The Omnibus

Collected Works of Jeff Hood

Volume 1

INTRODUCTION

Prophet, Priest, and Witness: The Public Theology of Jeff Hood

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There is a kind of theology that is done at a desk, and there is a kind of theology that is done in rooms. Jeff Hood has never been content with the desk.

What you are holding is a collection of eleven works that together constitute the body of a vocation. Not a career — a career implies choices made on the basis of advancement, security, the accumulation of credentials. A vocation is different. A vocation is what remains when you have stripped away everything that could be explained by ambition, and what is left is simply the thing you were made to do, the thing you cannot stop doing, the thing that keeps pulling you back into the rooms where most people would rather not go.

The term that best names Jeff Hood's vocation is public theologian. But that phrase can be misunderstood. It can suggest a theologian who is merely visible, who has found a platform, who has translated academic work into accessible language for a broader audience. That is not what Hood is. Public theology, in his hands, is something more demanding and more dangerous than that. It is theology that takes its questions from the public square — from the execution chamber, the hospital ward, the streets of a post-genocide country, the communities the institutional church has written off — and returns its answers there, accountable to the actual consequences of what it says.

Within that larger vocation of public theology, three ancient offices organize Hood's work: prophet, priest, and witness. These are not metaphors. They are functional descriptions of what he actually does in book after book, across eleven wildly different forms and registers. They are also, in the deepest sense of the Christian tradition, three dimensions of a single calling

— the calling that the tradition names after Christ himself, the one who was all three at once.

The prophet speaks before it is welcome. High Country Theology announces this dimension from its opening pages. Hood's wilderness theology is not pastoral in the sentimental sense. The mountains do not comfort — they expose. They strip away whatever is not essential, and what remains is the knowledge that God is present, that creation itself bears testimony to that presence, and that the person who has genuinely encountered this presence is thereafter obligated to say so, regardless of institutional permission. The high country does not negotiate with respectability.

The Prosperity Gospel & Malpractice is prophetic speech in the most direct sense: it names the harm being done in God's name and refuses to soften the accusation for the sake of collegial comfort. Hood's choice of the word "malpractice" is not rhetorical flourish. It is a precise ethical claim. A physician who

prescribes a treatment that damages the patient is not absolved by good intentions. The same standard applies to theology. The criterion is the damage done to actual bodies, actual savings accounts, actual faith. The prosperity gospel has done damage. Hood names it. That is what prophets do.

The Basilica of the Swinging Dicks carries the prophetic imagination into fiction, which is itself a prophetic move — the decision to let truth arrive by the route that doctrine cannot always travel. The novella finds the sacred in the places institutional religion has decided the sacred cannot be, and it does so with the particular kind of laughter that has always accompanied genuine prophetic speech, from Amos to Flannery O'Connor. The title alone is a declaration of prophetic intention: God is here too, whether the respectable church consents or not.

Toxic Masculinity extends the prophetic critique into the territory of Hood's own formation. He knows Wild

at Heart from the inside. He was shaped by the world that book helped create. The prophetic accountability he brings to Eldredge is the hardest kind — the accounting that begins with the self, that refuses the convenient distance of the outside critic, and that names the damage precisely because it was personal damage, carried in a real body, belonging to real people.

The priestly office is different from the prophetic. The prophet speaks out. The priest turns in — toward the community, toward the suffering, toward the person in the room who needs someone to stand between them and the void. The priest mediates. The priest makes the sacred present in the particular. The priest shows up and stays.

Tales from the Crypt: Verbatim from Clinical Pastoral Education is the most explicitly priestly document in this collection. These are verbatim accounts of actual pastoral encounters in hospitals, behavioral health

units, and rooms where people have arrived at the outer edge of what they can survive alone. Hood writes them down exactly as they happened, without the flattering edits that professional reflection usually introduces. The priest is accountable to the actual — not to the encounter as it should have gone, not to the textbook response, but to what was actually said and felt and failed and somehow, sometimes, found. This is priestly ministry without the vestments or the safety of institutional distance.

The Gospel of Mary: A Modern Commentary performs the priestly function at the level of the tradition itself. Hood enters the ancient text not as an academic but as a minister — someone who needs this text to be true, who needs Mary's authority to be real, who has sat with enough silenced people to know exactly what it costs when a community's essential voices are suppressed for the convenience of those in power. The commentary mediates between a buried gospel and a present need. That is priestly work.

6 Days in Guatemala locates the priestly vocation in geography. Hood goes to a place where the church failed catastrophically — where evangelical Christianity made its peace with a government that was systematically exterminating the Mayan people — and he goes as a minister, as someone whose presence is itself a form of accountability. The journal is a record of what it means to be a priest in a place where the priesthood has already made its worst bargain. He walks the same streets and asks what faithfulness looks like now.

The witness occupies a different position from both prophet and priest. The prophet speaks to the community from outside its comfortable consensus. The priest ministers within the community to its most vulnerable members. The witness simply testifies to what was actually there — not what should have been there, not what the community's preferred narrative would have placed there, but what was actually

present in the room when the room was at its most unmanageable.

Out of My Head: Freed Thoughts is the purest act of witness in the collection. It is a ten-minute late-night recording, unparagraphed, unedited, the mind running without the management of craft or professional frame. What emerges is a theology that could not have been produced by deliberate composition — a testimony to the actual interior of a life given over to this vocation, with all its fear and its hunger and its exhausted hope and its insistence on returning to the table again. Read it as the underground river that all the other books draw from. It is Hood as witness to himself, which is the hardest witnessing of all.

The Is of Is constructs a theology of witness. Hood's argument for tangibility — the insistence that any theology worth the name must remain in contact with the actual rather than ascending into comfortable abstraction — is itself a theology of what the witness

does. The witness does not interpret before seeing. The witness does not tidy the room before describing it. The witness stays in the room, holds what the room contains, and reports. Is of Is is the philosophical foundation for everything else in this collection.

Science Fiction Theology performs witness in the imaginative register, using speculative fiction to testify to the shape of what coercion does to faith, what compulsion does to salvation, what invisible chains look like when you finally try to name them. The genre allows Hood to witness to the structural — to testify about systems that are too large to see clearly in their immediate form but become visible when you move them to another world.

The Complicated Legacy of Cesar Chavez brings the witness function to historical and ethical inquiry. The paper is a refusal to accept hagiography as a substitute for honest reckoning. Chavez deserves the full engagement of a witness — someone who will look at

the whole record, including the parts that complicate the icon, and testify to what is actually there. The witness's accountability to the actual is ultimately what makes this an act of respect rather than diminishment.

Prophet, priest, witness — these are not roles Hood cycles between. They are simultaneous. The prophetic speech is always grounded in priestly presence. The priestly ministry is always accountable to the witness's obligation to the actual. The witness testifies to what the prophet named and the priest stayed to hold.

Together, they make a public theologian. Not a theologian who happens to be public, but one whose theology is constituted by the public — by the rooms and the streets and the death chambers and the post-genocide countries and the hospital wards at three in the morning, where the actual is so undeniable that only dishonest theology can avoid it.

These eleven books are the record of that constitution. Read them as one continuous act of public theology. Read them as the work of a prophet who speaks, a priest who stays, and a witness who will not look away.

That is the whole of it.

That is Jeff Hood.

— The Editors

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BOOK 1

The Prosperity Gospel & Malpractice

Jeff Hood

2013

The year is 2013. Jeff Hood is in the early years of a ministry that has already begun to take him into rooms where most ordained clergy do not go. He has been in hospitals. He has been in prisons. He has sat with people who were told by their pastors that their suffering was a spiritual failure, that their poverty was a sign of insufficient faith, that God's blessing could be unlocked if they would only give more generously to the church that was already taking what little they had.

He is angry. This book is the record of that anger, shaped by discipline into argument.

The Prosperity Gospel & Malpractice is the first major act of prophetic naming in this collection, and it establishes a standard that runs through everything Hood will write afterward: the criterion for theological adequacy is not doctrinal coherence but actual

consequence. What does this teaching do to the people who receive it? What does it cost them? What does it take from them that cannot be returned?

Hood's answer is unsparing. The prosperity gospel — the teaching that financial blessing is the reward of sufficient faith, that suffering indicates spiritual deficiency, that God operates as a kind of cosmic vending machine responsive to the right combination of belief and donation — is not merely wrong. It is harmful in the specific, documentable, clinical sense that the word "malpractice" implies. It is a treatment that damages the patient. It is a prescription written by someone who either does not know or does not care what the medicine does to the body that receives it.

The argument proceeds with the rigor of someone who knows the tradition he is critiquing from the inside. Hood is not an outsider lobbing criticism from a safe distance. He grew up in American evangelical Christianity. He knows what prosperity theology

sounds like from the pew. He knows the seductive logic of it — the way it promises agency to people who have been denied agency, the way it offers the comfort of explanation to people whose suffering otherwise makes no sense. He understands the appeal, and he dismantles it anyway, because understanding why something is appealing does not exempt it from accountability for the harm it does.

What makes this book more than polemic is Hood's insistence on grounding the argument in actual scripture. He is not anti-biblical. He is hyper-biblical — committed to what the text actually says against what interested interpreters have made it say. The God of the Exodus does not bless the wealthy. The Christ of the Gospels is consistently, almost obsessively, on the side of the poor. The prosperity gospel requires a selective reading so aggressive it amounts to a different book.

This is the opening salvo of a vocation. The prophet has found his voice. He will not put it down.

THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL

& MALPRACTICE

*A Theological F*ckery*

Jeff Hood

Contents

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Chapter I

Introduction

What happens after certainty? Reality dissipates and something more still seems to be out there.
Metaphysics deals with what's next. The subject begins with the idea that we are unbelievably more capable than we can ever know. We are life beyond life. Metaphysics is about daring to go beyond what we can prove. Always believing that there is something more. Knowing that we can change our own reality by reaching further and faster.
Philosophers have long claimed a monopoly on metaphysical thought. Seeking to answer fundamental questions, the philosopher often missed the fundamental nature of simply being. For philosophy, it seems that something got stuck in answers that failed to understand mysterious nature of sitting with the question. Into such a void, evolved modern metaphysical thought. Ruminating in the questions, the

modern metaphysical thinker journeys through introspection to a place of answers beyond answers… the self beyond the self. There is tremendous life to be found here. The mind becomes a vehicle…a means of transport for the soul. In embracing what could be, one is able to go beyond what is.

The earliest metaphysician believed in the divine within. The supernatural becomes possible through a right belief and practice of the natural. Modernity has not changed the possibilities. Perhaps, it has increased our skepticism. But, skepticism has never hindered the work of God. Divinity within creates an explosion of possibilities without. In the midst of it all, the age-old questions remain. Who am I? What am I? Where have I been? Where am I going? Though there is beauty in pondering the countless answers to these questions, the brilliance of possibilities can create space where abuse becomes possible, if not likely.

Not everything or everyone that claims to be spiritual is. Evil remains. Metaphysics is not immune to abusive teachings or teachers. In fact, claims of individual

divinity create room for everybody to think that they can do whatever they want and call it divine. Nowhere is this more apparent than in metaphysical notions of financial prosperity.

The purpose of this engagement with history, scripture and social justice is to describe common metaphysical prosperity thinking, illustrate how such teaching runs contrary to the teachings of Jesus and provide evidence of the violent consequences such prosperity thinking can have—like contempt for the poor, general lack of empathy, false measurements of success, ravenous selfishness, blessed greed, warped understandings of God and a whole host of other violent manifestations of the self in society.

Chapter II

Prosperity Teaching / Theological F*ckery

Phineas Quimby

Life grew hotter and hotter. In the midst of all the banging and clanging, Phineas Quimby could barely think. Often, Quimby retreated from his father's blacksmith shop and sought refuge in his own mind. In the midst of such escape, Quimby realized that he was growing sick. The doctor called it tuberculosis and prescribed him medicine that nearly killed him. "Enough is enough!" Quimby was done. He knew that he knew more than the physician. Once again, Quimby retreated into his mind. A cure met him somewhere beyond what others thought possible. From there, Quimby set out to teach others how to do the same thing. The mind was his salvation and could be for others as well. This was the beginning of modern metaphysical thought. This was the beginning of mind over matter as gospel.

“…all of our unhappiness arises from our belief…”

— Phineas Quimby

Quimby, Phineas. “Religion and Science.” Phineas Parkhurst Quimby Resource Center.

Referred to by many as the founder of modern Metaphysics, Phineas Quimby’s teachings were centered on the idea that there is no greater medicine than the divine within. The mind is at the center of such teaching. Healing is possible through right thinking. If you are unhappy with where you are, think yourself to a better place. If you are sick, think yourself well. Quimby believed in the power of the mind…not necessarily in and of itself…but because he believed that to be where God most fully proved manifest. As he set out to take his teachings to the world, he encountered all sorts of questions…some he’d thought of and some he hadn’t. Prosperity became a tricky area.

“…money is not wisdom…”

— Phineas Quimby

Quimby, Phineas. "Death III." Phineas Parkhurst Quimby.

You do not have to declare what something is not until someone has said what something is. Phineas Quimby began his metaphysical work with a focus on mental and physical health. Then, people started asking about other things…namely, money. Regardless, Quimby had to answer the inevitable questions of history. Can riches make a life? Does money buy happiness? Is money the root of all evil? Ultimately, Quimby arrived at the conclusion that money is not wisdom…but wisdom makes money. Prosperity is a result of wisdom. In 1863…as the economic despair brought on by the Civil War raged…Quimby said as much to his patients. These words are the foundational metaphysical thoughts concerning money.

What I Impart to My Patients, 1863

"The question is often asked me 'Do you impart anything to your patients when you talk?' I answer, 'I do.' And I will try and make you understand how… Suppose you

are purchasing goods, and in your hurry, you lose your wallet containing all your money. You do not miss it, until you go to pay your bills, and then you find that you have lost your cash. Now the shock excites your system (or mind), just according to the amount you are disturbed… At last, you let your trouble be known to some person, and you begin to look for the money. You cannot find it, and borrow the money to pay the person assisting you. This adds to the trouble, and at last you take to your bed and send for a physician… I know nothing of his trouble, but I have found a pocketbook containing $10,000 and am going to advertise it. At the sight of the pocketbook, he starts and says, 'That is mine.' The shock changes the mind, and the cure is made. Now, who imparted the cure? The $10,000 I gave him?"

Quimby, Phineas. "Religion and Science." Phineas Parkhurst Quimby Resource Center.

Phineas Quimby believed that the mind was the source of all disease. The money was not the problem. The mind was. However, Quimby makes it clear that the

recovery of the money has ramifications on the mind. For him, the pursuit or recovery of money with the right mindset is not a negative thing. Disease exists in the mind…the coveting of something…not in the hand or in the pocketbook. Therefore, the mind is the root of all evil…not money. In turn, the father of modern metaphysics creates a space where money can be desired and pursued zealously with the right mindset. The problem with such this juxtaposition is the question of mindset. Should one's mindset be financial prosperity for all or just the self? The insular nature of modern metaphysics contributes to an insular understanding of financial prosperity…and it began with Quimby…and continued.

Mary Baker Eddy

Though Mary Baker Eddy later tried to distance herself from Phineas Quimby, there is no question that something very powerful happened when they met. Here were two people who had the financial resources to spend their days seeking to encapsulate the nature

of believing in mind over matter and how it relates to everyday living. Regularly incomed people could not have spent years like this. Though their predecessors tried to separate them, their work is inseparable. Which is why they had similar beliefs about financial prosperity.

“Health is not a condition of matter, but of Mind.”

— Mary Baker Eddy

Eddy, Mary Baker. Science and Health. Google Books.

What is health? It seems that both Quimby and Eddy would argue that health is about transcendence. Pushing through the limitations of the world for something greater. When the mind is free then the entire person is free. Health is about one’s comfort beyond the limits of what one thinks is possible. Prosperity is to be grasped for with all one’s might. In Eddy’s conversations with Quimby, there is no doubt that financial prosperity came up. Both came to early conclusions that financial health was an integral part of health in general. But… Who determines how much

is enough? The more success that Eddy had in business…the more that enough seemed to get bigger and bigger. When the mind gets to determine what is health, it is easy for the definition of health to expand. As she moved on from Quimby and began to market her ideas, Eddy became wealthy beyond her wildest imagination. Metaphysical ideas of relentlessly blessing the pursuit of financial prosperity begin here.

“Science and Health presents an opportunity to acquire a profession by which you can acquire a fortune.”

"Future of Christian Science." The Presbyterian Banner. June 1908.

Rich folk don’t have to acquire a profession to get rich…they’re already there. By the time that Mary Baker Eddy was advertising her book as a resource to get rich, she was well on her way to riches herself. While many accounts have called her a wildly successful businesswoman, one cannot look past the fact that she got rich promising others health and riches that she was never able to deliver. It is in Eddy

that New Thought thinking moved toward a fully corrupted understanding of prosperity. Mind over matter became money over others. The Christian Science Movement quickly became one of the fastest growing religious movements of its time. Unfortunately, Eddy's focus on the mind seemed to neglect the soul. One can have all the money in the world and still lose their soul. Furthermore, the denial that Eddy demanded of others…she didn't demand of herself. In the future this would not be an uncommon phenomenon amongst other New Thought thinkers.

"[G]rasping, sordid, penurious, famishing for everything she sees—money, power, glory—vain, untruthful, jealous, despotic, arrogant, insolent, pitiless…illiterate, shallow, incapable of reasoning outside of commercial lines, immeasurably selfish."

— Mark Twain

Twain, Mark. The Writings of Mark Twain: Christian Science. 1907, pg. 208.

The fairness of words depends on the fairness of the hearer. Many were hailing Mary Baker Eddy a messiah of sorts. Few had ever heard of the mind being such a regenerative religious component. Historically, when people had talked about the Christian religion the focus was on the soul. While it was helpful to move spiritual conversation in a more holistic direction, Eddy ultimately made sure the direction always circled back to her…and her pocketbook. One should always be skeptical when another gets rich off of religion. Such teacher's ideas of prosperity are for them to keep getting rich while you are supposedly learning how. Misplaced notions of financial prosperity are the single greatest impediment to New Thought teachings for followers of Jesus. By ignoring what true religion is…

"Religion that God accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

James 1:27

New International Reader's Version. International Bible Society, 1996.

Pollution destroys that which is good. There is nothing wrong with encouraging people to spiritually develop their minds…but there is something very wrong with teaching that financial prosperity should follow such development. The orphans and widows get thrown out the window…and ultimately the world does too. Eddy started a trend of pollution that continues to this day… choking the life out of healthy ideas of spiritual prosperity.

Charles & Myrtle Fillmore

"You do not have a problem except the one that is in your own mind, and you put it there!"

— Myrtle Fillmore

Fillmore, Myrtle. AZ Quotes.

In their minds, they knew each other before they ever met. That is where they fell in love. That is where they were healed. That is where they came to know. They

were not soul mates. Such an abstraction was too simple for them. They were something much more eternal…mind mates. Through the teachings of Mary Baker Eddy and others, Charles and Myrtle Fillmore had been brought to this moment. Together, they would expand upon what they'd been taught and take to the world the power of New Thought teachings of sin and redemption…you put the garbage in and you can take the garbage out. You are both the sinner and the healer…all in your own mind. Prosperity could be yours if you can think it.

Slowly, his mind slipped away. Neurological disease had taken its toll. The end seemed near. Rational thoughts were becoming so difficult to come by. In time, his mind was completely gone. Desperate to help, a friend took him to Myrtle Fillmore. Upon their arrival, Fillmore told him that his health problems originated in his mind and that they could be solved through the mind. Unfortunately, his diminished mental capacity inhibited him from thinking about anything. Fillmore had no idea what to do when the

mind was deficient. What happens with New Thought type ideas when their ability to have rational thought is gone?

On the street, a homeless man asked Myrtle Fillmore for money. Instead of assisting the man, Fillmore told him that the problem was in his mind. Immediately, his response made it clear that he was mentally ill and unable to use his mind in a healthy way. What happens to him? Is he simply left to die…because his mind is different?

“It is a sin to be poor.”

— Charles Fillmore

Fillmore, Charles. “Prosperity: Spiritual Secrets to an Abundant Life.” Courier Corporation, pg. 60.

Walking downtown, Charles Fillmore is stopped by a beggar. Instead of helping him, Fillmore simply says, “It is a sin to be poor” and walks off.

A struggling family calls Charles Fillmore for help. Instead of helping, Fillmore simply says, “It is a sin to be poor.”

After a woman was badly beaten by her husband, she begs Charles Fillmore for help. Instead of helping, Fillmore tells her, “It is a sin to be poor.”

The stories are endless. The consequences are too. When the mind is the source of all things good and evil, it is very easy to blame the individual for the challenges that they face. All of a sudden, environmental factors don’t matter…and injustice is something that can be thought away. Such thinking is evil. There is nothing evil about being poor. If anything, there is something evil about being rich. The teachings of Charles and Myrtle Fillmore fall into a traditional fallacy of New Thought thinking…centering everything on the mind of the individual and forgetting that there are all kinds of other minds out there. People are poor because of the evil minds of others, not because their own mind isn’t being used properly. Financial prosperity again seems to be the Achilles Heel of New Thought thinking or lack thereof.

“We cannot say Unity was a leader in social justice… Unity had some catching up to do.”

— Tom Thorpe, Professor of Spiritual Education and Enrichment

Page, Eric. "Archive Letter Sheds Light on Social Change Within Unity." Unity. 2013.

Unity, the denomination and movement that Charles and Myrtle Fillmore founded, was on shaky ground from the very beginning. The problem was that their theology started in their heads and not in their hearts. It is easy to dismiss social injustice as a deformity of the mind…it is harder to consider that your mind might be responsible for the injustices that plague others. A heart for the marginalized and oppressed was not part of the Fillmore's theology. The only thing that they were thinking about was helping people achieve prosperity…particularly financial prosperity. Unity wasn't a leader in social justice because its founders didn't have the theological foresight to let it be. Money is not a theology. Though the Fillmores had countless students, none took their message further or wider than Norman Vincent Peale.

