error

In the year 1615, Galileo of Florence was denounced as a heretic and called before the “Holy Office of the Supreme and Universal Inquisition.” Galileo’s heresy was the promotion of certain teachings considered by the church to be unscriptural and therefore false, namely: That the earth is not the immovable center of the universe. And, that the sun, along with all the other heavenly bodies, does not center on the earth, but rather that the earth centers on the sun (Campbell 573-574).

Mine is a similar “heresy” as “heresy” I am sure it is called by some. In this and other papers besides, I have and do continue to promote the teaching that the Christian Church is not the center of the universe. Furthermore, in this and other papers, I have and do continue to promote the teaching that Creator does not center on the Christian Church or on any other ethnic or spiritual community, but rather that *all* offspring of Creator center on Creator.

Here is a lesson from the ancient cedar fire which we approach, from time to time, for purification and healing. The rocks around that fire are all different one from another, yet as those rocks center on the fire, they touch one another and form a unity with one another and with the fire. Even so, when all the diverse peoples of earth center on Creator, even as the rocks around a fire center on the fire, then there will be harmony. When all peoples of earth center on Creator, not on theology or ideology or missiology or on this or that book, but on Creator, then there will be real peace and true freedom.

But what if one of those stones around the cedar fire decides to exclude all the other stones, because they are different? What if one stone sets out to remake or reform all the other stones after its own image? What if one stone desires to place itself in the center, with the fire around *it*? What if one stone claims the fire for itself and will allow access to the fire only on that one stone’s own terms or conditions? I think that unless that stone comes back to center on the fire rather than on itself or on what it thinks and says about the fire, that stone may wind up rejected, even as all the stones that stone

would reject or exclude are accepted and included. But of course a stone has more sense than to behave in such a way.

There is a story that is told in both Matthew 12:22-37 and Mark 3:20-30. Part of the story is also recounted in Luke 12:8-10.

According to this story, when Jesus did good things, when he cast out bad spirits, when he healed people of blindness and dumbness, certain religious leaders said, “He is possessed by Beelzebub! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons” (Mark 3:22). Because Jesus was not of their in-group, and because Jesus would not accept their theology and teachings, the religious leaders would not entertain the possibility that the Spirit of Creator was working in and through Jesus. This is the exclusive truth claim in action. Speaking to these religious leaders, Jesus said all sorts of sins and blasphemies will be forgiven or forsaken or laid aside. He went on to say, “Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man (Jesus) will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come” (Matthew 12:32).

The exclusive truth claim takes the Spirit of Creator, that wind which blows wherever it pleases (John 3:8), and attempts to force it into a parameter or a box. The exclusive truth claim says only those of its own group have any access to the Spirit, and when good things, healing and wholeness, are seen happening outside its group, the exclusive truth claim attributes these works of the Spirit to evil origin. This is that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit of which Jesus warned. Just as Jesus said the one who calls another person a moral fool puts himself “in danger of hell fire” (Matthew 5:22), one who attributes good to evil cause just because it doesn’t fit with his or her group’s exclusive claim to the truth blasphemes against the Holy Spirit of Creator who is at work throughout the entirety of creation.

Those who exclude others, exclude themselves. Those who invalidate the spiritualities of others, invalidate their own. It may be that every spirituality is invalid or crippled in one regard or another, but the exclusive truth claim is the greatest of all invalidating aspects, for it brings the most harm, standing as it does at the heart of so much violence in the earth, excusing and even encouraging every level of conquest and even genocide. Healing and wholeness come through or happen within every spirituality and even where no spirituality is clearly defined or delineated. Just as in every other spirituality, healing and wholeness come through and happen within the practice of Christianity, but the exclusive truth claim, which is seen nowhere to the extent that it is seen in Christianity – this is the self-blinding to the work of the Spirit of Creator in others. The exclusive truth claim of Christianity is foundational to the persecutions of non-Christians that began during the reign of Emperor Theodosius (379-395) and continued through the Spanish inquisition and right up until and through the NAZI purges and even after. The exclusive truth claim of Christianity fueled the bloody crusades of the Middle Ages. The exclusive truth claim of Christianity provided the sharp point and the driving force of the Christian conquest and colonization of the Americas, Africa, Australia, Asia and the Islands of all the ocean seas. The exclusive truth claim of Christianity continues to justify and even canonize aggressive conquest and colonization and the building of hegemonic systems of control to this very day. This is the destructive