Norman Vincent Peale

Financial stress may affect you year round, but tax season can really throw you for a loop. Sure, you may get a decent return, but will you be able to save it? Everyday costs are taking away from our vacation funds and extra activities. Gas prices and groceries climb at an alarming rate. Spring is also the season for real estate, mortgage foreclosures, and with credit tightening, buying a house or a car could become even more difficult. No need to panic. Just follow these steps:

1. *Believe that for every problem there is a solution.*
2. *Keep calm. Tension blocks the flow of thought power. Your brain cannot operate efficiently under stress.*
3. *Don't try to force an answer. Keep your mind relaxed so that the solution will open up and become clear.*
4. *Assemble all the facts impartially, impersonally, and judicially.*

5. List these facts on paper. The problem becomes objective, not subjective.

6. Pray about your problem, affirming that God will flash illumination into your mind.

7. Believe in and seek God's guidance.

8. Trust in the faculty of insight and intuition.

9. Go to church and let your subconscious work on the problem.

10. If you follow these steps faithfully, then the answer that develops in your mind, or comes to pass, is the right answer to your problem.

Peale, Norman Vincent. "Optimistic Thinking Cures Money Woes." Guideposts. April 2008.

In the blossoming age of mass communication, Norman Vincent Peale might have been the greatest of them all. Millions upon millions read his books and heard his words. Despite his reach, there was nothing incredibly complex about his teachings. Repeatedly, Peale just reminds his reader to remain positive. In

classic New Thought fashion, anything and everything can be accomplished through the mind. Peale writes with such clarity, that it is easy to assume that his teachings are faultless. In the passage, nothing separates the reader from financial prosperity other than positive thinking. External factors are ignored as Peale champions the brain as the vehicle of success. In the midst of all of this positivity, much of the poor, disabled, marginalized and oppressed are left on the outside looking in…unable to think…working too much to survive…enslaved by socioeconomic oppressions. For many, Peale was just another capitalist preacher getting rich off the backs of the poor. Simplicity or success does not equal righteousness. Financial prosperity can often be evil. I wish that Peale could have said it that plain. Positive thinking is not necessarily righteous thinking.

Norman Vincent Peale created room for an entirely different world of thinkers. New thought or positivity thinking ushered in a new wave of prominent prosperity preachers. One of the primary reasons for

such a development is that they made prosperity thinking palatable to a much wider audience…in turn, there were many more people ready to be proselytized. By the time Rev. Ike took up the mantle of New Thought prosperity thinking, people didn't just want positive or prosperous…they wanted to be rich…filthy rich.

Rev. Ike

"The best thing you can do for the poor is not to be one of them."

— Rev. Ike

Riley, Clayton. "The golden gospel of Reverend Ike." The New York Times, 9 March 1975.

In the spirit of Charles Fillmore's "It is a sin to be poor," Rev. Ike denigrated poor people in order to encourage his followers to pursue wealth. Ike filled arenas with the promises of riches that never came. The only person that seemed to accumulate riches in the midst of it all was Ike. Down through the decades, New Thought prosperity thinking had created an

almost singular focus on financial prosperity. For most people, prosperity means money. Nobody should be surprised that this is where prosperity thinking ended up.

“Money is God in action.”

— Rev. Ike

Armstrong, John H. “Rev. Ike & The Prosperity Gospel.” John Armstrong. 28 August 2009.

By locating God in the mind and not the heart, New Thought thinkers created space for people to create God in the image of what they desired the most. Predictably, money became God. What happens when the money isn’t there? Does one become an atheist? If the mind is the home of God…does one cease existence? For much of theological history…love is considered to be God in action…money seems to be something else in action.

“I love money and money loves me.”

— Rev. Ike

Rev. Ike. AZ Quotes.

Can money sacrifice? Can money offer affection? Can money make love? Can money offer friendship? Can money offer grace? Can money respond to the love of another? Can money offer an interpersonal relationship of any kind? These are important questions that must be asked of any New Thought thinking that grants spiritual authority to money or financial prosperity.

Rev. Ike's Ten Commandments of Money

I. Thou shalt not think that money is evil.

II. Thou shalt not speak evil of money. Thou shalt not say money is hard to get or to hold. Money has ears and will flee from thee.

III. Thou shalt do right about money.

IV. Thou shalt give right about money.

V. Thou shalt not serve money, rather, money shalt serve thee.

VI. Thou shalt be aware that money loves thee, money loves to fill thy hands and pockets.

VII. Thou shalt not fear money, that it will corrupt thee. ‘Only the corruptible can be corrupted.’ If thy religion cannot stand money, then thy religion is bad—not money.

VIII. Thou shalt not deny money. If thou deny money, money will deny thee. Never say, ‘I don’t have any money,’ even if you don’t.

IX. Thou shalt see to it that thy money makes money. Money shall work for thee.

X. Thou shalt not seek ‘something for nothing.’ However, thou shalt make the most of the money.

Rev. Ike. “Rev. Ike’s Ten Commandments of Money.” Science of Living Online.

Rev. Ike’s Ten Commandments of Money are directly derived from New Thought thinking on financial prosperity. Every line seems to up the stakes of just how important money is. In fact, it would seem that for Ike, money is God. This should come as no shock. Ike is taking New Thought teachings to their logical conclusion. If you exchange the word money with the word I…it becomes very clear that these

commandments are the same as the New Thought focus on the self. Ideas of financial prosperity come from the I.

The Ten Commandments of I

I. Thou shalt not think that I is evil.

II. Thou shalt not speak evil of I. Thou shalt not say I is hard to get or to hold. I has ears and will flee from thee.

III. Thou shalt do right about I.

IV. Thou shalt give right about I.

V. Thou shalt not serve I, rather, I shalt serve thee.

VI. Thou shalt be aware that I loves thee, I loves to fill thy hands and pockets.

VII. Thou shalt not fear I, that it will corrupt thee. 'Only the corruptible can be corrupted.' If thy religion cannot stand I, then thy religion is bad—not I.

VIII. Thou shalt not deny I. If thou deny I, I will deny thee. Never say, 'I don't have any I,' even if you don't.

IX. Thou shalt see to it that thy I makes I. I shall work for thee.

X. Thou shalt not seek ‘something for nothing.’ However, thou shalt make the most of the I.

In the following decades, dozens of teachers made financial prosperity the chief end of spirituality. Beginning with Quimby, teacher after teacher illustrates what an unchecked focus on financial prosperity can turn into. Money clouds the mind and becomes everything. There is nothing new about such thought…in fact it is as old as memory. Everyone is concerned about “The I.”

“I started out by believing God for a newer car than the one I was driving. I started out believing God for a nicer apartment than I had. Then I moved up.”

— Jim Bakker

FitzGerald, Frances. The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America. Simon & Schuster: New York, 2017.

“…you can’t manage that today, this dope-filled world, and get in a long tube with a bunch of demons, and it’s deadly… this new plane is a sanctuary.”

— Kenneth Copeland

Mehta, Hemant. "Listen to Two Christian Pastors Defending Their Multimillion-Dollar Private Jets." Friendly Atheist. 31 December 2015.

"I've heard people say that it's not about money, it's about peace and it's about love… no, IT'S ABOUT MONEY!"

— Creflo Dollar

Dollar, Creflo. "It's About Money." YouTube.

"When you sow a First Fruits Offering of $75 or more, I will rush to you the book, the devotional and also a Paula White 2018 wall calendar! Track throughout the entire year prioritizing God with me!"

— Paula White

Macintyre, James. "Trump adviser Paula White says send money to her for blessings—or face divine consequences." Christian Today. 10 January 2018.

Over the last few decades, televangelism has exploded. No matter what time of day, you can find someone screaming about financial prosperity in the media.

Such thinking has become a poison that continues to choke the life out of the faithful. Money is not God. God is God. So when New Thought teachers continue to discuss financial prosperity…it is very easy to see them as modern Phineas Quimbys…leading generations astray.

Chapter III

Scriptures

“He sat down opposite the treasury and observed how the crowd put money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow also came and put in two small coins worth a few cents. Calling his disciples to himself, he said to them, ‘Amen, I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the other contributors to the treasury. For they have all contributed from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has contributed all she had, her whole livelihood.’”

Mark 12:41–44

New American Bible, Revised Edition.

The room filled to capacity. Music blasted off the walls. The New Thought pastor ran up to the pulpit like a king. The hour had arrived. Now, was the time to raise up the offering. The plates were forcefully passed

around. I couldn't help but notice the rough looking woman across the aisle. Her clothes didn't fit. Her hair was greasy. She rocked back and forth. Her face gave expression to her sadness. When it came time for her to give her offering, she dropped her most valuable possession into the plate…an old wristwatch. Expecting much more, the usher asked if that was it. When she nodded her head, he laughed at her and moved on. After the offering was collected, the pastor led the congregation in the time of blessing. "Financial prosperity is a sign of God's full presence in your life!" Calling up the top givers in the church, the pastor gave them an anointing. Courageously, the woman decided to ask for the anointing as well. When she arrived down front, the pastor rebuked her and declared, "Without financial prosperity, one does not know God." Devastated, the woman left completely broken. Once again, money had perverted the beauty of New Thought teachings.

I'd read all of her books. Metaphysics had no greater champion as far as I was concerned. After being told

that everybody was welcome to her conference, we decided to give one of our tickets to a friend of ours that was struggling financially. The entire conference was very positive until the very end. We were told that financial prosperity was the key to experiencing our God-mind. Instead of telling us how to achieve financial prosperity, we were pointed to a table filled with her financial prosperity guide and encouraged to buy one if we wanted to move forward. We didn't have enough money to buy everybody one. When our friend asked for a free copy due to her financial situation, the speaker declared, "You obviously aren't prosperous enough yet to even begin the journey."

"If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me…" When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was very wealthy. Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven."

Matthew 19:21–22

Berean Study Bible. 2019.

In the distance, I saw one of the great preachers of our age. Every thread was tailored to perfection. Jewels adorned every finger. Fur dropped from his shoulders. Money seemed to aimlessly fall from his pockets. A vast entourage ministered to his every step. The entire situation made me fearful. Regardless, I stepped forward and said, “Do you want to know the way of God?” Laughing, the preacher responded, “What is the way of life?” Remembering the scripture, I replied, “Jesus has asked us to sell everything that we have and follow him.” Recognizing the truth in such words… The preacher fled quickly…because he was very rich.
“Financial prosperity is mine!” “Financial prosperity is mine!” “Financial prosperity is mine!” The enlightened leader had us saying it over and over again.
Eventually, I felt myself going into somewhat of a trance. Somewhere between confusion and hope. I began to hear a voice, “Remember that camel?” I realized that the more I yearned for wealth the further

I was traveling away from God. Prosperity had always been about loving God and my neighbor…that's where enlightenment resided for me. When I left, I was supposed to be residing in the God within me…I had no doubt that I was.

And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the money changers, and the seats of them that sold doves, and said unto them, It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves.

Matthew 21:12–13

Bible, King James Version. 1611.

What does a pastor need with a private jet? I attended the service to be able to ask that very question. Everything was about him. He was Jesus. He was God. He was anything and everything anyone could want him to be…as long as there was cash involved. The offering was like a shakedown. The ushers kept on asking if we had anything else to give. The longer the

whole charade continued the angrier I got. By the end of the service, I just wanted to get out of there. Then, the pastor announced that he had to travel on his new jet for the Lord's work. As he traveled to the runway across the property, zeal for God overtook me. I outran the security and everyone else. When I got to the plane, I started to destroy it as best I could. By the time I was done, it was unflyable. As I was being dragged off, I declared, "This is the day of God's salvation!"

We were taken to a remote place. We all came seeking the same thing…financial prosperity. Whatever you want to call it, we wanted to be more successful in the acquisition of money. The retreat wasn't cheap, but we all knew it would be worth it. After days of study, we reached the apex of our time…the sweat lodge…where we were to visualize our prosperous future. After continuous pontifications from our teacher, things got out of hand. Instead of financial enlightenment, people started collapsing. Eventually, someone started shredding the thing up and pulling people out. The financial teaching came at a great cost…some people

tried to hang on so long that it killed them. I guess you could say that they wanted to die in the pursuit of prosperity.

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. 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… ‘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’… ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me’… Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

Matthew 25:31–46

Bible, New International Version.

“For I was hungry and you gave me money, I was thirsty and you gave me money, I was a stranger and you gave

me money, I needed clothes and you gave me money, I was sick and you gave me money, I was in prison and you gave me money."

"For I was hungry and you talked about financial prosperity, I was thirsty and you talked about financial prosperity, I was a stranger and you talked about financial prosperity, I needed clothes and you talked about financial prosperity, I was sick and you talked about financial prosperity, I was in prison and you talked about financial prosperity."

But it turned out to be nothing…

"For I was hungry and you gave me nothing, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing, I was a stranger and you gave me nothing, I needed clothes and you gave me nothing, I was sick and in prison and you gave me nothing.'"

Those who spend their time preaching financial prosperity as salvation or enlightenment will eventually get from God what they give the people of God…nothing.

Chapter IV

Violent Consequences

Love Your Neighbor

Greed

“Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”

Luke 12:15

Bible, New International Version.

Not too long ago, I heard a New Thought teacher proclaim, “GET WEALTHY! But of course don’t be greedy about it…” Such a declaration is absolutely absurd. Such a statement is akin to telling an alcoholic they can have a little to drink. These oxymoronic statements prey on the worldly urges of people and turn them into the epitome of greed. Selfishness becomes a way of life. How can anyone love their neighbor when all they care about is getting “mine?”

They can't. Such a deficit of love always leads to violence.

Have you ever wanted something so bad that you would kill for it? The pursuit of money can very quickly take someone down this path. In the scheme of financial prosperity, status is all about what you can get. In the late 1980s, there was no greater get than Michael Jordan namesake sneakers. Retailers couldn't keep the shoes on their shelves. When resources get scarce, greed takes over. Violence is never too far behind. In numerous cities, people killed each other to get their hands on a pair of Air Jordans. There was so much violence over these shoes that schools and businesses started banning them. This is not an isolated occurrence. Every year, we see people subjected to deadly violence around the Christmas shopping season. Fights. Shots. Blood. Death. You can't tell people to ravenously seek financial prosperity and not expect them to do everything in their power to get it. Greed has a way of changing us. These are some of the personal and micro consequences of telling people

to get theirs…but what happens when the stakes get much higher?

“Capitalism is the ideal system to create good out of the most human of instincts…greed.” While I don’t remember where I heard such words, I do know that they’ve never left me. Religions or practices or spiritualities or thoughts that encourage the pursuit of financial prosperity do so at a great cost. People are encouraged to buy into the notion that greed is good. Unfortunately, greed always comes at the cost of the other…capitalism is our instructor in such a regard. Clothing companies take advantage of cheap labor overseas. Retailers pay minimum wages to their workers. Corporations stop offering insurance. Prices continue to skyrocket. Jails for profit continue to fill. Destruction of the environment continues to devastate. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer. The history of financial prosperity seems to repeat over and over again. Greed will never be a principle that benefits us all. In addition to these consequences, greed destroys the soul of the greedy…because they spend all of their

time hurting and even destroying others. The pursuit of financial prosperity will always be a violent enterprise both within and without.

On a macro level, greed is the chief motivator of war. You threaten what I have so I'm going to stop you. You took what I have and I'm going to get it back. I want what you have so I'm going to take it. The pursuit of financial prosperity leads to countless injuries and deaths. The pursuit of financial prosperity neglects the pursuit of subsistence for all. It seems to me that subsistence is the best place to start…anything else is greedy…or of the utmost violence.

Depression

When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was very wealthy.

Luke 18:23

Bible, New International Version.

Financial prosperity pushers consistently speak from a place where everybody has the chance to succeed. Unfortunately, I don't know of such a place. Here in the

real world…people don't have enough to eat…people's lives are ravaged by war…people fall victim to sexual violence…people are mistreated…marginalized…oppressed…and consistently enslaved to different types of poverty. This is not a place that people can simply escape from. Financial injustice is real and to engage it as if it can simply be overcome with right thinking is an act of violence. Depression is always going to overcome and choke out those who are repeatedly told that they can do something that is for all intents and purposes impossible. When I hear these prosperity teachers talk about getting personally prosperous, I am reminded of Jesus' interaction with the rich young ruler. In the midst of a financial seminar of sorts, Jesus declared that the way to get financially or spiritually prosperous was to sell everything you have and give the proceeds to the poor. Jesus begins his teachings on financial prosperity with the least of these…not on how to become a most of these. Any other teaching is bound to bring about the violence of depression…for life and

mental health can only come from sacrificing for others.

Death

“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life.”

You work hard to get paid. You work hard to get your wages. Unfortunately, sometimes you don’t get the wages that you deserve…those who have achieved financial prosperity are interested in you working to keep them prosperous. Most exist to keep financial prosperity at the top. Such a system is violent at its core. The wages of the financially prosperous are death…but the gift of those who have had not…is the wealth of joy everlasting. Money can’t buy that shit. To make it all very plain…

“No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”

Matthew 6:24

Bible, New International Version.

Financial prosperity is an evil term. God is prosperity… not money. To teach anything else is violent.

Chapter V

Conclusion

Phineas Quimby birthed many children. While there is evidentially a stream of his thought that flows through the Christian spaces, there are also streams that have flown through more secular spaces as well. Financial prosperity has become the main focus of all of these branches. Disturbingly, money often seems to be the only thing that unites the descendants of Quimby.

“Well, you need to hear about money, because you ain’t gonna have no love and joy and peace until you get some money.”

— Creflo A. Dollar

Dollar, Creflo. All Christian Quotes.

“Poverty comes from Hell. Prosperity comes from Heaven. Adam had complete dominion over the earth and all it contains. Sow a big seed; when you confess it, you are activating the supernatural forces of God.”

— Benny Hinn

Hinn, Benny. AtoZ Quotes.

“Anyone who tells you to deny yourself is from Satan.”

— Paula White

White, Paula. “Evangelicals should be deeply troubled by Donald Trump’s attempt to mainstream heresy.” The Washington Post. 2017.

“Within you is the divine capacity to manifest and attract all you desire.”

— Wayne Dyer

Dyer, Wayne. “Manifesting Your Desires.” Dr. Wayne W. Dyer.

“When you focus on being a blessing, God makes sure that you are always blessed in abundance.”

— Joel Osteen

Osteen, Joel. Beliefnet.

“When you are grateful, fear disappears and abundance appears.”

— Tony Robbins

Robbins, Tony. Amazon.

“People who have drawn wealth into their lives used The Secret, whether consciously or unconsciously. They think thoughts of abundance and wealth, and they do not allow any contradictory thoughts to take root in their minds.”

— Rhonda Byrne

Byrne, Rhonda. Awaken the Greatness Within.

Over the last six months, two deceased men seemed to have inhabited many of my thoughts: Dr. Eddie Long and Rev. Charles Moore. In the tradition of the New Thought pioneers, Dr. Long was a prophet of the spiritual powers of prosperity thinking and died with many followers. In the tradition of the martyrs, Rev. Moore set himself on fire in protest of racist conditions in Texas and died with no followers. For Long, the power of spirituality was a pathway to abundance. For Moore, spirituality was a pathway to death. Long concentrated on the self. Moore concentrated on moving beyond the self.

Though I've learned much from both Long and Moore, I can't help but think that the path that Moore walked is closer to the path that Jesus walked. Though Moore's path wasn't one of money, it was one of sacrifice. I simply can't see how one can love their neighbor and chase financial prosperity. To do anything other than sacrifice your life is to sacrifice relationship with God. Personal emphases on financial prosperity give us permission to cling to the one thing that we have to give the world…our self.

There is no more violent of an act.

BOOK 2

The Complicated Legacy of Cesar Chavez

Jeff Hood

2013

On This Book

The second book of 2013 shows a different face of the same vocation. If The Prosperity Gospel & Malpractice is prophetic speech at full volume, The Complicated Legacy of Cesar Chavez is something quieter and in its own way more demanding: the work of the witness who refuses to simplify.

Cesar Chavez is a hero in the tradition Hood inhabits. He is a figure whose life embodies the commitment to labor justice, to the dignity of the farmworker, to the insistence that the poorest and most vulnerable members of a society deserve the same protections as anyone else. Hood honors that legacy. He does not pretend it is not real. But he is constitutionally incapable of the hagiographic mode — the mode that selects only the evidence that flatters, that resolves the complexity into an icon, that treats honest engagement with a hero's failures as a kind of betrayal.

What Hood finds in Chavez's record on immigration is troubling. The man who fought so hard for the rights of documented farmworkers repeatedly took positions that harmed undocumented workers — people whose vulnerability was, if anything, even greater than the workers Chavez championed. He reported undocumented migrants to authorities. He organized opposition to their inclusion. He drew a circle of solidarity and, for years, drew it too small.

The theological frame Hood brings to this history is Exodus 22:21 and Mark 12:31 — the commandment not to oppress the stranger, and the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. These texts do not permit the distinction Chavez drew. They do not recognize the border as a moral limit on the obligation of solidarity. And Hood, reading them plainly, says so.

But he does not stop there, and this is what makes the piece an act of witness rather than prosecution. He

traces Chavez's evolution. He documents the ways in which Chavez, late in his life, began to extend the circle. He makes the argument that moral life is a practice, not a possession — that the standard is not perfection but direction, not arrival but movement. Chavez moved in the right direction, eventually. That matters. And the years of harm before the movement also matter. Both things are true.

This is the discipline of the witness: to hold both things true at once, to resist the temptation to resolve the complexity in either direction, to say what was actually there. It is harder than prophetic speech. It is harder than priestly comfort. It is the willingness to stay in the discomfort of the full picture. Hood stays.

The Complicated Legacy of

Cesar Chavez

A Historical Ethical Theological Project

Jeff Hood

Introduction

Saints and heroes are always more complex than those of us who venerate them allow. There is no question that Cesar Chavez is without equal in terms of legacy in Latino history in the United States, but there is also no question that this was a complicated man with faults, a human being. This paper is intended to complicate the legacy of Cesar Chavez, especially with regard to immigration, and to offer some fundamental theological principles concerning immigration based on interplaying the life of Chavez with Exodus 22:21 and Mark 12:31.

The hagiographic impulse—the drive to elevate our heroes to a status beyond critique—is a deeply human one. It is understandable. When a community has been denied its history, its accomplishments, and its heroes, those figures who do emerge as symbols of resistance

and dignity become precious, almost untouchable. Chavez filled that role for millions of Latino Americans who saw in him a reflection of their own struggles, their own suffering, and their own aspirations. Yet the very act of venerating someone beyond critique ultimately diminishes them. Chavez was not a saint. He was something both lesser and greater: a man who fought extraordinary battles and made real choices with moral consequences—some noble, some troubling. To engage with his full complexity is not to tear him down, but to take him seriously as a moral actor in history.

The theological stakes of this project are also significant. If we are to construct a Christian ethics of immigration—one rooted in scripture and tested against real experience—we cannot build it on a sanitized version of anyone's life. We must build it on the raw material of human struggle, failure, and growth. Chavez provides precisely that: a career-long wrestling match with the question of who belongs, who

deserves protection, and how far the commandment to love one's neighbor truly extends. His trajectory, from calling the INS on undocumented workers to championing amnesty, is itself a theological story about the expansion of moral imagination.

Part 1:

The Mexican Repatriation, Bracero Program, and Operation Wetback

The Mexican Repatriation took place from 1929 to 1939, during the presidencies of Herbert Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt. These events led to the forced deportation of an estimated 2 million people to Mexico, of these an estimated 1.2 million were citizens of the United States. California, Texas, Colorado, Illinois, and Michigan were targeted for their high populations of people of Mexican descent. The Immigration and Naturalization Service said that they targeted Mexicans because they were easy to identify and deport. These events, though numerically much larger than the Japanese internment of World War II, are seldom mentioned or discussed in textbooks by historians or in the construction of policy by the

government. The State of California is the only government that has apologized for their involvement in these crimes.

The comparative silence around the Mexican Repatriation is itself an act of violence—a secondary erasure compounding the original crime. The Japanese internment rightly occupies a central place in American memory and moral reckoning. That the Mexican Repatriation, which affected far larger numbers and involved the expulsion of American citizens based solely on ethnic appearance, remains peripheral in mainstream historical consciousness reveals the hierarchy of whose suffering is deemed worthy of national grief. This selective memory is not neutral. It shapes policy, political will, and the capacity of the Mexican-American community to name and resist ongoing injustice. Chavez grew up in this silence, and it is worth asking how that silence shaped him—whether it taught him that the suffering of Mexican-

origin people was simply not something the state was capable of accounting for honestly.

On the heels of this grave injustice, less than three years after the Mexican Repatriation, Franklin Roosevelt met with Manuel Avila Camacho, the President of Mexico, in August of 1942 to discuss the importation of temporary contract laborers from Mexico to the United States. This program was intended to provide agricultural workers to help fuel World War II. Many of those who came to the United States as temporary laborers were persons who had been deported as U.S. citizens a few years prior. There was perhaps a sense that the Bracero Program atoned for some of the previous sins of the Mexican Repatriation. Unfortunately, it only seemed to compound them, by taking highly skilled U.S. citizens deporting them based on their skin color and appearance and then bringing them back to the United States as low skilled laborers. Over 4.5 million braceros

came to the United States through this program before it was halted in 1964.

What the Bracero Program achieved in practice was the institutionalization of a tiered humanity. It created formal legal categories that distinguished between those who could be citizens and those who could only ever be laborers—useful bodies to be imported during wartime scarcity and discarded when that utility expired. The cruelty of this is magnified by the fact that many braceros had already been Americans, stripped of that status by the Repatriation and then re-imported as something less than what they had been. The state, in effect, laundered its own crimes through the machinery of the guest worker system, converting citizens into commodities. This pattern—the oscillation between expulsion and exploitation—runs throughout American immigration history, and Chavez would later be caught in its moral web.

The Bracero Program complemented and also created the political cover for efforts to deport undocumented immigrants such as Operation Wetback in 1954. The presidential administration of Dwight Eisenhower approved an initiative created by Director of the Immigration and Naturalization Service General Joseph Swing to raid areas populated by Mexican Americans, quickly process those captured, and deport as many Mexican Americans as possible. In 1954 alone, close to 1.1 million Mexican Americans were deported. Throughout the program's existence there were consistent violations of the civil rights of those apprehended, including beatings, starvation, and overall neglect. A particularly heinous incident occurred in July of 1955, when 88 deported Mexican Americans were left in the desert to die in 112-degree heat. The crimes of this operation were well known to the Mexican American community.

Cesar Chavez worked in the fields of Southern California until 1952. Over the next ten years, until

1962, Chavez worked with the Community Service Organization, a Latino civil rights group, eventually rising to be their national director in 1958. After being persuaded to partner with Dolores Huerta, Chavez left the CSO in 1962 to cofound the National Farm Workers Association. One of the first orders of business for the group was to fight the Bracero Program. Both Chavez and Huerta believed that the program consistently undermined migrant workers that were already in the United States, as the program allowed growers to replace migrant workers who attempted to unionize. Temporary workers were a threat to the ability of Chavez to organize. Due in part to the efforts of Chavez and Huerta, Congress ended the Bracero Program in 1964.

As for the Mexican Repatriation, Operation Wetback, and other attempts by the government to deport both documented and undocumented Mexican Americans, Chavez either remained silent about the past or welcomed present efforts. Chavez believed in the

privilege of being legal in the United States and was committed to protecting that privilege. To allow for more temporary and undocumented workers, was to allow the diminished influence of his labor union and organizing efforts. In 1962, Chavez even told members of his newly formed National Farm Workers Association to call the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to report the presence of illegal immigrants in the field and demand the agency deport them. Chavez and his followers welcomed the raids and deportations of the INS.

It is here that the moral fault line in Chavez's early career becomes most legible. His silence on the Repatriation and Operation Wetback cannot be dismissed as mere ignorance. These were living memories in the communities he moved through. The people he organized had cousins, neighbors, and parents who had been affected. His decision to align himself with INS enforcement was therefore a knowing choice—a calculation that documented status

was the relevant moral distinction, that the union's power depended on enforcing the boundary between the documented and the undocumented. This is a defensible position within the logic of labor organizing, but it is not a defensible position within the logic of the gospel. The question Chavez refused to answer in this early period was whether his solidarity had a citizenship requirement.

Cesar Chavez has become the patron saint of Latinos throughout the United States, perhaps this veneration is forced, but nevertheless it is difficult to deny the existence of a Cesar Chavez Boulevard in practically every city with a large Latino population. One of the greatest contemporary debates of consequence for hundreds of millions in our country and outside of it is the immigration debate. The tales of families being broken up and destroyed, people dying to get across the border, the overall global economic system of injustice that the United States continues to participate in and perpetuate, and other tales of oppression are

often overwhelming. We rightfully judge historical figures based on the events they interacted with and the consequences of their actions or inactions on the presence. With regard to the early activism of Cesar Chavez, the result on immigration is clear.

Those who risk their lives to come to our countries as undocumented immigrants are battling for an opportunity and survival. Those that Cesar Chavez met who were in the same category, battling for an opportunity and survival, were reported to the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Cesar Chavez must have been aware of how brutal and unjust the federal government could be with regard to immigration; he had to look no further than how his neighbors, family and friends who were affected by the Mexican Repatriation and Operation Wetback. Yet when the federal government moved in to deport undocumented immigrants, Chavez was a huge supporter. Also, not only was Cesar Chavez a man who opposed undocumented immigration, he was also

someone who encouraged the sometimes questionable work of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. One would think that someone who took such a hard line on those who are in our country undocumented would take a softer stance on those who came to this country legally, not so.

Chavez was so concerned about his National Farm Workers Association losing influence and power that he opposed the Bracero Program. For Chavez, temporary workers would hurt the negotiating power of the workers who were already here. Helping persons from Mexico was too great a price to pay. There was a need to keep the privilege where it was, right here amongst documented Mexican-American United States residents and citizens. Any attempt to create other legalized classes was wrong and detrimental to those Chavez represented. Unfortunately, such thinking only contributed to a world of privileged and unprivileged classes of Latino descent. Throughout the initial stages of his organizing

and activism, Cesar Chavez took a hard stance against immigration.

There is a painful irony embedded in Chavez's position that deserves extended reflection. The very logic by which undocumented workers were deemed a threat to documented workers—that their vulnerability made them useful to employers as strike-breakers—was the same logic that had made braceros useful to employers a decade earlier, and that had made Mexican-American citizens easy targets for deportation during the Repatriation. In each case, the state and capital exploited legal precarity to divide workers and suppress wages. Chavez understood this dynamic perfectly when it came to his own members. He somehow failed to extend that understanding to the undocumented workers who were, in structural terms, simply the next tier of the same exploited class. Rather than directing his organizing energy at the structural exploitation that created vulnerable worker classes, he

directed it at the vulnerable workers themselves. This is the tragedy of the early Chavez.

When we venerate persons, we are right to expect them to have acted like saints. With regard to immigration, the actions of Cesar Chavez are highly questionable. As we begin to create the basics of a theology of interaction with immigrants, we can look to the early life of Chavez and the broader events that surrounded his early life for theological clues of how not to treat other people. As guiding scriptures, I will interact with Exodus 22:21 and Mark 12:31.

Exodus 22:21 reads as follows, "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the Land of Egypt" (New Revised Standard Version/NRSV). Chavez consistently opposed the Bracero Program to allow temporary workers into the United States. Once those workers were here, Chavez saw them as a threat to his power and influence as a labor organizer. Theologically, we have a choice to make at this

junction, we can choose to believe that these temporary workers were hurting Chavez's negotiating power and this is the overall good or that all people are equally worthy of a chance to make a living regardless of where they are from and this is the overall good. Based on Exodus 22:21, I think there is a real argument to be made that the Christian is to love and not oppress irrespective of nationality and to see the alien as the self. There seems to be a failure on the part of Chavez to love and not oppress and to see the alien as self in his opposition to the Bracero Program. The follower of Christ must make a decision if their love will extend beyond the borders of security, class, power, and privilege.

The theological force of Exodus 22:21 lies in its grounding of obligation in shared experience. The Israelites are commanded not to oppress the alien not as an abstract moral principle but because they themselves were aliens in Egypt. They know what it feels like. Memory is thus deployed as the foundation

of empathy, and empathy as the foundation of ethics. This is a remarkably sophisticated moral structure—one that anticipates the insight, developed more fully in the gospel, that the ethical imagination depends on one's ability to locate oneself in the vulnerability of the other. Chavez, who had himself worked in the fields, who had been subject to exploitation, who moved in communities marked by the wounds of the Repatriation, had access to precisely that imaginative resource. That he did not fully use it in this early period is not a disqualifying failure, but it is a moral one.

In the light of Exodus 22:21, it is hard to not wrong or oppress the resident alien when you and your followers are calling the Immigration and Naturalization Service to report the resident alien for deportation. When you have a resident alien deported for trying to work where you work, there is a sense that you have something that you do not want to share. When we fail to share what we have, we create a

boundary for love of the resident alien. There is a fundamental theological question at work: Will our love extend beyond what is ours?

Jesus commands all who hear to "Love your neighbor as your self" in Mark 12:31. You cannot love your neighbor as your self and deny them the opportunity to make a wage capable of sustaining their life. You cannot love your neighbor as your self and have them deported. This seems to simply defy the fundamental logic of how anyone would want to be treated.

From the early life of Cesar Chavez, we discover a few fundamental theological principles. Opposing a temporary worker program or immigration in general because it takes away from what you have, seems to fail the fundamental task of not oppressing the resident alien, remembering that you are not far removed from being an alien, remembering to love you neighbor as your self, and it seems to defy simple charity. Seeking to have your neighbor deported is not

the way to love them as your self. Giving your neighbor food, shelter, and helping them earn a wage that can sustain them seems to be the start of loving your neighbor as your self. We must decide if we are going to be on the side of one oppressed people or all oppressed people. The only way to love your neighbor as your self is to connect your self to all oppressed people.

Part 2:

The Delano Grape Strike, March to Mexican Border, Wet Lines

The Delano Grape Strike began on September 8, 1965 when Filipino labor organizers Phillip Vera Cruz and Larry Itliong led Filipino workers to walk off the farms of area grape producers and jointly demand wages equal to the federal minimum wage. One week later, the National Farm Workers Association led by Cesar Chavez joined the strike and eventually the two groups merged in August of 1966 to found the United Farm Workers of America. The strike lasted a total of five years, eventually succeeding in achieving a collective bargaining agreement and nationwide support for agricultural workers. During the Delano Grape Strike, Chavez gained national prominence. One of his more noteworthy moments occurred when Chavez committed himself to fasting for nonviolence in 1968.

During his campaign for President of the United States, Bobby Kennedy came to Delano to celebrate communion with Chavez to end one of his longer fasts. Chavez responded by committing the United Farm Workers to helping Kennedy win the California Primary, which he did, right before he was assassinated. Phillip Vera Cruz maintained a good relationship with Cesar Chavez, even serving as Vice-President of the United Farm Workers, until 1977, when he split with Chavez over his trip to the Philippines to meet with President Ferdinand Marcos, who was a known human rights violator.

The Delano Grape Strike is where Chavez's genius as an organizer and his capacity for moral leadership were most fully on display, and it is worth dwelling in the complexity of that moment before moving to the darker chapters that followed. The coalition Chavez built was multiracial—Filipino and Mexican workers laboring side by side under a common banner—at a time when such coalitions were both politically

difficult and morally urgent. He understood that the power of capital lay in its ability to pit worker against worker, nationality against nationality, documented against undocumented. In the fields of Delano, he found a way to refuse that logic. The fast for nonviolence was not merely a political tactic, though it was a masterful one. It was a theological act, a claim that the movement's integrity depended on refusing to mirror the violence of those it opposed. Bobby Kennedy's communion with an emaciated Chavez was not simply a photo opportunity; it was a public enactment of solidarity across the barriers of class, ethnicity, and institutional power that ordinarily separated them.

After significant planning, in 1969, Cesar Chavez led a large group of members of the United Farm Workers to the Imperial and Coachella Valleys to protest growers' hiring of undocumented immigrants. Joining him on this march, were the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy, President of the Southern Christian Leadership

Conference and successor to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and U.S. Senator Walter Mondale, the eventual Vice President of the United States during the Carter Administration. The objective of this march was to pressure the employers of undocumented immigrants and also to frighten undocumented immigrants into leaving the country. Chavez felt that proper wages could be secured only when employers were forced to stop hiring undocumented immigrants.

The 1969 march presents one of the sharpest contradictions in Chavez's career, and the presence of Rev. Ralph David Abernathy alongside him makes that contradiction more pointed, not less. Abernathy had stood with King in Birmingham, in Selma, at the Edmund Pettus Bridge. He had helped lead a movement premised on the radical inclusivity of human dignity. That he marched with Chavez in a campaign designed to frighten undocumented immigrants into leaving the country raises uncomfortable questions about how even the most

seasoned civil rights leaders could fail to extend the logic of their own movements. It also raises questions about how Chavez was able to frame his campaign in terms that civil rights leaders found acceptable—language about fair wages, about employer exploitation, about workers' rights—while the practical effect was the intimidation of the most vulnerable people in the fields. There is a rhetorical gap between the stated goal and the lived reality of the march that deserves scrutiny.

San Francisco-based KQED News conducted an interview with Cesar Chavez on September 25, 1972. In the interview, Chavez explains why he believes that employers bringing in illegal labor can always break his legitimate agricultural strikes. Chavez speaks boldly and unrestrained in the interview, stating, "This is the case right now, one of the strikes we have with Butte Gas & Oil Co., where we have basically closed them down. They've been unable to get strikebreakers, or have gotten very few. And then all of a sudden,

yesterday morning, they brought in 220 wetbacks—these are the illegals-from Mexico. Now there's no way to defend against that kind of strike breaking." These comments foreshadow of what was to come.

The language Chavez used in the KQED interview is not incidental. Words carry the architecture of thought, and the casual deployment of a racial slur—in a public interview, with no apparent awareness that it required apology or softening—tells us something important about how Chavez conceptualized the people he was describing. They were not, in that moment, fellow workers whose vulnerability was being exploited by the same capital that exploited his members. They were, in his language, something less. The slur performed a dehumanizing function, collapsing complex human beings into a category defined entirely by their mode of crossing a border. For a man who had built his entire movement on the insistence that farm workers were full human beings worthy of dignity and legal protection, the use of that language is a moral

failure that cannot be explained away by the rough idiom of labor politics.

In 1973, with the blessing of Cesar Chavez, the United Farm Workers set up what they called a “wet line.” Much like the work of present-day Arizona Minutemen, this “wet line” was set up along the Arizona-Mexican border to prevent Mexican immigrants from entering the United States. Under the guidance of Manuel Chavez, Chavez’s cousin, United Farm Workers tried to convince Mexican immigrants to not cross the border. After several failed attempts to sway the immigrants, the United Farm Workers started beating and bloodying immigrants to teach them to not try again. The Village Voice described the events as “a campaign of random terror against anyone hapless enough to fall into its net.” The New York Times also criticized the United Farm Workers for the first time.

The “wet line” represents the most catastrophic moral failure of Chavez’s career, and it demands analysis that

goes beyond moral condemnation to understand how it came to happen. The progression from rhetoric to violence is rarely sudden. It follows a path worn smooth by accumulated dehumanization—language that consistently treated undocumented immigrants as a category rather than as persons, a structural logic that framed their presence as a threat rather than as a shared condition of vulnerability, and an organizational culture in which the protection of documented workers' interests had become sufficiently paramount to justify almost any means. Manuel Chavez did not appear in the desert at the Arizona border with a disposition toward violence that had no prior history. He arrived there as the product of years of movement culture that had defined undocumented immigrants as the enemy of documented workers. The beating of human beings in the desert is the logical endpoint of a dehumanizing ideology, even when that ideology is held by people who have themselves suffered dehumanization. The movement had failed to reckon with the possibility that it had imported the

same logic of expendability that had been used against its own members, simply directing it at a more vulnerable population.

The tough immigration stances of Cesar Chavez were growing increasingly out of step with other Mexican American rights groups. In 1974, the government of Richard Nixon was so certain that Chavez supported all efforts to stem undocumented immigration that when they announced a plan to deport over one million undocumented immigrants they said the plan had the support of Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers. Chicano activists all over the country erupted and Chavez was forced to distance himself and the United Farm Workers from the plan. Later Chavez backtracked and stated in the San Francisco Examiner, “Illegal aliens are doubly exploited, first because they are farm workers, and second because they are powerless to defend their own interests...But if there were no illegals being used to break our strikes, we could win those strikes overnight and then be in a

position to improve the living and working conditions of all farm workers." Chavez went on to promise that the United Farm Workers would support legalization for the undocumented, "our brothers and sisters." Such sympathetic language however only seemed to surface between bouts of harsher language. In 1979, Chavez complained in testimony before Congress, "...when farm workers strike and their strike is successful, the employers go to Mexico and have unlimited, unrestricted use of illegal alien strikebreakers to break a strike. And, for over 30 years, the Immigration and Naturalization Service has looked the other way and assisted in strikebreaking. I do not remember one single instance in 30 years where our nation's immigration service has removed strikebreakers...The employers use professional smugglers to recruit and transport human contraband across the Mexican border for the specific act of strikebreaking..." As the 1970s drew to a close, Chavez was still increasingly conflicted on the issue of undocumented immigration.

The Nixon episode is instructive in ways that extend beyond Chavez's specific situation. It illustrates how a politician's exploitation of a figure's stated positions can force a clarification that genuine moral persuasion had failed to produce. The Nixon administration's calculation that Chavez's known opposition to undocumented immigration could be weaponized for a mass deportation plan backfired because it made visible, in the most politically uncomfortable way possible, the ultimate destination of the logic Chavez had been employing. When Chicano activists erupted, Chavez was compelled to articulate something he had been reluctant to say: that undocumented immigrants were "brothers and sisters," doubly exploited, deserving of protection. The tragedy is that it required political embarrassment to bring that language forward. The 1979 congressional testimony, with its framing of undocumented immigrants as "human contraband," suggests that even the language of "brothers and sisters" had not fully displaced the older dehumanizing vocabulary. Chavez was a man in

genuine moral transition, capable of great generosity and disturbing cruelty, sometimes within the same decade.

There are always moments that define us more than others, for some these moments turn out to be iconic. For Cesar Chavez, the Delano Grape Strike was one such moment. The eyes of the nation and perhaps even the world rested on Delano, California. The veneration that many feel for Cesar Chavez was solidified in these moments. The images of a fast-weakened Chavez marching against the labor practices of grape growers, the Filipino and Mexican Americans marching side by side for justice, and of an emaciated Chavez breaking his fast for nonviolence by taking communion with Bobby Kennedy are all seared in the collective American consciousness. These images are important, primarily because they help people to aspire to their own moments of iconography, where their efforts to help people inspire others. Unfortunately, images only tell part of the story.

The image of Chavez marching with all of the Filipino farm workers does not tell the full story of his split with some of the Filipino leaders in those photographs after he went to visit Filipino President Ferdinand Marcos in 1977. Most importantly for this paper, the images of Chavez throughout the Delano Grape Strike do not tell the full story of his views of immigration. Chavez fought for those who were documented residents, but for those who were undocumented the venerated saint looks different.

There is something important to say here about the power and the limitation of iconic imagery in the formation of moral exemplars. The photographs from Delano are genuine documents of genuine courage. But photographs are also selective—they freeze a moment, strip it of its contradictions, and offer it to posterity as something more coherent and complete than the messy reality from which it was extracted. The danger is not that we honor those photographs. The danger is

that we mistake them for the whole story, and then use that partial story as a shield against the fuller, more difficult account. When contemporary advocates display images of Chavez at immigration rallies, they are implicitly claiming his authority for a position he often did not hold. That is not simply a historical distortion. It is a form of moral borrowing that the borrowers have not fully earned, and that the borrowed figure never fully offered.

Chavez fought for employers to stop hiring undocumented immigrants. In marching to the fields and job sites where the undocumented worked, Chavez was creating a boundary of class and documentation. Chavez fought for documented residents, but who was fighting for the undocumented. The march in 1969, and the fact that Chavez led some of the bigger names in American socio-political life, illustrates a lack of concern for the undocumented and an encouragement for others to have a lack of concern for the undocumented. Those who venerate Chavez today

must ask themselves what they are saying to those undocumented workers that Chavez marched against then and the millions of undocumented workers trying to scrape by now.