blasphemy, the sin that may *not* be overlooked. If there is one sin that drags people down to hell, this is it. The exclusive truth claim creates hell by pulling people apart, destroying community, destroying harmony, denying freedom. It goes so far as to attempt to deny the Spirit of Creator the freedom to do as it will.

Can this sin be forgiven? If it can, it will most assuredly be only under the condition of true repentance, a complete turning around, and that is the hard part. Repentance from this sin is most difficult, for this is, after all, the self-blinding. This is the plank in the eye to which Jesus refers in Matthew 7:3-5 and Luke 6:41-42. The one who has this plank in his or her eye is forever gouging for sawdust in the eyes of others. Can this plank be removed? I believe it can. I speak from experience. After all, this plank of the exclusive truth claim was once in my own eyes. I have been through the experience of having this blinding plank miraculously extracted from my eyes. I continue to see this plank miraculously extracted from the eyes of others.

The Church that Jesus Foresaw

Of the four Gospels in the Christian Bible, only Matthew puts the word “church” in the mouth of Jesus. None of the other Gospel accounts mention the word at all. But, in the Gospel of Matthew, speaking of the church, Jesus says, “...the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18b K.J.V.). If indeed Jesus foresaw the founding of a church, this is how he foresaw it – as made up of those who would not shrink from crashing the gates of hell – those who would go down to the very pits to free the ones trapped there. If Jesus foresaw the church, this is the church that Jesus foresaw – not the institutional monstrosities that exist to perpetuate themselves and to lend aid and false legitimacy to conquerors and conquest, creating hell on earth, but rather those people who would brave hell on behalf of a friend or even for a stranger, even with no surety of ever coming out again.

If there is a conquest to which the followers of Jesus are called, it is to this invasion of hell, “to the pulling down of strong holds” (2 Corinthians 10:4 K.J.V.), to resisting and challenging the rulers, the authorities, the powers of this dark world order (Ephesians 6:4) that conquer and seek always to hold humankind and all creation in a state of captivity and helpless oppression. The powers, the authorities, the rulers, the strongholds are rooted in spiritual reality but are made visible in physical conquest and in the building and maintaining of empire and the establishment of hegemony. If Jesus foresaw the church, the church that Jesus foresaw is that which is always challenging and standing in opposition to malignant power. In so doing, it proves itself to be on the side of – the helper of – the bride of the power of love. This is the power that risks and sacrifices everything it has. This is the power that brings true freedom into the earth – not control or coercion or manipulation or presumptive authority and not even something that masquerades as democracy – but true freedom, the power of love. It is for this freedom that the followers of Jesus are set free (Galatians 5:1).

But, whenever something calling itself “the church” does not oppose the malignant power but rather courts that power as that power courts it and grants to that power a false sense or pretense of legitimacy in the earth – this cannot be the church as Jesus foresaw the church. This is not the bride of the power of love. This is nothing, more or less, than the whore of the malignant power.

All are free to choose which power to seek, follow and move within. Some choose the malignant power which sets up its own authority, its own rule and calls its own authority and rule "God." Others choose the power of love, and whether the power of love is called God or Creator or something else or nothing at all, it remains the power of love. On the one side are theologies of conquest; on the other side are theologies of freedom. It is possible to wake up and move from one bed to another.

Those who exclude others exclude themselves, but when you free others, you free yourself. Look around you to see and participate in what Creator is doing. Live, let live and be free.

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