In September of 1972, Chavez used the term “wetbacks” in an interview with KQED in San Francisco. This word is offensive to most people of Mexican descent. The word was also offensive then. Delores Huerta, cofounder of the National Farm Workers and later the United Farm Workers, when confronted with Chavez’s statements said, “the term always has been derogative and I was surprised to hear Chavez using it.” Later, when Huerta was confronted with her own use of the word “wetback” in a 1969 Lodi News-Sentinel interview she replied, “I’ve been misquoted.” The use of the offensive word wetback in public interviews to describe undocumented immigrants begs the question: What was being said behind closed doors? The use of such language in public seems to expose underlying

oppressive attitudes that were present in the way that Chavez and the United Farm Workers viewed undocumented immigrants. The care with which we use language often speaks of the care that we have for people. When we venerate someone who used the word “wetback,” are we being caring and compassionate toward those that the word describes?

When the United Farm Workers decided to set up a “wet line” in 1973, the use of consistent derogatory language and actions exploded into violence. Chavez’s cousin Manuel led the charge of beating up undocumented immigrants in order to teach them a lesson about trying to come into the United States undocumented. Chavez remained largely silent throughout the outcry that followed. The standard of nonviolence from the United Farm Workers disappeared in a moment. What caused the explosion of tension? What made these documented residents think that they had the power or authority to beat up on people who were trying to make their lives better?

The words and actions of the leadership of the structure often lead to the first clues to garner such answers. In light of the current immigration debate, should we venerate someone who led an organization that beat up undocumented immigrants in the desert?

Cesar Chavez's most positive comments of the period about undocumented immigrants came as a result of his announced support of a government plane to deport over one million undocumented immigrants in 1974. After a tremendous pushback from Chicano activists, Chavez recanted any support and glowingly called undocumented immigrants "brothers and sisters." In 1979, Chavez testified before congress and complained about the Immigration and Naturalization Service not doing more to stop undocumented immigrants from coming into the country. Why did it take so long for Chavez to speak of undocumented immigrants as "brothers and sisters"? Why did Chavez go before congress and ask for more to be done to stop undocumented immigrants from entering the country?

Is this the person that we want to venerate in the middle of an immigration debate that affects the lives of 16 million Americans living in the shadows?

From a theological perspective, there is much to be learned from the middle part of Chavez's life and activism. When we look to the Delano Grape Strike, what made those events so magical? When we hear about Chavez's march to confront undocumented immigrants, what does this tell us about charity? When we hear the term "wetback" come from Chavez's lips, what does this tell us about the way that he constructed boundaries between he and his neighbor? When we hear of undocumented immigrants getting beat up, what does this tell us about love and distinctions between people? When we hear Chavez asking congress for more deportations, what does this tell us about how Chavez viewed his neighbor? Again as guiding scriptures, I will interplay these questions with Exodus 22:21 and Mark 12:31.

The magic of Cesar Chavez during the Delano Grape Strike is the magic of a man seeking to live out the command of Mark 12:31, “Love your neighbor as your self” (RSV). By bringing people of all races together to fight for a sustainable wage, Chavez loved his neighbors by bringing them together. There is a real need in creating a theology of immigration to bring people together. By fasting for nonviolence, Chavez taught people that avoiding violent conflict in the pursuit of peace with their neighbor is important. A resistance to violence creates a moral high ground with regard to interaction around immigration and helps to ingrain in us that you cannot love your neighbor as your self when you resort to violence. These are magical lessons that help us create theology around immigration, but there are other places were Chavez did not love his neighbor as his self.

Chavez’s 1969 march to confront growers and employers who hired undocumented immigrants was an act aimed at forcing the termination of employment

of the undocumented immigrants present. Exodus 22:21 states, “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the Land of Egypt” (NRSV). It is difficult to not wrong or oppress the resident alien or undocumented immigrant when you are calling for the termination of their employment. Presently, when people call for employers to fire undocumented immigrants, they are directly affecting or challenging the livelihood of resident aliens or undocumented immigrants. In order to not wrong or oppress the resident alien, everyone must be granted a fair chance to make a legitimate living. Is this possible with borders? The borders consistently seemed to trip Chavez up when it comes to loving the neighbor as your self.

“Wetback” is an offensive term that should not have been used or ever presently used. Calling someone a “wetback” is not the way to love someone as your self. If we are to follow the guidance of Mark 12:31, then we will do everything in our power to remove offensive

language from our vocabulary. A theology of immigration that is sensitive to the needs of the immigrant simply cannot use such language. For, in light of Exodus 22:21, we must not wrong or oppress the resident alien amongst us with our words. The care that someone uses when describing or naming undocumented immigrants is directly related to the love and concern that someone will show for an undocumented immigrant. We must stand on the side of love.

You cannot love you neighbor as your self when you are confronting them in the desert. The actions of the Arizona Minutemen to confront and try to intimidate undocumented immigrants look no different than the actions of the United Farm Workers in instituting their "wet lines." In accordance with Exodus 22:21, persons who are traveling through the desert to try to feed their families should not be wronged or oppressed. The United Farm Workers did both. There is nothing loving about stopping someone from having the success that

you have. A theology of immigration cannot be selfish nor can it support actions that seek to intimidate rather than love.

Can you love your neighbor and ask for them to be deported? Can you love your neighbor and seek to protect your wealth? When Cesar Chavez testified before congress, it was as if he was seeking to say, “I am your neighbor, but that undocumented immigrant over there is not.” You cannot love your neighbor and seek their deportation. If you are seeking someone’s deportation, you do not recognize that your destiny is tied to their destiny. Chavez was trying to protect his wealth and the wealth of resident immigrants. In accordance with Mark 12:31, it is difficult to see how you can love your neighbor and selfishly keep them from enjoying your riches. In order to create a theology of immigration, we must realize that this issue is not about protecting our self, for we are living in the land of plenty.

From the middle life of Cesar Chavez, we discover a few fundamental theological principles of immigration. Seeking to bring people together of all races and refusing to resort to violence are two building blocks necessary to create a theology of immigration. You cannot march to the workspaces of undocumented immigrants and demand their termination without wronging and oppressing them. Language is a fundamental part of doing theology and your language will often give away your bias. We must talk about immigration with how we seek to love in mind. Confronting undocumented immigrants in the desert is not the way to say 'I love you and I am here for you.' Opening your heart, doors, and wallet to undocumented immigrants is the more believable way to say 'I love you and I am here for you.' You cannot love someone and seek his or her deportation. Can we love someone and believe in borders at all? Thus is the question of Exodus 22:21 and Mark 12:31: Will we allow borders that we have drawn on a map to keep us from loving someone?

Part 3:

Immigration Reform and Control Act

In 1986, the United Farm Workers, still led by Cesar Chavez, were successful in convincing President Ronald Reagan to include an amnesty provision in the Immigration Reform and Control Act. This inclusion granted amnesty to any immigrant who entered the country undocumented before 1982. The overall point of the bill was to be a measure that toughened border security and legalized most of the people already here. The United Farm Workers cheered when Reagan in a televised debate with Democratic presidential nominee Walter Mondale (same person who marched with Chavez in 1969) said, "I believe in the idea of amnesty for those who have put down roots and lived here, even though sometime back they may have entered illegally." These events were seen as incredibly positive

developments for the Mexican-American community in the United States.

Having marched against undocumented immigration, supported "wet lines," used the term "wetbacks," and testifying before congress on the need for more deportation, Cesar Chavez was finally on the side of the down and out undocumented workers. It was as if the years mellowed him and he finally realized that the way to love your neighbor as your self was to be willing to give them what you have.

The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 represents a profound and complicated moral pivot. That Chavez championed amnesty in 1986 does not erase the wet lines of 1973 or the congressional testimony of 1979. But it does mean something. It means that Chavez's moral imagination was not fixed, that the arc of his life bent, however slowly and painfully, toward a more inclusive understanding of who deserved protection. The fact that Reagan—a

president not known for expansive sympathy toward the poor, the undocumented, or the Latino community—signed this bill at the urging of Chavez and the United Farm Workers is itself a remarkable piece of political history. It suggests that Chavez's moral evolution had practical consequences, that the expansion of his solidarity into the territory of the undocumented produced real, material change in the lives of millions of people who had once been his rhetorical and sometimes physical adversaries.

It is worth noting the biographical symmetry embedded in the 1986 moment. The same Walter Mondale who had marched alongside Chavez in 1969 in the Imperial Valley campaign against undocumented workers was now, as a presidential candidate, debating Ronald Reagan on amnesty. That Reagan beat Mondale to the genuinely inclusive position—and that Chavez celebrated Reagan's words—is a piece of political irony that defies any simple ideological reading. The history of immigration policy

in America has always confounded easy partisan alignments, and Chavez's trajectory through that history is no exception. He ended up in a place that his earlier self would not have recognized, and he arrived there not through sudden conversion but through the accumulation of moral experience, political pressure, and perhaps the simple wisdom that comes with age.

Part 4:

Conclusion

We must realize that to allow people to live in this country undocumented and exploited without offering real liberation is to fail the measure of Exodus 22:21 and actively wrong and oppress them. Chavez secured real help to undocumented immigrants by helping secure amnesty for them. We must follow Mark 12:31 and seek amnesty and liberation for all who are living in the shadows. A theology of immigration always begins with actively seeking amnesty from oppression for the immigrant and an explosion of love. Toward the end of his life, Cesar Chavez finally lived into such inclusive thinking...but for a considerable amount of time before that...he did not.

The concluding theological claim of this paper, then, is not simply that Chavez failed and then succeeded, or that his later goodness cancels his earlier harm. The claim is more demanding than that. It is that moral life is a practice, not a possession—something that must be worked at, revised, extended, and surrendered to again and again in the face of each new person who stands before us asking to be recognized as our neighbor. Chavez's life illustrates both the necessity and the difficulty of that practice. He had more access to the experience of the vulnerable than most political leaders of his era. He had scripture and tradition that pointed unambiguously toward solidarity with the alien. He had the example of his own people's suffering. And yet for decades he used that knowledge and experience to draw lines rather than erase them. The lesson is not that he was a hypocrite, though some of his actions were hypocritical. The lesson is that access to moral resources does not guarantee their use. We must choose, again and again, whether our love will be capacious enough to include the person who

threatens us, the worker who undercuts our wage, the stranger crossing the desert with nothing but the hope that someone on the other side will choose solidarity over self-protection.

Exodus 22:21 places the obligation to care for the alien within the narrative of shared exile. Mark 12:31 places it within the logic of self-love rightly understood—the recognition that our neighbor's flourishing is not separate from our own but continuous with it. Chavez, at his best, embodied both principles. At his worst, he violated them. His legacy, fully understood, is an invitation not to resolution but to ongoing examination: of our own categories, our own borders, our own willingness to extend the circle of neighbors when the cost is real. The question he leaves us with is the question that has always animated the deepest strands of both Jewish and Christian ethics: Who is my neighbor? And the answer, now as then, is the same: the one standing in front of you, regardless of what

documents they carry or what water they have crossed.

BOOK 3

Toxic Masculinity

Jeff Hood

2013

On This Book

The third book of 2013 completes what might be understood as Hood's inaugural trilogy — three books written in a single year that together establish the full range of his prophetic, intellectual, and pastoral concerns. Where the Chavez essay turned the witness's eye outward onto a historical figure, Toxic Masculinity turns it inward. This is the hardest kind of accounting.

John Eldredge's Wild at Heart was not a book Hood read from the outside. It was a book that helped form the world he grew up in — the world of evangelical masculine identity, of men as warriors and adventurers, of women as dependent and ornamental, of a God who is essentially a large and dangerous male. Hood knows this world from the inside of his body. He was shaped by it. He carries the marks of it. When he writes about the damage it does, he is writing about damage he has himself sustained.

What distinguishes Toxic Masculinity from ordinary cultural criticism is this personal implication. Hood is not diagnosing a pathology he has been immune to. He is describing a system he was inside of, and he is doing it with the honesty of someone who knows that the most dangerous lies are the ones you believed when you were young enough to have no defense against them.

The critique is theological before it is anything else. Eldredge's God is not the God of scripture. The God of scripture is not a masculine warrior fantasy. The Christ of the Gospels is not a figure of conventional masculine power — he weeps, he serves, he refuses coercion, he is executed by the very imperial masculinity that Eldredge's framework valorizes. The toxic masculine theology is not merely culturally harmful. It is Christologically incoherent.

But Hood goes further than the theological argument, because the theological argument, however accurate, remains safe. What is unsafe is the personal testimony: this is what it felt like to be formed by this. This is what it cost. This is what had to be unlearned, and the cost of unlearning, and the things that were damaged during the learning that could not be entirely repaired.

The prophetic word is most powerful when it is spoken from inside the community being addressed. Amos was not a foreigner. Jeremiah was not an outsider. Hood is not writing about evangelical masculinity from a position of comfortable detachment. He is writing from inside the wreckage, and the writing is itself a form of liberation — for him and, he trusts, for the reader who recognizes their own formation in his.

TOXIC MASCULINITY

Honest Engagement with
John Eldredge's Wild at Heart

Source text:

Eldredge, John. *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul.* Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001.

THE START

It's a man's world…at least that's what John Eldredge thinks. *Wild at Heart* is a dangerous book. In fact, I think it's fair to call it the spiritual handbook of toxic masculinity…although there really is nothing all that spiritual about it. Eldredge invites his reader into a mythical world of male dominance…complete with blatant misinterpretations of scripture, knights, valor, battles, warriors, sleeping beauties, chivalry, shining armor and all sorts of amalgamations of silly shit…he calls God's will. To top it all off…I came of age in a

space where people actually believed all of this foolishness.

Let's pause on that word: dangerous. It's not hyperbole. Dangerous books don't always look dangerous. Sometimes they come packaged in warm sentiment and earnest appeals to God. Sometimes they smell like pine trees and campfire smoke and something vaguely nostalgic. Eldredge's book is dangerous precisely because it seduces men who are genuinely looking for something—meaning, purpose, identity—and hands them a cartoon in place of theology. That's not salvation. That's a bait and switch.

One of my buddies pulled me aside. From the look on his face, I didn't know what he was going to say. Then his voice got real low. "I'm in love. I'm so in love…and I'm going to tell her too. I'm not just willing to fight for her… I'm willing to die for her." I was stunned. I really didn't know how to respond. Finally, I inquired, "Where did you get all of that language from?" With no hesitation, he replied, "*Wild at Heart*, of course." I

didn’t know what the hell he was talking about. Within a few months, everybody was talking about it.

What I remember most about that moment was the certainty in his eyes. He had found the script and he was going to perform it. That’s what books like this do—they don’t just offer ideas, they offer identities. Pre-packaged. Pre-approved. Conveniently masculine. And there he was, my buddy, auditioning for a role he didn’t write and couldn’t sustain. The tragedy wasn’t that he was in love. The tragedy was that the language he used to express it came from someone else’s fantasy.

There is a kind of cruelty embedded in handing someone a script for love. Love, actual love, requires improvisation. It requires you to show up without knowing your lines, to listen harder than you speak, to change your mind, to be wrong, to be surprised. When Eldredge gives men a script, he doesn’t liberate them. He puts them in a cage with velvet walls. They think they’re experiencing something wild and true. They’re performing a role in someone else’s play. And

eventually, the woman across from them stops being a person and becomes a prop. That's when things get dangerous.

The back says it all…

Every man was once a boy, and every little boy has dreams, big dreams: of being the hero, of beating the bad guys, of doing daring feats and rescuing the damsel in distress. Every little girl has dreams, too: of being rescued by her prince and swept up in great adventure, knowing that she is the beauty.

But what happens to those dreams when we grow up? Walk into most churches, have a look around, and ask yourself: What is a Christian man? Without listening to what is said, look at what you find there. Most Christian men are bored…

In Wild at Heart, John Eldredge invites men to recover their masculine heart, defined in the image of a passionate God. And he invites women to discover their

purpose as well, as they discover the secrets of a man's soul, and learn how to delight in his strength and wildness.

Read that back cover again slowly. Every little girl has dreams of being rescued. That's the whole thesis, right there, before you've cracked the spine. Women don't have their own heroic arc in Eldredge's universe. They exist as destinations. As prizes. As the reason the man bothers to be brave at all. If that's not telling enough, notice that women's "purpose" is framed as discovering the secrets of a man's soul. Not their own soul. His soul. Women, in this framing, are supplemental characters in somebody else's story.

I can't explain it. Toxic masculinity spread like a disease. People were all over this shit. I resisted. When one sees the epidemic growing…you have to provide an antidote…i.e., the truth.

There is something deeply telling about how quickly this book took hold. People hunger for permission. Men, in particular, who have been told their entire

lives to be something specific and yet never told what that something actually feels like—they were starving. Eldredge fed that hunger. Never mind that the meal was poison. It tasted like adventure. It tasted like God giving them permission to stop apologizing for being loud and rough-edged and itching for a fight. That's a powerful thing to offer a man who has never felt like enough. It is also, I would argue, a profoundly irresponsible thing.

Books like *Wild at Heart* don't just shape individual men. They shape communities. They shape churches. When a pastor recommends this book from the pulpit, he is telling every man in the pew: this is what God expects of you. He is telling every woman: this is what you should want from a man. He is telling every kid who doesn't fit the mold that their deficiency is not circumstantial—it is spiritual. The church becomes a place where a certain kind of man is affirmed and every other kind of person learns to hide. I have sat with too many people who were damaged in exactly

that way. The book did not do it alone. But it provided the theological permission structure.

There is also the matter of what this does to the men it is ostensibly trying to help. Eldredge promises liberation. What he delivers is a more elaborate cage. The man who measures his worth by his wildness, his battle record, his conquest of a beautiful woman—that man is trapped. He cannot rest. He cannot be vulnerable. He cannot admit failure or doubt or the desire to simply be held without it threatening his entire identity. I have met that man. He is exhausted. He is lonely. And he was told by a Christian bestseller that his exhaustion and loneliness are his own fault for not being wild enough.

By the way, the woman he said he would die for… called him a dumbass.

Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood March 25, 2020

THE EXPOSITION

John Eldredge begins to carve out theological territory in the initial paragraphs of the book, calling God one who longs for adventures, battles, and beauty. Doesn't this sound like a romance novel? The church's demands that men be responsible, sensitive, disciplined, faithful, diligent, and dutiful are the road of good intentions that leads to hell (xi). Since when is sensitivity hellish? Before the book even begins in earnest, Eldredge has staked his entire argument on ideas about what constitutes God and declared that one's thoughts on manliness have direct effect on their eternal salvation. Manliness = salvation? The next page, xiii, drops Matthew 11:12 in for effect: "The kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force." You have to kick ass before God will love you. Give me a break…

Think about that theological claim for a second. Sensitivity—one of the most Christ-like qualities a human being can embody—is the road to hell. Jesus wept. Jesus sat with the grieving. Jesus touched the

untouchable. The most radical acts in the Gospels were not acts of violence—they were acts of tenderness in places where tenderness was forbidden. For Eldredge to imply that sensitivity is a spiritual liability is not just bad theology. It is the opposite of the Gospel.

And notice what else gets thrown into that pile of hellbound virtues: responsibility, discipline, faithfulness, diligence. These are not the traits of weak men. These are the traits of men who can be trusted. These are the traits that hold a marriage together, that keep a father present, that make a community function. Eldredge has looked at the entire tradition of Christian virtue ethics—centuries of careful moral theology—and declared it the road to damnation. He has replaced it with a vague cocktail of aggression and appetite and called it God. The audacity is remarkable. The damage is real.

The first chapter is all about the wilderness. It is the only place where he, or any other man, is truly able to find his heart and this, of course, has biblical reasons: "Adam…was created *outside* of the Garden of Eden, in

the wilderness….Man has always been in and of the outback…(3)" Always? The text also illustrates that the most phenomenal biblical revelations always happened in the wilderness. Look at Moses, Jacob, Elijah, John the Baptist, and Jesus (5). Crucifixion/Resurrection? Christ was not able to get his heart back until he went to the wilderness and found himself. As men, our purpose is to go and do likewise (6). Christ needed a heart transplant? Eldredge's hermeneutical principles are incredibly suspect. In the first six pages it is clear that he develops a purpose and then finds scriptures that meet that purpose, often at the expense of the totality of the text and what Christians have historically claimed about God. There is a further assertion in these pages that man is created at a higher order or more in God's image than females. For Eldredge, the scriptures become a weapon to perpetuate sexual violence and uphold patriarchy. What Eldredge is doing here is not exegesis—it's eisegesis. He isn't pulling meaning out of scripture; he's pushing his predetermined conclusions into it and

calling the exercise divine. This is a profoundly dishonest way to use the Bible, and it's all the more dangerous because it wears the costume of devotion. Casual readers don't notice the manipulation. They just feel the warmth of affirmation and assume it must be coming from God.

The wilderness argument also does something subtle and worth naming: it privatizes spirituality. If God is found alone in the woods, then God is not found at the kitchen table, not found in the hospital room, not found in the difficult conversation with your teenager at midnight. The wilderness theology removes God from the relational and the mundane and deposits God exclusively in the dramatic and the solitary. That is not the God of scripture. The God of scripture shows up in burning bushes, yes—but also in the still small voice after the storm. In the bread broken at a table. In the stranger who needed water. Eldredge's God is inconveniently absent from most of the places where people actually need God.

Sissy? “These guys are what is destroying Western Christianity…Who wants to hang out with a bunch of sissy nice guys? This is why there are no real men in our churches…(9).” He defines real men through a description of their three great needs or desires: “A Battle to Fight,” “An Adventure to Live,” and “A Beauty to Rescue.” Eldredge begins with Exodus 15:3, “…the Lord is a warrior; the Lord is His name,” to explain why men love *Braveheart* and feel the need to prove themselves in battle. If God is a fighter then we are not living up to His image if we are not engaged in battle: “like it or not there is something incredibly fierce in the heart of every man (10–11).” God as movie star? Eldredge then speaks to the boringness of church: “Compare how you feel watching James Bond or an Indiana Jones thriller to how you feel at Bible study…(12),” declaring that every man needs adventure. “There is something wild in the heart of every man…(13).” Every? Eldredge uses a high school romance to describe how men grow out of being in love in order to be committed. “We all need a beauty,” he affirms (14–

16). All? Eldredge writes this thing as if it's the latest work of movie fiction. The problem is that he sells it as truth.

That word "every" is doing a lot of heavy lifting throughout this book. Every man loves battle. Every man craves adventure. Every man needs to rescue a beauty. "Every" is how you smuggle in the universal when you're only describing the particular. What Eldredge is really saying is: I feel these things, men like me feel these things, and therefore all men must feel these things, and therefore God designed men to feel these things. The logical leap is staggering. But the rhetorical trick is elegant: if you question the universal, you're questioning God.

There is also something worth examining in the three desires themselves: a battle to fight, an adventure to live, a beauty to rescue. These are not desires. They are appetites. More specifically, they are the appetites of a twelve-year-old boy who has watched a lot of movies. A battle to fight reduces the complexity of moral life to a binary of enemies and allies. An adventure to live

turns existence into a performance. A beauty to rescue converts the human woman into a function, a plot device, a reward. Eldredge has not articulated the deep desires of the masculine soul. He has articulated the fantasy life of someone who has not yet been asked to do anything genuinely hard.

What are the actual deep desires of a man who has been alive long enough to know himself? Not what he imagines he wants before experience teaches him. I would suggest: to be known without being abandoned. To offer something of genuine value to the people around him. To make sense of his suffering. To love without losing himself. To be forgiven for the ways he has failed. These are not adventures. They are not battles. They are the terrifying, beautiful, ordinary demands of being a person in relationship with other people. Eldredge has nothing to say about any of them.

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Talk about mansplaining. Eldredge enlightens us with his definition of what it means to be woman:

“The world kills a woman’s heart when it tells her to be tough, efficient, and independent…The core of a woman wants a man to fight for her, to experience adventure with him, and for him to be captivated by her…Every woman wants a dangerous man…(17–18).”

These are the assumptions about women that fuel the rest of the book. In fact, you couldn’t write this awful book without oppressing women.

Pause. Sit with that a moment. According to Eldredge, toughness, efficiency, and independence—three qualities that have allowed women to survive, thrive, and lead throughout history—are agents of destruction. They kill the feminine heart. In one sweeping generalization, every woman who has ever been self-sufficient has been told she is doing womanhood wrong. Every woman who built her own business, raised her own children alone, survived her own battles without a man coming to rescue her—she killed her heart. What an insult. What a spectacular, breathtaking insult dressed up as theology.

Gender and sexuality are incredibly static for Eldredge. Which leads to even more violence toward more groups of oppressed and marginalized people. These definitions of gender and sexuality are hell.

The damage this static framework does to nonbinary, transgender, and gender-nonconforming people is not incidental—it is structural. Eldredge does not have a footnote problem or a nuance problem. He has a foundational problem. His entire theology rests on the premise that God created two distinct, complementary, hierarchically ordered genders and that the fulfillment of God's purpose requires each gender to play its assigned role. Any deviation from that scheme is not just a lifestyle difference—it is a theological failure. The person who does not fit is not simply different. In this framework, they are broken. They are evidence of the fall. This is not a minor theological quibble. It is a system that has caused profound suffering to real human beings who were simply trying to exist.

Eldredge uses his expositions of his own insecurities to inform our perception of God. He uses scripture very

selectively and only when it confirms his opinion. Eldredge creates an excuse for violence…continued violence. He also seems to have been asleep for the past fifty years to the advancement of women and many other marginalized peoples. Independence is not a mark against an amazing woman. In order for his system to function, Eldredge has to go further.

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"The Wild One Whose Image We Bear" is a discussion of what God must be like and how that informs what men must be like. There is a particular focus on the movie *Braveheart* and its application to informing theodicy. Eldredge states: "I am convinced that Jesus was far more like William Wallace than he was Mother Teresa (24/29)." Killer or Healer? He then proceeds to use his categories to create a Doctrine of God. God definitely has *a battle to fight.* God is warring throughout all of scripture, Old and New Testaments, and Samson did not become a beast until "the Spirit of the Lord came upon him (26–27)." God is fierce. This is why we should fight for God's kingdom and for

romance at all times (29). Every page spews with misogynistic bullshit. “If you have any doubt that God loves *adventure* then spend the night alone in the woods…He is not safe, but he is good…Safety and security is the anti-God…(29–30).” God risked the death of his son so that he might have the adventure of *fighting for the beauty* that is his church (32). This is one fierce, wild, and passionate guy (35). God has officially become like every thrill junkie and outdoorsman on the planet. No one could ever fit the paradigms he is creating. Surely, being human is more important than being a man. God didn’t become a warrior…God became a child.

The William Wallace / Mother Teresa comparison is really the heart of Eldredge’s theology, stated baldly. He isn’t saying Jesus and Wallace were similar in some ways. He is saying Wallace is the better template for understanding Christ. A man who killed people. A man who led violent rebellion. A man whose greatness, in the film Eldredge loves so much, is defined by how many enemies he destroys. That’s the Jesus of *Wild at*

Heart. Not the one who blessed the peacemakers. Not the one who said love your enemies. The one who painted his face and screamed.

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The words of Albert Schweitzer begin the third chapter: “The tragedy of life is what dies inside a man while he lives…(40).” Schweitzer would not have approved of the use of this quote. Guaranteed. He was far too human for that. Eldredge’s questions that are so haunting to every man include: “Am I really a man?” and “Am I fierce, wild, and passionate?” For women the primary question is: “Am I going to be able to find a true man? (42–43).” Watching pornography and sports are the substitutes for true battles, true adventure, and true passion. Glory is placidly lived through a screen instead of experienced by the individual. Modern man is a failure of what it means to be a man (44). Man is afraid to live bravely, adventurously, and passionately primarily because man failed at the fall and didn’t take leadership over Eve. All that most do now is pose as a real man (48–55). Nowadays most men are hiding

behind women's skirts and don't have the courage to be who they need to be. Eldredge talks about pornography as someone who is very knowledgeable… not someone who is opposed. If manhood is the goal, then God is not. Eldredge keeps peddling visions of misogyny and calling them God. There is perfection in our pain. Wounds make us human, not deficient.

The pornography discussion in this chapter deserves its own interrogation. Eldredge identifies pornography consumption as a symptom of failed masculinity—men watching screens instead of living their adventures. He is not wrong that pornography is a substitute. But his diagnosis is completely off. Pornography is not a symptom of insufficient wildness. It is a symptom of disconnection, loneliness, shame, and the absence of genuine intimacy. Men do not turn to pornography because they haven't fought enough battles. They turn to it because they are afraid of real closeness. And a theology that tells men closeness is feminine, that vulnerability is weakness, that emotions are the enemy

of masculinity—that theology does not cure the pornography problem. It creates the conditions for it. That observation deserves to stand alone: wounds make us human, not deficient. That is the theological counter-testimony to everything Eldredge is selling. The wound is not a sign that you are less of a man. The wound is a sign that you have been alive. Every person who has ever loved, risked, tried, and failed carries wounds. Those wounds are not defects in the image of God. They are evidence of the image of God—a God who came to earth and got wounded, after all.

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"The Wound." Eldredge states the answer that sums up the life of a man is the answer to the question: "Dad, am I a wild man?" Most men live their lives terrified they are not a man and intent on proving they are (62). True men always draw their identities from their fathers (63). "The Father Wound" is the largest gaping wound in the hearts of most men. Men's fathers either make or break them (74). If a father messes up then a child can be destroyed or paralyzed for life. They will

either become gay, insecure, live without emotion, or be a horrible sissy nice guy. Of course to be any of these things is worse than being dead (74–75). The chapter beckons a few questions: “What about the children who grow up just fine without a dad or religion?” “What about a gay man?” “Who defines masculinity?” and “Who are you to say that you have discovered the core of masculinity—are you not affected by the fall as well?” The entire book is based on dangerous straw arguments that can easily be blown over. The problem is that people would rather hear this than to know that they actually have to learn to simply be who they are.

The casual homophobia in that chapter is breathtaking in its casualness. Gay is listed alongside insecure and emotionless as an outcome of bad fathering—as a wound, as a failure, as something worse than death. No argument is made. No scripture is cited for this particular claim. It is simply assumed, stated, and moved past, as though it were self-evident that to be

gay is to be broken beyond repair. That is not theology. That is prejudice wearing a cross.

Consider also what this chapter does to adult children of single mothers. By Eldredge's accounting, every one of them is spiritually pre-wounded, predisposed to brokenness, potentially gay, certainly insecure, necessarily incomplete. There is no version of the fatherless child in Eldredge's framework who turns out whole. No mother is equipped to give a son what he needs. The single mother, the grandmother who raised the grandchildren, the aunt who stepped in after tragedy—these women are, in Eldredge's theology, inadequate custodians of masculine souls. The contempt embedded in that assumption is staggering. And it is never named as contempt. It is named as concern.

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"To give a man back his heart is one of the hardest missions on earth…," from the movie *Michael* and the beginning of the chapter entitled "The Battle For A Man's Heart (78)." The greatest problem in the west

today is our domestication of males. We take away manhood from a very early age. “If you want real men then you have to accept the danger of real men as well (83–84).” Domestication takes away the soul of a man and makes him less than human, because you are denying him the privilege of imaging God (86). If you have already been domesticated, there is a way to get your heart back, but it is going to be a great battle (88). “I know there are battles all around, but the greatest testing ground is the battle for the heart of a woman,” Eldredge declares (90). Without the woman the man cannot feel full and alive. Homosexuality is a distraction and an attempt to repair the hole of domestication with masculinity. You will not be able to go after the woman that makes you fully alive until you are wholly affirmed, and that affirmation can only come from the father (95). You must take all your hurts and questions to the father. Jesus would’ve laughed his ass off at this ignorance.

The domestication argument is interesting because it reveals exactly what Eldredge fears most: a man who

has learned to sit still, listen, nurture, and serve without needing recognition for it. That's not domestication. That's maturity. That's the kind of person who can sustain a relationship, raise a child, hold together a community. Eldredge calls that soul-death. I call it the fruit of the Spirit. There is a reason Galatians lists gentleness and self-control alongside love and joy. The wilderness isn't where you find God. You find God in the relationships you refuse to abandon.

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"Who gives us our name? (102)." Psalm 139 makes it clear God has a particular ideal that he has created us to be and if we are not being a man then we are not living up to that ideal. God is trying to initiate us into this manhood, and fix our boring lives, if we will only let him (105). God demands that we admit our masculine woundedness and then follow him to regain complete masculinity. Through thwarting the false self we have created, we obtain the salvation of masculinity. We fight back to regain control and break

the chains that bind our soul (112–113). All that is wrong with humanity has one source: Adam's choice of Eve over God. For centuries we have been choosing the woman first and this is where the world's problems begin. We must learn to choose God over Eve once again (116–117). Women are the devil? I thought this book was about uplifting everyone?

There it is. There's the bottom of the argument. All human evil traces back to a man loving a woman too much. Eve is the origin of the fall, and every time a man prioritizes a woman over God, he repeats the original sin. Let that theological disaster fully land. Loving a woman is a spiritual mistake. Intimacy, devotion, partnership—these are presented as corruptions of man's relationship to God. I cannot think of a more thorough repudiation of the entire New Testament. The incarnation is God coming to be in relationship with creation. Jesus's ministry is built on love. Love for neighbor. Love for enemy. Love even for those who are driving the nails. Eldredge has somehow

constructed a theology in which love itself is the problem.

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“Healing the Wound.” Wendell Berry: “The task of healing is to respect oneself as the creature we were created, no more and no less (120).” Like he does the Bible, Eldredge is taking this quote completely out of context. We are not created to be one with the masculine God. Dependence is not something to be ashamed of, but rather something to be embraced. We have created a society that says real men are independent and reliant on no one. This is not how God has created us. It is no shame that a man needs healing (123–125). Eldredge states that the prayer of salvation is, “Jesus, take me into my wound…Christ, of course, says ‘Behold I stand at the door and knock…’ (130).” Next we must forgive the past, especially our fathers, and then allow God to be our father and our future masculinity (135–136). What about our mothers? When we begin to offer others our true selves then we are ready for the glory of battle (138).

War is hell. I know a great many people that will never fit such a paradigm.

That throwaway question—what about our mothers?—is more damning than it might seem. Eldredge's entire map of the interior life of men runs through father figures. God the Father. Your earthly father. The affirmation of fathers. Mothers are functionally absent from the spiritual formation of men in this worldview. Women are either objects of rescue or invisible. They cannot wound and they cannot heal. They cannot initiate and they cannot affirm. They are set decoration in a story entirely about men. If that doesn't strike you as a profound distortion of human experience, I'm not sure what would.

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A real man has vision greater than self and is cunning—he knows when to fight and can sense a trap. We must never forget that the world is enemy occupied territory and that we must constantly fight against the devil (142–143). Satan gives the masculine heart insecurity to keep him from being a real man and

conquering the world for God's purposes. If one wants to be a real man of God then they must stop sabotaging their manliness and embrace it. We defeat the devil by embracing our strengths (145–147). "We must let everyone around us feel the weight of who we really are as men and let them deal with it…We must embrace manliness and quit participating in the carnival of counterfeits—counterfeit battles, counterfeit adventures, and counterfeit beauties (149)." He concludes by exposing the birth of Christ as a wild battle of galactic good and evil using Revelation 12. "I am sick of these silly nativity scenes…There is a dragon out there, he tried to eat Jesus, and we must slay him (154–155)." The fantasy myths only seem to grow with every page. In order to promote Jesus as a warrior he has to make Satan his equal in battle. I think this is a severe misunderstanding of who Christ is. Jesus has already won. Christus Victor. Actually, Jesus won by not fighting.

Jesus won by not fighting. Let that sit. The central act of Christianity is not a battle in the traditional sense. It is

a surrender that somehow becomes victory. It is a man who could have called down angels choosing instead to be silent before his accusers, to be broken, to be buried. The resurrection is not the victory of force—it is the vindication of the one who refused to use force. Christus Victor is not a warrior's triumph. It is the triumph over the logic of warriors entirely. Eldredge wants to make Christ into a fighter. But Christ already showed us something infinitely stranger and more powerful than fighting: the willingness to lose, and in losing, to win.

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The war continues as John Eldredge teaches men how to have a strategy to defeat Satan. The greatest indictment of the modern man is the lack of danger in his life. We insure our lives against everything, and nothing of real substance ever takes place, because we are terrified of what it would mean to fight (159–160). We must courageously believe that we are on the right side and never believe we are on the wrong side again, for this is true manhood (165–166). We win the battle

of masculinity in the same way Jesus did: God was with him. We need the weapons of war in order to be real men, including the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the readiness of the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the spirit. Do these sound like feminine items to you? (173). We must never go into battle alone, but we don't need accountability groups; we need battalions of fellow warriors that are willing to fight and shed their blood with us (175–176). Eldredge concludes: "If you want to live in God's kingdom then it is going to take every ounce of passion and forcefulness you've got, scripture even says so: The kingdom of heaven suffers violence and violent men take it by force…(Matt. 11:12)." Remember, the kingdom is not, and never has been, inhabited by sissy nice guys (177–178). One's disposition as a man has much to do with whether or not he will see heaven. Not only is the idea of man-heaven asinine, it is completely contrary to the message of Jesus.

There is a revealing pattern in the way Eldredge handles every biblical text he touches: he reads it as though it were a men's magazine. Exodus 15:3, the Lord is a warrior? Proof that God wants men to fight. Psalm 139, fearfully and wonderfully made? Proof that God has a particular masculine ideal for each man. Matthew 11:12, the kingdom suffers violence? A battle cry for aggressive men. He is consistent in this approach. No text is allowed to resist him. No context complicates him. No counter-text is permitted to exist. The Bible, in Eldredge's hands, is not a multivocal library of human struggle with the divine. It is a highlight reel of masculine bravado, edited for the purpose of making men feel spiritually validated in their aggression.

The invocation of Ephesians 6 is clever in its misdirection. The armor of God is indeed in scripture. But Paul's intent is spiritual and metaphorical—the battle he describes is against principalities, against spiritual forces, not against flesh and blood. He explicitly says so. Eldredge yanks the armor of God out

of its context and uses it to reinforce the idea that real Christian men are warriors who fight. But Paul's whole point is that the spiritual battle requires spiritual weapons—truth, righteousness, peace, faith. Not physical dominance. Not aggression. Peace is listed explicitly as one of the weapons. That doesn't sound like a battle cry to me.

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Eldredge uses the country group *Dixie Chicks* to begin his tenth chapter, "A Beauty to Rescue." The assertion of the song is that women's purpose and dream is to meet the cowboy that will show them the way to God and to who they really are (180). If masculinity has come under assault in modern times, then femininity has been brutalized. We have completely lost sight of the fact that women reveal the exotic beauty and mystery of God (182). Eldredge is the one doing the brutalizing. He lies constantly to women, telling them: *"You are not desired…You are not worthy…You will not be protected…No one will fight for you…"* Most women think they are going to miss being loved by a man

because of these lies. Men must spill out their lives and fight for the woman to counteract the lies (183–184). Women will never feel worthy unless they are fought for (185). Men are the only thing that can validate women. A real man is made to fight, love, and live for the heart of a woman (190). Eldredge has a very low view of women. He claims that they can only find wholeness when their cowboy comes for them. He really does not believe singleness to be the virtue that Paul claims it to be in the New Testament. According to Eldredge, a real man's entire romantic life consists of rescuing the beauty from her insecurity. The battle for a woman's heart is a sacrament, on par with baptism or communion. From my perspective, it seems to me like the script should be flipped.

The script should not just be flipped. It should be burned. The framing of romantic pursuit as sacrament is one of the most revealing moments in the whole book. What Eldredge has done is take the human experience of longing and belonging—one of the most complex and mysterious dimensions of being alive—

and reduced it to a transaction. Man fights, woman is validated. Man rescues, woman is made whole. And this transaction, this exchange in which the woman's worth is determined by how hard a man works for her, is called sacred. This is not love. This is possession with a liturgy.

I want to be specific about what it means to call romantic pursuit a sacrament, because Eldredge is specific, and specificity matters. Baptism and communion are sacraments in Christian tradition because they enact something real in the relationship between the believer and God. They are not metaphors. They are encounters. When Eldredge elevates the battle for a woman's heart to sacramental status, he is saying that a man's romantic conquest is a point of genuine encounter with the divine. The woman's consent, her own desire, her own sense of whether she wishes to be pursued at all—none of this appears anywhere in the sacramental framework. The sacrament happens between the man and God. The

woman is the altar. She is the place where the holy thing occurs. She is not a participant. She is a location.

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God has set the stage for a high stakes drama on this earth and called it "good." The world only works when we embrace risk and live by faith. A man will not be happy and will be unable to love God fully unless he has adventure in his work, in his love life, and in his spiritual life (200). "Two roads diverged in a wood and I took the one less traveled, and that has made all the difference…(202)." Not Robert Frost too? The real man never takes the safe path and does not inoculate himself against risk (203). "A man's life becomes transcendental when he embraces adventure and releases control in favor of the dreams of his heart." Real masculinity can only be found in the wild and the seeker must go there (207). God is in the unknown and not in suburbia (208). "A man will never be more of a man until he embraces an adventure beyond his control, or when he walks into a battle he is not sure of winning (213)." God is adventure, so God is also what

truly makes the man (215). The highest attribute of God to the male is not love (that is for females), but adventure. Women are secondary throughout the book and sometimes third or fourth or fifth. Misogyny really can make somebody crazy as shit.

God is not in suburbia. That line is almost funny until you realize how many people read it and nodded. What Eldredge is saying, stripped of its mystical packaging, is that ordinary life does not count. The man who shows up every day, who works a job he didn't dream of, who drives carpool and sits through school plays and makes dinner and does laundry—that man is not truly alive. His life is not an adventure. He is, by Eldredge's measure, failing to be a man. The courage it takes to love somebody consistently, without drama, without the applause of an audience, without the feeling of conquest—that courage is invisible in this framework. That is a tragedy. Because that quiet, unglamorous fidelity is exactly what most lives require and exactly what most people spend their whole lives trying to offer the people they love.

Let me say one more thing about adventure before we move on, because Eldredge's use of the concept is so foundational and so slippery that it deserves direct confrontation. Adventure, as Eldredge defines it, is always outward. It is physical, external, dramatic, visible. It is something you do in places, to enemies, toward women. What Eldredge never once considers is the adventure of interiority—the genuine terror and courage required to actually know yourself. To sit with your own grief. To admit the ways you have caused harm. To change. The examined life that Socrates called the only life worth living is, by Eldredge's measure, a life spent hiding. But the man who has done the interior work—who has faced his own shadow, named his own cruelties, and come back humbler—that man is capable of the kind of love that does not destroy. Eldredge is producing the other kind. The book also fails on its own stated terms. Eldredge claims to want to rescue men from boredom, from passivity, from smallness. He wants men to be fully alive. But the man who emerges from *Wild at Heart* is

not fully alive. He is performing aliveness according to a script. He is measuring his pulse against a checklist of battles, adventures, and conquests. He is unable to rest because rest looks like surrender. He is unable to grieve because grief looks like weakness. He is unable to truly love because love requires putting someone else's reality above his own narrative. The man *Wild at Heart* produces is not wild. He is rigidly, exhaustingly, defensively committed to a particular performance of wildness. That is not freedom. That is a very specific kind of prison.

John Eldredge is ignorant. He allows childhood fantasies to shape all of his gender realities. Surely, gender is a far more fluid concept than what Eldredge speaks of. It is wrong to say that any gender exhibits the certain attributes of God better than any other… because we all image God differently. It is dangerous to say that a woman's purpose in life is to be rescued by a man. Is she simply supposed to sit back and take whatever comes? It should be revealing when you tell a woman that you're going to fight for her…such an assertion only seems to foreshadow violence. In fact, I would encourage anyone who hears these words to run as fast as they can.

Run is right. There is a straight line from the theology of *Wild at Heart* to a certain kind of man who believes his desire entitles him to pursue, and pursue, and pursue, regardless of what the object of that desire actually wants. Eldredge romanticizes persistence as devotion. But there is no category in his framework for the woman who says no, and means it, and is met with

a man who has been told by God Himself not to give up on the battle for her heart. That is not romance. That is a manual for harassment. The language of fighting for a woman, refusing to be domesticated, never surrendering in the pursuit of beauty—this language does not stay metaphorical when it lands in the hands of men who are already inclined toward control.

The consequences of Eldredge's heresies have been proven by the criminal enterprise La Familia Cartel in Michoacan, Mexico. They refer to beheadings and assassinations as divine justice and use *Wild at Heart* as their proof text. Everyone who enters the cartel must read it and there are reports of cartel members forcing all school children in the area to read it. The Cartel makes it plain: "God's blood-stained clothes in Isaiah 53…proves that sometimes we have to get real bloody to be like God." (*La Familia Michoacan: A Deadly Mexican Cartel Revisited*, by George Grayson, Foreign Policy Institute / *Focus on the Family Outreach*, June 2009).

I want to dwell on the cartel connection a moment longer, not to be sensational but because it is genuinely clarifying. When we ask who is the intended audience for *Wild at Heart*, Eldredge would say: Christian men who feel lost. Men in churches who are bored and emasculated and hungry for something real. That is his stated audience. But theology does not stay in the room it was written for. It travels. It gets picked up by people in different contexts, people for whom the metaphors are not metaphors. People for whom battle is not a spiritual concept but a daily reality. And when those people read Eldredge's insistence that God loves blood, that violence is divine, that a real man takes the kingdom by force—they do not hear an invitation to adventure. They hear permission. They hear commission. The cartel understood Eldredge's theology clearly. Possibly more clearly than Eldredge understood it himself.

It would be too convenient to dismiss that connection as a misuse of the text, an extreme outlier unrelated to Eldredge's intent. But intent and outcome are not the

same thing. When you build a theology around divine violence, masculine conquest, blood as proof of devotion, and God as a warrior who fights for what is his—you do not get to be surprised when someone takes that framework to its logical conclusion. The cartel did not distort *Wild at Heart.* They applied it. Violently, yes. Horrifically, yes. But the seeds of that application were in the original text, fertilized by every chapter that equated manhood with aggression and bloodshed with holiness.

❧

The things that John Eldredge says on a theological level are absolutely blasphemous. Eldredge has created a Man Theology that centers the entire Bible and the entirety of one's spiritual life on being a man. Salvation is not being redeemed of sin or setting the world to rights, but rather becoming the manliest man one can be. Finding and conquering the beauty becomes the sacrament. Life becomes not about the least, but rather preservation and gratification of manliness. The things that Eldredge says about God are horrific. In his

attempts to make God manly, he completely destroys Christian orthodoxy in favor of his own theology. Eldredge takes scripture out of context and manipulates it for his own purposes. He claims to be evangelical, but even the most radical Biblical scholars exhibit more fidelity to scripture than he does. The one true God is not something off of a popular movie…but something that exists uniquely in the soul of all creation.

Christian orthodoxy has, for two thousand years, been clear that God transcends gender. The creeds do not describe a masculine God. The mystics, male and female alike, have understood the divine as encompassing categories that shatter every human binary. When Julian of Norwich wrote of God as both Father and Mother, she was not being radical—she was being faithful to a tradition that understood divine love as something larger than any human category could contain. Eldredge doesn't just ignore this tradition. He inverts it. He makes God not just masculine but

aggressively, narrowly, toxically masculine. In doing so, he doesn't reveal God. He reveals himself.

Here is what I keep returning to: *Wild at Heart* sold millions of copies. It was recommended from pulpits. It was the centerpiece of men's retreats and small groups across the country. Pastors built sermon series around it. Christian organizations endorsed it. Which means that all of the theology I have catalogued in this critique—the contempt for sensitivity, the reduction of women to prizes, the equation of violence with holiness, the homophobia, the erasure of single mothers, the God-as-action-hero hermeneutic—all of it was absorbed by millions of people as sound Christian teaching. That is not Eldredge's failure alone. That is the failure of an entire community that was so hungry for a muscular, relevant, exciting version of Christianity that it did not stop to ask whether the version it was being sold was actually Christian.

The men who read this book and were hurt by it—the men who spent years trying to be wild enough, fierce enough, passionate enough, and found themselves only

further from themselves—they deserved better from their churches. The women who were pursued by men armed with Eldredge's theology and were told their discomfort was part of the battle—they deserved better. The gay men who read that their sexual identity was a symptom of fatherlessness—they deserved better. Every person who sat in a church where this book was celebrated and felt, quietly, that they did not fit—they deserved better. Writing this is not an academic exercise. It is an act of repair.

❧

"Love the Lord our God with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength. And love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:29–31)."

NOT

"Love the Penis our God with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength. And love your Penis."

Come on, folks… Surely, God is about more than penis religion.

The greatest commandment is not about conquest. It is not about wildness or warfare or the rescue of beautiful women. It is a commandment about love—the kind that turns toward God and turns toward neighbor without measuring the cost, without calculating the glory, without needing anyone to witness the sacrifice. That is not a small or boring vision of humanity. That is the most demanding and most expansive vision of what it means to be a person that has ever been articulated. Eldredge shrinks it down to something a boy who watched too many action movies might manage. God deserves better than that. And so do the men reading his book.

Amen.

BOOK 4

Tales from the Crypt: Verbatim from Clinical Pastoral Education

Jeff Hood

2014

By 2014, Hood is deep in Clinical Pastoral Education — the supervised training that sends seminary students and clergy into hospitals, psychiatric wards, and institutional settings to provide pastoral care under conditions that no classroom can simulate. CPE is the place where theological formation meets the irreducible specificity of actual human suffering, where the frameworks you were given either hold or they do not.

Tales from the Crypt is the record of what Hood found when he got there.

The verbatim form is essential to what this book is. In CPE, the verbatim is a pedagogical tool: you write down, as precisely as you can remember, exactly what was said in a pastoral encounter. Not the edited version. Not the version where you said the right thing.

The actual exchange, including the moments where you did not know what to say, where you said the wrong thing, where you sat in silence because there was nothing adequate to say and silence was the only honest response.

Hood embraces this form with an almost reckless honesty. These encounters are strange, painful, sometimes darkly comic, frequently beyond the reach of any theological formula he was given. The patients he meets in these pages are not illustrations of pastoral principles. They are people in extremity — people at the outer edge of what they can bear, arriving at the attention of a young minister who is also at the outer edge of what he knows how to do.

The priestly vocation is most visible in this book because the priest's work is most visible in extremity. Presence. Witness. The refusal to leave. The willingness to stay in the room when the room is terrible, when the person in the bed is saying things that do not resolve

into meaning, when the best you can offer is the fact of your continued presence.

What Hood learns in these encounters — and what the reader learns alongside him — is that the priestly work is not about having the right words. It is about the body in the room. It is about showing up and staying. It is about the willingness to be changed by what you encounter rather than managing the encounter from behind a professional frame.

These tales are the education that does not appear on any transcript. They are the formation that happens not through teaching but through contact with the actual — with the full, unmanageable weight of what it means to be a human being at the end of their resources. They are the ground from which everything else Hood writes will grow.

Clinical Pastoral Education gave me multiple tales from the crypt. They were consistently beyond belief. This is how I remember them...verbatim.

Leprechaun

Patient's Initials: CY

Age: 65

Marital Status: M

Race: W

Sex: F

Religion: Pseudo-Christian

Room/Bed: *156987*

Unit: Behavioral Health

Admit Date: 9/10/2012

Call Date: 9/22/2012

Time of Call: 3:00 AM

Length of Call: 15 minutes

Diagnosis: Dementia and periods of delirium.

Observations:

Before I ever arrived at the unit I could hear CY screaming, "Tommy! Tommy! Tommy!" When I

opened the door to the unit, the nurses were standing outside, chuckling, and saying, “You really don’t want to go in there...” As I walked into the room, CY was alone...her creepy expressionless smile scared the shit out of me.

Verbatim:

I slowly approached a screaming and smiling CY seated at a table under the television.

CY1: Tommy! Tommy! Tommy is that you?

C1: No, Mrs. Y. I am sorry I am not Tommy, I am Chaplain Hood.

CY2: That’s ok. You got any cigarettes. I love cigarettes.

C2: No, Mrs. Y. I don’t have any cigarettes.

CY3: What's with the collar? You a priest or something? I love the Leprechaun. I love him with all my heart and pray to him all the time.

(When she first mentioned the Leprechaun, my mind quickly went to images of some of the horror movies I have seen with Leprechauns in them…I suppressed my fear and pushed forward.)

C3: I actually would consider myself to be both a priest and minister…

(She interrupted me before I could finish…)

CY4: Are you a minister and priest of the Leprechaun?

(I paused briefly to figure out a trajectory…)

C4: Tell me a bit about the Leprechaun…Then I can say for sure whether I am a priest and minister of the Leprechaun.

CY5: Tommy! Tommy is my husband. I am going to kick his ass for leaving me up here. Tommy!

(CY screams for Tommy for about five minutes, moving her head back, forth, up, and down over and over, as if she is going to find him hiding in one of the corners or on the ceiling. It was my goal to wait out this bout of confused mania.)

CY6: (She suddenly stops…) So are we going to pray to the Leprechaun or what? (growing agitated) I thought you said you were a priest or something???

C5: I thought you said you were going to tell me about the Leprechaun?

CY7: I didn't say that you piece of shit. Don't be an asshole to me! Ok, God damnnit, I'll tell you about the fucking Leprechaun.

(The bout of harsh cusswords seemed to be a short blip of mania…as they subsided as quickly as they arrived)

The Leprechaun is to be praised above all Leprechauns. The Leprechaun made everything that is green first and then made everything else in the universes. The Leprechaun made people to be little Leprechauns. The Leprechaun sent his daughter, Linka, to die in a microwave for all the bad things people have done in the world. The rays zapped all of our sins out of her. Linka then became radioactive and lived forever. The Leprechaun later sent his son Allah into the world to proclaim some more stuff. Then in 1365 the Leprechaun gave multiple men the vision to found America. Now, here we sit in 1625 in freedom. The Leprechaun lives in outer space, still talks with me, and is so beautifully good. I know the Leprechaun

speaks through you Father… Can we pray to the Leprechaun, Linka, and Allah?

(I had to pause for a second to gain my composure. I didn't really know what I was going to say…then the Spirit took over. I could hear…it's ok she is my child and just a little confused.)

C6: (Feeling as if I didn't have control over my mouth…) Yes CY, I will pray to the great loving Leprechaun with you.

CY8: Oh fantastic. (grabbing and pulling at me) Let's kneel.

(We are now both kneeling next to the table)

C7: Ready?

CY9: Yes! (she whispered loudly)

C8: Loving Leprechaun we thank you for your presence at this hour in this place. We love you. It is out of this love that we seek you. We seek you almighty Leprechaun because we have nowhere else to go. Though the struggles of life are great and the limits of our harsh realities often weigh us down, we believe you almighty Leprechaun are the answer to all of our questions, infirmaries, and perceived boundaries. We thank you for your ways of restoration, healing, and hope. Tonight, I pray especially for CY. I pray that you will inhabit her totally and completely. She loves you and needs you at this hour. Dance with her in the chaos and love her as no one else on this earth is able. Walk with her on what might be an extended journey home. (touching her forehead and making the sign of the cross) I bless you CY in the name of the Creator, Christ, and Spirit of the Leprechaun… Go in peace my child…

(CY keeps her head down for an extended period of time. After about 4 minutes, I leaned over to make sure she was still alive… As I leaned…)

CY10: I was praying silently Father. (A huge real smile grows on her face.) Thank you so much Father. That was absolutely beautiful and now I am tired. Goodnight!

(CY gets up and walks on her cane down to her room. She never turned around. I got up to leave)

(The nurses met me at the door…speaking almost simultaneously…)

N11&21: What did you do to her?

N22: She almost never sleeps.

N12: She has been driving us crazy with those screams for Tommy.

C9: I prayed with her.

N23: You have got that magic God touch.

C10: Leprechaun touch...

Verbatim Interpretation:

It all feels very strange. I had no idea that God was a mythical creature. I guess I'm truly learning what it means to encounter the many faces of God...even the really strange ones.

Body Jumping

Patient's Initials: YO

Age: 15

Marital Status: M

Race: W

Sex: F

Religion: Christian

Room/Bed: *159898*

Unit: JPS ICU

Admit Date: 11/7/2012

Call Date: 11/9/2012

Time of Visit: 3:30 AM

Length of Visit: Not sure

Diagnosis: Severe Brain Injuries Resultant from a Suicide Attempt

Summary

After completing a call to pray with a woman whose brother was dying in JPS' ICU, I ran into a nurse who asked me to go in and pray with the mother of her patient. The nurse informed me that the patient had attempted to commit suicide. I looked into the room and all of the lights were off. When I walked through the door, I immediately noticed that the patient was young and comatose. When I rounded the bed, YO's mother YOU popped up from her corner chair. I could tell that she had been crying for most of the evening. Her face was red and burnt with anguish.

Verbatim:

I courageously walked toward the anguished woman… she immediately grabbed me and pulled me tightly against her.

C: I am so very sorry. My hearts breaks for you and your loss.

YOU: Can you listen?

C: Yes.

YOU: This past Wednesday, I left my son alone for 30 minutes. I don't usually leave him alone… He has bipolar disorder and I have always been afraid that his depression was going to get the best of him. Lately, he has been struggling with his sexuality. He likes boys. Can you handle this chaplain?

C: Yes.

YOU: When I got back to the house from the store, everything was eerily quiet. I screamed for my son over and over and over again. I ran upstairs and opened the door to find my son hanging from a leather belt attached to the ceiling fan. I cried and cried. My

daughter started doing CPR on him and got a faint pulse. The paramedics arrived and I rode with them. I have been here by his side ever since. I feel so guilty. I should not have left him. All of this is my fault… You can talk now…

C: I rebuke the words you have just spoken in the name of God. YO obviously wanted to commit suicide and this could have happened whether you had been at the house or not. You must not carry around such guilt… It will kill you.

YOU: Do you know anything about bipolar disorder? That is what he has…

C: I actually have bipolar disorder and know what it means to be as depressed as he was. I have been there and contemplated suicide many times. I believe your son is probably better off now than he was in the living hell that is chronic mania and depression.

YOU: Wow… Who would have thought I would get a chaplain up here with bipolar disorder? Can I hug you?

C: Sure.

(She squeezes me tightly and holds me until she begins to cry again… Through tears she states…)

YOU: Are you open to receiving my son?

(I respond instinctively to her desperate plea…)

C: I think so.

(My body began to shake. I no longer had control. YO was inside me.)

YOU: Will you...

C: “I love you mommy so much.”

YOU: It's you!

C: “Mom, I’m ok now…Let me go.”

(She wept violently…)

(I began to shake once more...and it was over.)

(The machines began to beep...and before long...it was clear that YO was dead.)

Verbatim Response:

I don't know.

Demons

Person's Name: Silence

Age: 84

Faith Affiliation: Not sure…

Nursing Unit: Geriatric Psychiatric – 6 North

Diagnosis: Serious Dementia and Alzheimer's

Number of Previous Visits: Zero

Number of This Visit: One

Time of Visit: 3:20 PM

Length of Visit: 8 Minutes

I. Introduction and First Things:

Silence was sitting alone in the corner unable to speak and restrained. He is a large black man, 84 years-of-age, with a stark morbidity abut him. I met Silence for the first time on this discussed visit and had very limited interaction with him after the fact (moved to Bryce…). I decided to have a visit with Silence due to his stark demeanor in comparison to the rest of the group in the dayroom. I was previously scared of Silence, because he didn't speak, but decided to push through and force myself to go sit with him in his silence.

Thus began the visit…

II. The Visit:

Chaplain Hood: (grabbing his hand) Hello Silence, this is Chaplain Hood…

Silence: ……. gargle gargle

(I began to ask questions and answer them myself…)

Chaplain Hood: How are you feeling this morning? You look like you are feeling pretty rough… Do you know God, Silence? Well, God knows you and loves you deeply…

Silence: ……. gargle gargle

(I sat with the patient for about five minutes just holding his hand and whispering that things are going to be ok…)

Chaplain Hood: (Thinking about my own issues and struggles…I began to weep with the patient…The only thing I knew to do next was pray) *Father, we are struggling and we need your help. It is lonely down here and we need your presence. Life is hard Lord and we need your comfort. Please don't leave us now… In the*

name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit... (I then made the sign of the cross in the air on the patient...)

(Silence's eyes turned completely black.)

Silence: We're watching you.

(I ran out the door...)

(The nurse assured me that I was imagining things... "Silence hasn't spoken in nearly a decade.")

III. The Summary

I still don't know what happened. I just know that it was very evil. I remain deeply frightened.

Who is watching me?

I never saw him again...except in my nightmares.

A Prayer for Silence:

Bind the demons God…bind the demons.

A Prayer for Myself:

LORD HAVE MERCY…

Possession

Person's Name: Luci (short for Lucifer)

Age: 86

Faith Affiliation: Christian

Nursing Unit: Geriatric Psychiatric – 6 North

Diagnosis: Schizophrenia, Dementia, Increasing Erratic Belligerence, and Overall Mental Instability

Number of Previous Visits: Zero

Number of This Visit: One

Time of Visit: 3:15 PM

Length of Visit: 10 Minutes

I. Introduction and First Things:

Luci is a very disturbed small-framed woman, 86 years-of-age, with unusual strength and quickness. I met her for the first time on this discussed visit and had very limited interaction with her after the fact. To say that Luci is the strangest visit I have had would be an understatement… I walked into a room on the sixth floor and the patient was sitting up erect staring at me. I said hello and before I could get anything else out Luci began to yell for me to get away from her… *Thus began the visit…*

II. The Visit:

Chaplain Hood: Knock-Knock…Knock-Knock…Luci, Hello, this is Chaplain Hood…

Luci: I know who you are priest get the fuck away from me…Tell Jeff and Suzanne, I am going to fuck them up if you come any closer…

(I walked in and began to pray…)
Chaplain Hood: (Praying loudly…) *Jesus Christ is here and whatever you are…he is here to stay…This is Jesus' room. In His name, I demand of you demon: What is your name?*

(The patient went placid again and stared at me in an otherworldly fashion…then, after about a thirty-second delay, she erupted again…)

Luci: I am God's killer pastor and I am going to slit your fucking throat.

Chaplain Hood: *This is Jesus' room. In His name, I demand of you demon: What is your name?*

Luci: You're scared aren't you? *Laughing…*

Chaplain Hood: *This is Jesus' room. In His name, I demand of you demon: What is your name?*

(Luci then reached out and grabbed my arm pulling me toward her…scratching the shit out of my arm)

Luci: (Laughing….she whispers in my ear as a yell for help) This is why Sara left you…you little pussy…I am going to slit Jesus' throat too you know…

Chaplain Hood: (struggling to get out of the room and catch my breath) *Leave this woman in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit… (I then made the sign of the cross in the air as I stumbled out…)*

III. The Summary

I was never sure where what we would call psychosis or sanity began or ended, but, frankly, I don't give a

damn. On some levels I want to dismissively say what I saw was crazy, but my heart won't allow it, as I am beginning to think WMDFP might be the sanest of persons I have ever known. In his words and actions I heard the deep cries of his heart. This is not an insane man who knows nothing, but a very real human being, experiencing the absolute rawest of emotions. Perhaps, here amongst the so-called sane, there is much to learn from the WMDFPs of the world, for we are a world that often doesn't understand fits of passion. To further illustrate this notion and its' consequences on pastoral care, I intend to provide reflection in four key areas: pastoral concerns, spiritual assessment/plan, self-evaluation, and theological reflection.

I have grave pastoral concerns when it comes to WMDFP. Perhaps the most pressing on my mind, is WMDFP's transfer, over this past weekend, to Bryce State Mental Hospital in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. I must confess, my interactions with this dear brother have made me particularly angry about the many injustices

of mental healthcare in this country. We are a nation who shuns the passionate/excited as delusional/weird/crazy and, therefore, mentally ill. WMDFP is an unusually passionate man, especially about his fishing pole, but not someone who should be locked up for life (The doctors have told me they recommended he never leave Bryce…). WMDFP is a man who knows God and, believing him able, cries out for his fishing pole. When I prayed for a return to fishing, he responded in the only way he knew how, out of the deep/soulful/passionate groaning and moaning of his heart. Unlike most of our contemporaries, this is a man who unquestionably knows what he wants and is willing to fight for it. Does this make him mentally ill? I hope not…

WMDFP's family was particularly angry when they learned their beloved uncle was being sent to Bryce. This is a man who is able to function as well as anyone, yet, the state is disturbed by his passion. I am very concerned that Bryce will break WMDFP's spirit and sedate him with powerful medications. I am going to

continue in prayer that this will not be the case, but strongly suspect the state will impose their desires. In the story of WMDFP there are many pastoral concerns most, however, revolve around questions of justice.

I never saw a problem with WMDFP's spirit or spirituality. He is beautifully connected to God in ways that many of us can only dream of. The state and their desire to tame WMDFP is the most vital spiritual issue working against the patient. For this reason, I have no ability to provide a future plan. I have a strong suspicion that WMDFP's passionate spirituality will be sedated out of him very soon.

Today, WMDFP is gone, there won't be any follow-up visits, and the chances of getting to see him through the red tape at Bryce are very slim. While heartbreaking, I am beginning to realize WMDFP's situation is not unique… Others continue, almost daily, to leave our psychiatric ward for no other apparent reason but an overwhelming/inconceivable amount of passion. I am left here alone. Here I ponder my

actions, or lack thereof, and am left wondering how to fight such a perverse system.

I am disappointed in the way I handled myself in this situation. My desire to have a nice peaceful visit inhibited me from speaking truth to an unjust situation. I was so shocked/overwhelmed at WMDFP's passion/response that I left when I should have stayed. I should have demanded of the nurses they not sedate a man who was experiencing a level of passion foreign to most. I feel like this moment of outburst was the beginning of the end for WMDFP, as he was taken during the following night to Bryce. I regret not being present there for him. I failed the gospel call to be WMDFP's advocate. Now WMDFP is gone, but this situation challenges me to prophetically speak for those society deems mute in the future. I laid awake in my bed most of last night wondering how my situation was any different than those troubled persons who stood idly by at Auschwitz, knowing an injustice anywhere is a lack of justice everywhere… God has called me to be his prophet in the great gaps of justice,

yet on this occasion, I decided to cast my lot with the powerful and not the powerless. I know Jesus would not have been silent in this situation. I was.

A Prayer for WMDFP:

May his life and situation become a rallying cry against the way the passionate/odd of our world are treated. Draw him to your side and grant him your peace…

A Prayer for Myself:

Lord have mercy…

Creepy

Person's Name: Mr. Query

Age: 78

Faith Affiliation: Not sure…

Nursing Unit: Geriatric Psychiatric – 6 North

Diagnosis: Dementia, Schizophrenia, Bipolar, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Alzheimer's

Number of Previous Visits: Six

Number of This Visit: Seven

Time of Visit: 2:45 PM

Length of Visit: 3 Minutes

I. Introduction and First Things:

Mr. Query was laying alone in his bed whistling as I walked past his room in the Geriatric Psychiatric Unit. He is a hairy frail creepy-looking white man, 78 years of age, with a sense of the demonic about him. I have to force myself to go see Mr. Query at times due to his unnatural cheeky smile, odd mannerisms, and green puke. I often cannot help but think that I am encountering something otherworldly when I meet with him. I chose this visit to further discuss how to deal with similar situations. I met Mr. Query in early June for the first time and have had constant interaction with him ever since. Mr. Query seems to get odder and odder with each subsequent visit. This past week, I noticed Mr. Query in his room and decided to pay him a quick visit. Walking in, I was scared, due in part to previous interactions, but after deciding to push through, I forced myself to push through my fear.

Thus began the visit…

II. The Visit:

Creepy Whistling…

Chaplain Hood 1: *knock, knock, knock*…Good afternoon Mr. Query, this is Chaplain Hood…

Mr. Query 1: Hello young man…I am so very glad you decided to visit me here in this room alone. So no one will interrupt us…

Chaplain Hood 2: How are you feeling this morning?

Mr. Query 2: I am doing so much better ever since you arrived you young stallion…

(I wondered if I should leave at this point…I was incredibly uncomfortable and scared of what might happen next…)

Chaplain Hood 3: Mr. Query… I am a chaplain here at the hospital and was wondering if you had any spiritual needs at the present time…

Mr. Query 3: You remember that time I sucked your dick in Cleveland?

Chaplain Hood 4: Mr. Query… I think you are mistaking me for someone else and I am just here to pray with you…

Mr. Query 4: No you are not… You are here to return the favor… *(Mr. Query proceeds to pull out his penis…)*

Chaplain Hood 5: *(Turning my head and blocking my eyes…)* I need to go now Mr. Query and will be more than willing to pray with you when your clothes are

on… This today, however, is in no way appropriate behavior and I find it offensive…

Mr. Query 5: Whenever you are ready to suck a little on your daddy's dick then I'll be right here… *(Mr. Query continues to say incredibly vulgar things as I exit…)*

Chaplain Hood 6: The Lord be with you sir… *(I got out as quickly as possible…)*

III. The Summary

This visit really creeped me out. It wasn't just what was said, although, such vulgarity so pointedly directed at you is creepy enough, it was the look about Mr. Query. I felt like I was looking into the face of something non-human and it terribly frightened me. Mr. Query smiled and touched himself the entire time we were talking. Three of my dearest friends are homosexuals and I consider myself comfortable

enough with my own heterosexuality to have such friends. I do not think this visit was about sex. I think that this was a direct attack against my work in the Unit. I find it incredibly difficult to deal with cases like Mr. Query, in which, I am sure I am dealing with some level of demonic influence. Often psychosis looks very similar to the demonic, but there is a different feeling about things when you feel like you are coming in direct contact with evil in its purest sense…

My previous visits with Mr. Query, although strange, were nothing like this. Previously, I have had both prayer and communion with the man, but, as of late, his behavior has begun to grow much darker. I know very little about Mr. Query other than he might have worked as a florist in Ohio. I honestly left this visit never wanting to return to the Unit again. I have thought about this interaction ever since it happened and remain very unsure about how to handle such dark/demonic patients. Mr. Query haunts me and honestly, he visits me often, as I see him right before I close my eyes to go to sleep most nights… This

situation aside, I remain committed to fighting evil in all its forms no matter what shape it might take…

A Prayer for Mr. Query:

Cast out all evil that inhabits and torments Mr. Query… Draw him to your side, let him know your love, and grant him your everlasting peace…

A Prayer for Myself:

LORD HAVE MERCY…

Dog Man

Pastoral Encounter: 1

Patient's Initials: F

Age: 44

Marital Status: S

Race: Human

Sex: M

Religion: Christian

Room/Bed: *159898*

Unit: PCU

Time of Visit: 3:10 PM

Length of Visit: 45 minutes

Diagnosis: Infection

Pre-Verbatim Information

Background Information:

I was making rounds at the hospital when I arrived at the door of F's room. The nurse caught me before I entered and told me that he was quite odd. I thanked her for her opinion and charged right in.

Observations upon entering:

When I knocked and walked in, I was a little taken aback for a number of reasons. F had crawled up so high in his bed that it was almost as if he was sitting on the top of the bed. The smell of the room was awful. I thought that I was going to have to pull my shirt over my nose to stay in the room. F had the television turned off but was holding the remote. The sheets were hanging off the side of the bed. The lights in the room were off except for a nightlight plugged in under the television. F did not seem to have any personal belongings with him. Since I knew he didn't wear the gown to the hospital, I wondered where his clothes were. F's gown was crooked and his right butt cheek

was hanging off the side of the bed. F was overweight and unkempt. F's hair was not cut evenly.

Non-Verbal Communication:

F was a wild-eyed unkempt gentleman who looked to be in great distress. F appeared frightened and helpless. F stared at me from the moment I entered the room until the moment I left.

Personal Feelings upon Entry into the Room:

I knew from the moment I entered the room that this was going to be an intriguing visit. I was comfortable with my discomfort. I felt courage and presence as I pushed forward.

Verbatim:

C1: Hi F. I am Chaplain…

F1: Does your name matter? I am going home in the morning. We probably won't be interacting again will we chaplain?

C2: I guess not.

F2: Do you do relationships?

C3: Yes. I am Baptist not Catholic. I am married with…

F3: No. Do you do counseling for relationships?

C4: I do. I would feel privileged to hear a little bit about your life and offer any guidance I can.

F4: I have been with my partner for about four years (*He begins to cry…I draw near to him and hold his hand*)…and in the last two weeks things have just started breaking down. Things just don't seem to be the same.

C5: Tell me a little bit more about your relationship with your partner.

F5: Her name is Lucy!

C6: I apologize. Could you tell me a little bit more about Lucy?

F6: We met four years ago at a music festival. When I first laid eyes on her, I knew we were made for each other. After spending some time together just hanging out and listening to music, we walked to my car. I didn't know if she wanted to go home with me or not… so I got up the courage to ask her. She said yes and off we went. We were intimate with each other on the first night. It was magical. We rolled around together the whole night. We have pretty much been together ever since. We don't stifle each other…she does her thing and I do mine…but I have never doubted that she loved me…at least until about two weeks ago.

C7: Did something happen two weeks ago to cause a disconnect?

F7: (*F begins to cry uncontrollably…I put a fresh grip on his hand…Desperately trying to stay present in the moment*) Lucy bit me!

C8: What do you mean she bit you? Are we talking about rough sex that went awry?

F8: Yes. When we were being intimate the other night, Lucy sank her long teeth into my neck. She had never done that before. Lucy became so very vicious very quickly.

C9: (*Still holding his hand…*) Sir, if you don't mind me asking…what exactly is Lucy?

F9: Lucy is 88 beautiful pounds of Labrador retriever.

C10: (*Still holding his hand…*) I appreciate the clarification. I am sorry that things are not proceeding as well as you would prefer in your relationship with Lucy. Do you think the disconnect you are feeling from Lucy could possibly be attributed to the vast differences between your species?

F10: I have thought about that…but things seemed to be going fine for the last four years.

C11: What made you attracted to Lucy in the first place?

F11: I have had numerous failed relationships in my life with females. This relationship with Lucy just seemed to work.

C12: How did those failed relationships make you feel?

F12: Less than human.

C13: Is it possible that your failed relationships turned you toward something that was less than human?

F13: Lucy didn't complain like all the women I've dated. Lucy didn't fight with me like all the women I dated. Lucy didn't abuse me like all the women I have dated. Lucy just loved me.

C14: Have you considered that what you are doing to Lucy is abuse?

F14: I think I liked her because I could control her and treat her how all of the women in the past treated me.

C15: Does it surprise you that even a dog will get tired of that type of treatment?

F15: No, I guess not.

C16: (*I am still holding his hand from earlier…and I draw closer*) F, I love you and more importantly God

loves you. What you are doing to yourself and Lucy is destructive to you both. You need to let her go and seek therapy to help you find a way forward into healthier relationships. God is here and God will be with you.

F16: I know you are right. It is just going to be hard to let her go. I get horny just thinking about her (*his gown had noticeably risen at his crotch*). I know what I have to do…I just have to find a way.

C17: (*I ignore the erection…*) We serve a God who always knows how to make a way out of no way. I know this from personal experience. A few years ago, I was engaged to a beautiful woman named Sara. We met in Atlanta while we were both studying theology. I loved her. My God I loved her. I have Bipolar Disorder and I had a severe manic-depressive episode…where I was basically incapacitated for a few weeks. She dumped me and broke my heart. I didn't think I would make it through…yet I prayed that God would help.

My heart healed with God's help and now I am married to a beautiful woman named Emily who has made me forget all about Sara. God always knows how to make a way out of no way and God will make a way for you F.

F17: I receive that. I need to leave Lucy behind. I am ready to be in a relationship with someone who can at least talk to me. I am going to call my sister and ask her to take the dog to the humane society. I have got to move past this funk I've been in. Chaplain it means so much to me that you have held on to my hand this whole time. I thought you would reject me…but you held on. Most people don't understand relations with animals. I thought that you would think I was weird, odd, disgusting or strange or something like that.

C18: You are not weird, odd, disgusting, or strange… you are a child of a loving loving God…who promises to never leave you nor forsake you. God is holding your hand F and God will not let go.

F18: Will you pray for me…and then let me be so that I can take care of all this? This has been a ton to handle.

C19: I will. *God we call upon you because we have nowhere else to go. You alone are God. You alone are love. Reign down wisdom on my dear brother F as he seeks to make a way out of no way. Hold his hand and remind him that you are the God who never leaves nor forsakes. Draw F so close to you Lord that he will hear your voice guiding him through the days ahead. God we pray that you will take care of Lucy as she is placed in another home. Heal her…as a part of your creation. God of light shine bright.* (Making the sign of the cross on his forehead) *I bless you my dear brother F in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit of a loving loving God. Amen.*

F19: (*He begins to cry again…*) Thank you so much Chaplain… You are a true man of God. What is your name?

C20: Jeff

F20: Thank you Jeff. Now get out of her…I have got to do all this shit we have talked about.

C21: It was a pleasure to meet you sir.

F21: Likewise. Bye now.

(Turning around, I watched the man transform into a dog momentarily...and then he switched back.)

(I left very confused.)

Verbatim Response:

1. Feelings in my relationship with the patient:

The shock that this man had been having sex with a dog named Lucy was difficult to push through. I concentrated on his hand and not letting go. I felt that if I could hold his hand I could remain in the room. I went from feeling weird by the room and his mannerisms in the beginning to being disturbed that he was having sex with a dog named Lucy to actually feeling sorry for him and the loss of love to actually having some admiration for the guy by the end of the visit.

2. Description of the dialogical process:

The dialogical process involved the revealing interactions in the chaos of a man having a relationship with Lucy the dog. I asked questions throughout the visit to allow him to lead the way of the discussion. I seemed that the process of conversation went in the direction that he wanted it to go. I think that he was more open because I refused to let go of his

hand. I did this to let him know I wasn't going anywhere.

3. Personal evaluation of the pastoral encounter:

Strengths: I zealously loved him. I refused to let go of his hand.

Weakness: I left. I didn't really want to leave him. I wanted to help him clear everything up…but I knew I had to leave. I also knew that I was leaving God with him.

4. Theological issues/spiritual assessment:

God was present.

5. Assessment of psycho-social issues:

I zealously stayed with the patient. I put my psychological skills to work to help F figure out why he was engaging in this type of behavior. I think he did some difficult yet productive work in the time that we were visiting.

6. Introspection by Chaplain – what issues of transference/counter transference were at work here? Any theological/spiritual issues for the chaplain? Psychological issues for the chaplain (identifications, projections, etc.)

I was there. I stayed with him. I held his hand.

When he was thinking about the pain of losing Lucy…I wanted him to know that it was natural to miss someone you love when they are gone. I think the transference of the story of Sara was helpful to help him feel less like a monster and more as a child of God. I wanted him to know that I was there and I was feeling his pain. I think it helped.

As in all situations of ministry, I was projecting my hopes into the chaos. I wanted to see this man healed and so I led the conversation in that direction. I couldn't just leave him wallowing in destruction…so I held his hand.

7. What I need from my peers:

Conversation/deconstruction concerning the unique nature of the visit/the chaos/interaction.

Discussion about the dog that I saw. What the fuck was that?

I was there. I'm still there...somewhere beyond belief.

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BOOK 5

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6 Days in Guatemala: A Journal

Jeff Hood

2015

In 2015, Hood gets on a plane to Guatemala.

The journal that results is one of the most immediate documents in this collection — theology written while the hands are still shaking, while the images are still fresh, before the distance that reflection introduces has had time to settle over what was actually seen. This is the public theologian at full exposure: no institutional protection, no professional frame, no ability to process the experience before having to live inside it.

Guatemala in 2015 is a country still living in the shadow of a civil war that lasted thirty-six years and killed two hundred thousand people, the great majority of them Mayan. The war ended in 1996. The trials were still ongoing when Hood arrived. Efraín Ríos Montt, the general whose eighteen-month presidency in the early 1980s saw the most intensive

massacres of Mayan civilians, had just been convicted of genocide — the first former head of state in Latin America to be convicted by his own country's court. The conviction was overturned ten days later on procedural grounds.

Hood walks into this history. He walks the streets of San Pedro de Atitlán, a town that is sixty percent evangelical and forty percent Catholic, where the ethics police still chase tourists through the streets at night and where the posters quoting John 14:6 leave no room for dialogue. He visits Santiago de Atitlán, where Father Stanley Rother — a priest from Oklahoma who refused to abandon his parish during the worst of the violence — was assassinated by military agents in 1981. Rother's heart is buried in the church he would not leave.

The theological question the journal keeps returning to is the question of where the church was. Not the question of where God was — Hood is too honest a

theologian to pose that question in the mode of accusation — but the question of where the church was. The institution that claimed to represent the God of the Exodus, the God who hears the cry of the oppressed, the God who commands solidarity with the stranger — where was that institution when the exterminations were happening?

The answer is complicated, as Hood's answers always are. There were priests and pastors who said no, who protected people at the cost of their own lives. There were also hierarchies that looked away, institutions that made their peace with power, evangelicals who baptized the ideology of the state. The church was in multiple places, doing multiple things, and the journal is a record of sitting with that complexity in the actual geography where it played out.

This is the priestly vocation in its public dimension: the willingness to go, to be present, to let the actual history

of what the church did and did not do be witnessed without the protection of institutional distance.

May 12, 2013 Hate Translates

San Pedro de Atitlan, Guatemala

When I stepped off the boat in San Pedro de Atitlan, I was greeted by a giant poster proclaiming, “Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through him.” Now, I have been a Christian long enough to know that posters reciting John14:6 usually are not placed by people inviting dialogue about the ins and outs of spirituality. There is no question that San Pedro is a conservative place, about sixty percent of the residents are evangelicals and forty percent are Roman Catholic. At night one can hear the whistles of the policia de etica or ethics police chasing the drug using and sex-craving gringos all over the tourist district. Sometimes I think the men who run the policia de etica get close enough to take a nice long gander before they blow their whistle, literally or figuratively. Regardless, there is a clash of cultures in

this place, one western and one distinctly conservative Mayan.

The Mayan people have endured much in this region. Since the Spanish conquered present day Guatemala, there has consistently been conflict bubbling beneath the surface between persons of Mayan descent and persons of Spanish descent. The conflicts have exploded into all out war on numerous occasions. There has never been a fair fight. The Mayans have always been outgunned. Often their only chance at deflecting total defeat is to endure. One such occasion of endurance occurred during the Guatemalan Civil War of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.

Yesterday, 86-year-old Rios Monte, the former President of Guatemala from 1982 to 1983, was convicted of the genocide of 1,700 people of Mayan descent and sentenced to 80 years in prison. During the civil war, the military consistently exterminated people of Mayan descent. There were death squads

and hit lists. The only way to break the fight of the Mayan people was extermination.

There were pastors and priests all over the Mayan regions who said no to the often indifference of their hierarchies, who were often connected to the government carrying out the exterminations. One such priest was Father Stanley Rauther of Oklahoma. Father Rauther was responsible for the parish in Santiago de Atitlan, which is very close to San Pedro, for many years. In 1981, after enduring numerous threats for his work and protection of the Mayan people, members of the military broke into the parish residence and exterminated Father Rauther as well. Tens of thousands of people mourned the loss of their beloved “Ap’las” or father in the native Mayan dialect. Though his body is buried in Oklahoma, his heart is buried in the parish church in Santiago de Atitlan. Yesterday, I prayed with his heart and the bullet that killed him, which is lodged in the floor of the parish.

This is my third time visiting San Pedro de Atitlan. I have stayed with the same family every visit. They are beautiful people. The grandmother is in her late eighties, the parents are both in their sixties, and their are four children, three of which have children of their own, all living in the same house or close by. I have had many conversations with them about their brothers and cousins who were lost during the Civil War. When I ask why they died, they respond for being Mayan and loving freedom. These are a people who are painfully aware of the consequences of hate. Last night I was with the entire family and the conversation got interesting. We talked for a brief moment about the conviction of Rios Monte and then the conversation shifted to questions about the church I pastor, The Church at Mable Peabody's. When I told them that about ninety percent of our church is lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, you would have thought I told them that Jesus comes down in drag from heaven and preaches a sermon to us every Sunday. It was that foreign to them. I asked them to

think about the oppression that they have experienced and are experiencing for being Mayan. I told them that in the United States and around the world the situation is similar for persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. After much conversation, they began to get it. The family has always known that I have a heart for the marginalized and oppressed no matter the location. Finally, after more explanation, the mother said, “Jesus is always with the marginalized. Jesus is with the homosexuals. They are us and we are them.” Hate translates.

Amen.

May 13, 2013

Guatemala City, Guatemala

Perspectives

“16 of my friends and classmates disappeared.”
“My brother had his testicles cut out with razorblades and bled to death.”
“My cousin had all of his fingernails pulled out before he was shot in the head.”
“Our bishop was beat to death with one rock.”
“The soldiers consistently remarked, ‘The best way to stop the insurgency was to kill the insurgent in the womb.’”

Comments like these filled my day. The interactions were unbelievably intense. Tears welled up in my eyes. The weight of these realities left me exhausted with many thoughts.

How are we to react to a world gone mad? Where in these hellacious realities is Jesus?

I think the best answer is incarnated directly in the hellacious realities. Jesus disappeared. The testicles of Jesus were cut off with razorblades. The fingernails of Jesus were pulled out before the shot to the head. Jesus was beat to death with a rock. The womb of Jesus was cut open and her child was pulled out. If we are to believe in a God that has taken on human form, joined us in our struggle, and incarnated into the least of these, then there is no question that all of these statements are true.

The nature of the incarnation continued to surface.

I encountered two ministers. One knew that he was a minister. The other had no idea, but I found him to be a minister of deep secular conviction.

I encountered the secular minister first. He was the consummate professional, briefcase and all. During the Guatemalan Civil War, he was a clandestine communicator between various guerilla organizations and students at universities. Many of his friends were killed and he was forced to go into hiding on numerous occasions. The minister presented a short history of Guatemala then moved to the present day conviction of Rios Monte. The level of passion in the room skyrocketed. The minister declared the perpetrators of the genocide evil and demanded justice. He spoke lovingly of his friends and family who died. "Rios Monte should be tortured and killed," he declared. In his world, there was good and there was evil. Justice could not come without vengeance. The only way that he could remember his friends was to hold those who killed them responsible. There was no mistaking his conviction.

I encountered the other minister second. He was disheveled and rambunctious. During the Guatemalan

Civil War, he was threatened and forced to leave Guatemala on multiple occasions. The gentleman told his story. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, his dad was in and out of jail on six different occasions for subversive activities. In 1978, his brother was tortured and killed. When the conviction of Rios Monte came up, passion in the room skyrocketed once more. He spoke lovingly of his friends and family who were killed and persecuted. Then, much to the surprise of everyone in the room, he thrust his whole body forward and boldly declared, “The 86-year-old Rios Monte is a victim in need of our attention. He was a victim of the oligarchy of Guatemala, greed, corruption, and the foreign policy of the Reagan Administration. Why can’t we just forgive him and move on? You scream of justice, but forget that justice is in the hands of God. Will we be the voice of Jesus asking for forgiveness for those who have persecuted us? Or will we be the ones sick with vengeance and hate? Forgiveness is the only way to free us all.” There was no mistaking his conviction.

I know which minister was the incarnation for me.

Amen.

May 14, 2013

Quetzaltenango, Guatemala

"Borders"

I met a forest of trees this morning. The pines exploded toward the sky like rockets. The ground was covered in a dense rug of clovers. There were no borders in this sanctuary, just an invitation for communion. I spoke the words of Jesus to the trees in this place, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me in."

As I stood in silence in this space, a Mayan spiritual guide joined me. "The Mayans ask for all people to join the God, who represents all people," he beckoned. For the spiritual guide, there were no borders to the forest and there were no borders to God.

Borders are an important topic of conversation right now.

Conversation of who is in and who is out seems to be all the rage.

The truth is that the United States has left out most of the developing world already. The Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) has successfully pillaged the countries of Central America, making the rich richer and the poor poorer. We want to close the borders, but it is our economic policies that have destroyed the lives of those trying to get in. In turn, they must risk theirs in order to support their families. We consistently create borders to true communion.

The forest is a good metaphor. There were no boundaries of communion in the forest. It was beautiful. In our forest, will those we encounter be able to use the words of Jesus, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me in?”

There are people right now standing at our borders, the literal and metaphorical ones. They are standing at the borders we have created nationally, locally, and as individuals. Folks of various races, genders, orientations, identities, races, nationalities, religions, and statuses, all knocking and asking for true communion. Will we open the table?

How long will we sit around and try to figure out ways to partially open the door of communion? The truth is that we are either welcome the stranger or we don't. There is no place called between. For the people at our borders, between is the place where they die in the desert starving for hope.

May we be the radicals who make the choice to believe in love and communion above all constructs of borders.

Amen.

May 15, 2013

Chicostenango, Guatemala

Environmental Consciousness and Gender Equality
The mountains seemed to grow fiercer with every turn of the wheel. Then we stopped and stepped out to a place that seemed frozen in time. A forest as lush as any I have ever seemed. I asked our Mayan guides why this mountain was so lush and the other mountains were so barren. The reply came back sharply, “The people of this region fight for their trees.”

The Mayan Mennonite pastor told us of a peaceful protest against deforestation that took place in October of 2012. The people marched and were confronted by government troops. After a brief standoff, the troops opened fire and killed seven people on the Pan-American Highway. Many of the dead were local

church people who believed that part of loving Jesus was fighting for their environment.

I was reconvicted that the only way that I can give life is by sacrificing my own.

In this incredibly traditional region, most of the local environmental leaders are women. These are women who refused to be bound by traditional gender roles while the men sold off their spaces of worship and culture. Through their collective sacrifice, life is being created and preserved. The women are taking the people to places of environmental stewardship that the men refused to go.

When women lead, we get to go to places we previously refused to believe possible.

The Mayan village on the side of the mountain was poor. The dwellings were made out of mud and looked like they could be kicked over. In the past, due to lack

of available jobs, men were forced to go to the cities to find work. The women were left behind with little money and kids to feed. Some of the progressive churches in the country combined resources to help with the resulting oppression and malnourishment. They decided to build something that would help the environment and sustain families throughout the year, greenhouses.

The churches knew that supposed equality without economic freedom was oppression by another name.

The greenhouses have revolutionized the villages. The women are able to plant their own environmentally friendly organic crops and sustain themselves. They do not have to rely on anyone else. Traditional gender roles have gone out the window. Now, the men and women take turns doing the cooking and the cleaning. When I had lunch in the village, there were men cooking and serving just the same as the women. The sight was strikingly different than many of the other

Mayan villages I have visited, where gender roles are very traditional. By promoting sustainable interaction with the environment, progressive churches are freeing men and women.

True environmental consciousness and gender equality in this space were not just topics of scholarly conversation.

Amen.

May 16, 2013

Panajachel, Guatemala

The Fiction of Neutrality

On the mountainside in a small rural Guatemalan village, the morning was dark and cold. Everyone was on high alert. The army had entered the town overnight under the cover of darkness. The soldiers demanded that men go to their places of worship for meetings with government officials. The small Methodist church in town sat on the side of the mountain slumped downward. Close to forty men filled the inside of the small space. The men were told if they left the building they would be shot on the spot. No one moved. This was not the first time they were called to the church. After a couple of hours, the sound of a large helicopter gunship filled the air. With a sharp thud, a bomb hit the church. Everyone inside was dead in seconds. The year was 1983.

The church was targeted, because it was deemed a threat to the oppressive society.

Today, I met the man who was the pastor of that church on that dreadful day. He had been exiled to another city and was not present for the fiery deaths of his parishioners. When asked what his response was, he said, “I had to remain neutral and couldn’t say too much, my life was on the line.”

There have been few times in my life were my expectations were this shocked to meet such a weak reply.

I am a pacifist. I don’t believe in violence, whether offensive or defensive. I don’t believe that shooting people teaches people not to shoot other people. I don’t believe that spanking children teaches them not to hit people. I don’t believe that this pastor should have taken up arms against his government, but I do

believe that Jesus asks the church to lay down our lives. This means refusing to be silent in the face of injustice, no matter the consequences. To remain silent is to be complicit.

As I write…

Queer folk are being targeted for violence and execution. The church responds with neutrality.

Immigrants are living in the shadows and dying in the desert. The church responds with neutrality.

Minorities are being imprisoned and executed at alarming rates. The church responds with neutrality.

Our global economic policies and financial institutions are destroying and extinguishing the lives of billions. The church responds with neutrality.

On and on and on…

When people are dying, neutrality is a word that grows uglier and more offensive by the hour. I hear church people say all the time that their checks, houses, retirements, and comfortable lives are on the line with regards to issues of injustice and they must remain neutral.

No wonder people are not bombing our churches...we are not a threat to the status quo. We have swallowed the belief wholeheartedly that our comfort is more important than the lives of others. Checks mean more than people. Buildings mean more than people. Status means more than people. People are dying and we cling to a fictitious neutrality.

I have a suspicion that many of the church people I know will be hanging their heads in the future, having been silent in the midst of the grave injustices of our world, just like the pastor I met earlier today.

I pray it not so.

Amen.

May 17, 2013

"A Tale of Two Pastors"

Antigua, Gautemala

The sun was rising over the volcanoes and glistening on the water as we sped across the lake. The boat was made of straight fiberglass and really rocked your bum with every wave, but I didn't care. I was deep in thought, pondering all the people who gave their lives in the villages along the sandy shores during the Guatemalan Civil War. We arrived at the village and walked up the cobblestone streets until we arrived at the church.

One of the young ladies who worked for the church came out to take us on a guided tour of the facilities. We went to a coffee plantation, a sewing facility, a school, a sustainability project, clinic, and numerous other places. There was no question that the church

was doing great work. The most striking component of the tour, however, was the continuous portraits, pictures, statues, and representations of a Father Steve in every location.

We were told that Father Steve left his home in Wisconsin to serve as a priest in this small village. Through his ingenuity, the church was able to create projects that helped the community grow and thrive. I was very moved by the stories of Father Steve until someone in our group asked a fateful question, “Where did Father Steve stand with regard to the Guatemalan Civil War?”

The reply troubles me as I type.

The guide laughed and said, “He played both sides and always gave whoever asked him the supplies they wanted.”

The location of these comments weren't too far from the massacre sites were the Guatemalan military slaughtered tens of thousands of Mayan people and dumped them into mass graves. There is little question as to whether or not genocide took place in Guatemala.

Did Father Steve support the genocide by giving supplies to the Guatemalan military?

When we went back to the church, the guide proudly showed us a medal that Father Steve was granted from the Republic Of Guatemala. Since the peace accords, the presidents of this nation have consistently been former government military personnel from the Guatemalan Civil War. The medal seemed to be dripping with the blood of the Mayans to me.
Father Steve had a responsibility to take a stand against injustice, not to help both sides. On the other side of the lake, another priest from Oklahoma was killed by government troops while seeking to protect

the thousands of Mayan people of his church from being slaughtered in 1982.

Nobody ever came after Father Steve for anything but supplies. Who would you want as your pastor?

Go and do likewise. Amen.

Postscript:

THE CHURCH IN BED WITH EMPIRE

A Theological Inquiry

I cannot sleep. The fan is broken and the air sits on me like something with weight. Outside there are dogs and somewhere further out, past the dogs, the lake. I keep thinking about the lake. Not because it is beautiful, though it is, obscenely so, the kind of beautiful that feels like an argument for something you cannot quite name. I keep thinking about it because of what is in it. What was put in it. And I keep thinking about the church.

These two things have become the same thought for me and I am not entirely sure when that happened.

I have been a Christian my whole life. I have pastored. I have preached. I have sat with the dying and tried to bring something of God into those rooms. I believe in

the gospel. I want to say that plainly before I say anything else, because what I am about to say is going to sound like I do not, and I do. But I am sitting in Guatemala at whatever this hour is and I cannot stop asking what the church is actually for. What it has been for. Not in theory. Here. In this country. With these people. In this history that is not even history yet, that is still happening, that is happening right now in the economic arrangements that starve this place slowly while we argue about the border they created.
I should say something about who I am in this room. I am a visitor. I will leave. Whatever reckoning is happening to me tonight in the dark is a reckoning I get to have with the relative luxury of an airplane ticket home in my bag. The people who live beside this lake do not have that ticket. The people who lost their brothers and their cousins and their fathers to the lake do not get to have their crisis and then go home and process it in the safety of distance. I am aware of this. I am aware that there is something almost obscene about a foreigner sitting in a borrowed room having a

theological awakening at the expense of someone else's history. I do not know what to do with that awareness except to name it and keep going, because the alternative, which is to decide that the outsider's discomfort gives me permission to stay comfortable, seems worse. The history does not belong to me. But the church does. The church that produced this history is my church, and I do not get to disclaim that just because I was born too late to have signed the documents or trained the soldiers or heard the confessions. Inheritance is not only about the goods. Constantine. I keep coming back to Constantine. 313 AD and the church looked at the offer and said yes. I understand why. God help me I understand why. Three centuries of being fed to things, of meeting in cellars, of the bread and the cup passed in rooms where everyone knew what discovery meant. And then an emperor says: I will make you safe. Of course the church said yes. Survival is not a small thing. I have sat with enough people who were about to lose their survival to know it is not a small thing.

But.

But something happened in that yes that the church has never fully looked at. It did not just receive the protection of empire. It became the story empire told about itself to feel righteous. Every army that marched under a cross. Every colonial project wrapped in the language of salvation. Every ship. Every chaplain on every ship. Every death squad whose officers went to confession on Sunday and were back at work by Monday morning. I am not being rhetorical. I am sitting here and I mean this literally. The officers who conducted the genocide in this country went to church. They confessed. They received absolution. They went back. The church was there for the whole thing and the church is still here and the graves are still here and the lake is still full of whatever the lake is full of and I do not know how to hold all of that at the same time but I am trying.

I want to stay with Constantine for another minute because I think the church has never really mourned that moment and I think we need to. There is a grief

available to us that we have not done the work of feeling. The grief of what the church was before it was safe. The grief of what it gave up when safety arrived. Because here is the thing about the underground church, the church in the cellar, the church passing the cup in the dark: it had no interest in running the empire. It was not trying to manage the arrangements. It was trying to love its enemies and feed its poor and visit its prisoners and hold something together in conditions that were designed to make holding anything together impossible. That is a very different project from what the church became once it had property to protect and hierarchies to maintain and an emperor to advise. The Sermon on the Mount does not read the same way when you own the building. I know this. I own a building. I have sat in budget meetings arguing about the HVAC system and then gone to preach about the lilies of the field and felt the distance between those two activities as a kind of low-grade nausea that I have mostly learned to ignore. Most of us have learned to ignore it. That is the problem.

I want to say something about confession. The sacrament. Because I have been thinking about it since someone told me about the officers and I cannot let it go. The confessional booth is one of the most beautiful inventions in the history of the church. The idea that you can bring the worst of yourself into a small dark space and name it and have it received without punishment, without exposure, without the social consequences that public naming would bring, and leave lighter than you arrived. I believe in that. I have experienced something like it. I am not here to dismantle the sacrament.

But the confessional booth also has a shadow side that the church has not looked at honestly, which is that it can function as a pressure-release valve for the conscience in ways that allow the behavior to continue. You confess. You are absolved. You go back. The cycle resets. The individual is relieved of the accumulation of guilt that might otherwise build into the refusal to continue. The church in Guatemala understood this. The officers understood this. The machinery of

genocide understood this. Absolution was not incidental to the project. Absolution was structural to it. It was how you kept Christian men doing unchristian things week after week without the weight of it breaking them or turning them or making them refuse. The priest in the confessional was not a bystander to the genocide. The priest in the confessional was load-bearing.

I do not think most priests understood this. I do not think most of them would have chosen it consciously. But intention is not the same as effect and the effect was real. The church provided the psychological infrastructure for men to do terrible things and go on doing them. That is not a peripheral fact about the church in Guatemala. That is a central one.

I keep thinking about the soldiers themselves. Not the architects. Not the generals and the politicians and the men who gave the orders from air-conditioned rooms. The actual soldiers. Young men, most of them, from poor families, from small towns, from the same villages and the same poverty as the people they were

sent to kill. Some of them Mayan themselves. Conscripted. Told that what they were doing was necessary, was holy, was the defense of civilization and the faith against a communist insurgency that would destroy both. Given a uniform and a gun and a priest who told them God was on their side. I do not know what it costs a person to do what those soldiers did. I do not know what it takes to carry out an order like that against people who look like your family, who live like your family, who are in some cases your family. I think it costs everything. I think the men who came home from that war came home as something other than what they left as. And I think the church, which gave them the theological permission to go, has never adequately asked what it owes to what they came back as. The church blessed the going. The church did not meet the returning. The church has not sat with what it authorized in those young bodies and what the authorization produced.

The Doctrine of Discovery. I was not thinking about this when I got on the plane. Now I cannot stop. 1493.

The papal bull that declared any land not inhabited by Christians available for the taking. It sounds like a history class. It is not a history class. It is the legal and theological root system of everything that has happened to the Mayan people of this country from the moment the Spanish arrived until now, until tonight, until the trade agreements that gutted the farms and the borders that criminalize the people who had to leave because the farms were gone. The church did not write that document reluctantly. Nobody put a gun to the pope's head. The church sat down and wrote the architecture of what would become five centuries of killing and called it the will of God.

I am a Christian. That church is my church. I do not get to have it both ways.

What the Doctrine of Discovery did, and what I think about lying here in the dark, is that it did not just authorize the taking of land. It authorized the erasure of the sacred. The Mayan people had a cosmology. They had a relationship to the earth and the sky and the dead and the living that was coherent and ancient

and sophisticated and that understood itself as deeply, structurally holy. The ceiba tree was sacred. The corn was sacred. The mountains were sacred. The ancestors were present. The calendar was a theological document of extraordinary complexity. None of this was nothing. None of this was superstition waiting to be replaced by the real thing. This was a people's entire framework for understanding what existence means and what the human being owes to the world it lives in.

And the church came and said: that is not God. That is the enemy of God. That is the thing we are here to replace.

They built churches on top of the temples. Literally. You can go see this. The foundations of the old worship are underneath the foundations of the new worship, which tells you something about what the new worship understood itself to be doing. It was not arriving into a spiritual vacuum. It was conquering occupied spiritual territory and planting a flag. And what was lost in that conquest was not just the rituals

and the calendar and the cosmology. What was lost was the specific, irreplaceable way that those particular people had developed over centuries for answering the question of how to live. We do not get that back. It is not in a museum somewhere. Most of it is gone. What survived, survived underground, survived in the syncretism that mixed the Christian saints with the old sacred, survived in the stubbornness of a people who refused to let the new vocabulary entirely replace the old one. But the church did not plan for the survival. The church planned for the replacement. And I have to ask, lying here, what that says about a Christianity that could look at another people's way of being sacred and see only an obstacle.

I have been walking through markets and villages for days now and I keep noticing the way the sacred is woven into the ordinary here in a way I was not raised to expect. The woman selling corn does not separate the commercial transaction from the spiritual one. The farmer who tends the milpa is not doing agriculture

and then going to church to do religion. These are not two activities. They are one. The earth is not raw material. The earth is a relative. I am not romanticizing this. I am not pretending that the Mayan relationship to the land is without its own complications or that traditional societies are uniformly wise. I am saying that when the church arrived and told these people that their sacred was not sacred, it was not just doing bad theology. It was severing something that had taken centuries to grow and that, once severed, does not simply reattach when you say the right words over it. And I think about what the church was so afraid of. Why the sacred had to be replaced rather than encountered. I think the answer is that an incarnate God, a God who is present in the corn and the ceiba and the mountain and the ancestor, is a God who cannot be owned by an institution. You cannot charge admission to the ceiba tree. You cannot build a hierarchy around the mountain. A God who is everywhere and available to everyone through the land they live on and the ancestors they carry is a God

who does not need the church as an intermediary. And an institution that does not serve as the necessary intermediary between the people and God is an institution that cannot justify its power, its land, its tithe, its authority. The erasure of the Mayan sacred was not just theological imperialism. It was a business decision.

The volcanoes have been out there all week and I have been trying to decide what they mean to me theologically and I keep failing. They are too old. They do not care about my categories. They were here before the Mayan cosmology that the church destroyed and they will be here after whatever comes next. There is something clarifying about that, about being in the presence of something that has been witness to everything and registered none of it as particularly conclusive. The volcano does not adjudicate between the Spanish and the Mayan. The volcano does not take sides in the question of whether Constantine made the right call. The volcano is simply present, massively and indifferently present, in a way that makes my two in

the morning theology feel very small and very recent and probably very temporary. I do not mean this as a counsel of despair. I mean it as a reminder of scale. The questions I am asking tonight are important questions. They are also questions being asked by one person in one room at one moment in a history that is very long and that will continue long after the particular theological crisis of this particular night has resolved or been replaced by a different one. The volcano knows this. I am trying to learn it.

I have tried to have it both ways. I want to be honest about that too. I have spent years finding ways to love the institution while being appalled by its history, finding the exceptions and the heroes and the base communities and the liberation theologians and holding them up as evidence that the church is really, at its heart, on the right side. And those things are real. The exceptions are real. But I think tonight, here, I am being pushed past the comfortable version of that argument. The exceptions do not absolve the institution. The heroism of the individuals does not

answer for the complicity of the structure. And the structure has been complicit in ways that are so deep and so long and so generative of actual dead people that saying well but there were also good ones feels like bringing a candle to a flood.

What I keep asking myself, what I have been asking for hours now with the fan broken and the dogs outside, is whether the complicity is the church's nature or its corruption. This is not an academic question for me. If it is the nature, if the pull toward power is so deep in the institution that nothing can reach it, then I need to think seriously about what I am part of. If it is the corruption, if there is something at the center that keeps refusing to be fully domesticated, then the project is worth the argument. I believe it is the corruption. I want to be honest that tonight that belief is costing me something to hold. The evidence for the other position is real and it is here and it smells like diesel and something else I cannot name.

But I think about the base communities. I think about the people who read the gospel from underneath the

arrangements instead of on top of them and arrived at conclusions so threatening that Rome spent decades trying to suppress them. Alarming to power. That is the test I keep coming back to. Is the church alarming to power. The early church was alarming enough that the empire spent three centuries trying to kill it. Then they co-opted it. And the question ever since has been whether the thing being co-opted has enough life in it to keep leaking out around the edges of the institution. I think it does. I have seen it. I have seen it in this country. But I also think we have gotten very comfortable with a version of the church that has made its peace with power so thoroughly that it has forgotten it was ever at war with anything.

Here is what empire needs from the church. Not faith. Not salvation. Not the sacraments. Empire needs legitimacy. Mere force, just a man with a gun saying give me what you have, that is fragile. It can be resisted. It can be named for what it is. But force wrapped in the language of providence, force that arrives as the outworking of the divine plan, force that

has a priest standing next to it explaining that this is how God is bringing history to its proper conclusion, that is much harder to resist. You are not just fighting the soldiers. You are fighting the story. And the church has been supplying that story, with interruptions and exceptions and genuine heroic resistance at the margins, for most of its institutional life.

How. How does it do it. I want to name the mechanisms because I think naming them is the beginning of something, not a solution, I am not naive enough to think I am going to solve this at two in the morning in a hot room in Guatemala, but naming at least refuses the comfort of vagueness.

The first one is heaven. Not heaven as a genuine theological affirmation about the nature of God and the final destination of creation. Heaven as a management tool. The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed. True. But the church has used that truth to counsel the poor to wait in a way it has never counseled the rich to wait for anything. Has used it to redirect the energy that

might otherwise go into changing the arrangements into the endurance of the arrangements. Has made patience a virtue precisely for the people for whom patience costs the most. Empire is very comfortable with the poor hoping for heaven. What empire cannot tolerate is the poor deciding they want some of the kingdom now.

There is a version of this I have preached myself and I am not proud of it. The version where suffering is redemptive. Where the cross means that pain has meaning, that endurance is holy, that the person being ground down by the machinery should take comfort in the fact that Jesus was ground down too. There is something true in there. I am not saying there is nothing true in there. But the way I have sometimes used it, the way the church has habitually used it, strips out the resurrection. Stops at the crucifixion. Says: God suffers with you. Does not say: and God does not intend for the suffering to be permanent, and the resurrection is not just a spiritual event but a political one, a declaration that the powers that killed him did

not have the last word and do not have the last word and will not have the last word. The resurrection is supposed to be threatening. We have made it into a comfort. We have taken the most politically explosive moment in human history and turned it into an assurance that everything will be fine eventually, which is exactly what the empire needs it to be.

The second one is making everything personal. The question is not: what produced this poverty, who benefits from it, what would dismantling it require. The question is: does this person know Jesus. Are they saved. Have they accepted. I have preached this version of the gospel. I am confessing that. I have stood in pulpits and treated salvation as a transaction between a soul and a savior with nothing to say about the systems that were grinding the bodies of those souls into the ground. It keeps the church busy. It looks like faithfulness. It requires nothing of the arrangements.

And I want to be fair to this impulse because I think it comes from a real place. The individual in front of you

is real. The individual in front of you is suffering now and you want to address the now. I understand that. I have felt that. The structural analysis can feel cold when the person in the room is in pain. But what I have come to believe, slowly and against my own resistance, is that the choice between the personal and the structural is a false one that the church has accepted because the structural is dangerous and the personal is safe. You can save a soul without threatening an arrangement. You cannot dismantle an arrangement without threatening the people who benefit from it. And the people who benefit from it are often sitting in the pews. Often writing the checks. Often on the building committee. The personalization of the gospel is not just a theological mistake. It is a survival strategy. And it has cost the people at the bottom of the arrangements everything.

The third one is order. This is the one that is sitting on me heaviest tonight. The church has almost always, when it came down to it, chosen order over justice. Because the church has things. Property. Buildings.

Endowments. Hierarchies that depend on stability to function. And so when the choice comes, when the moment arrives where taking the side of justice would mean disrupting the arrangements that keep the institution intact, the church finds a way to be on the side of order. Issues a statement. Calls for dialogue. Urges both parties to come to the table. The table where one party has helicopters and the other has a church on the side of a mountain.

I think about that church. The small Methodist congregation in a village not far from here. 1983. Forty men inside. The soldiers said: leave and we shoot you. Nobody left. Then the helicopter. Then nothing. That church was bombed because it was a threat. A small congregation of Mayan farmers was threatening enough to the machinery of power that the machinery of power called in an airstrike. I keep sitting with that. I keep asking what our churches would have to become to be that threatening. I keep not liking the answer, which is that we would have to stop being useful to the status quo, stop being the place people go

to feel better about the arrangements, stop absorbing the pressure that might otherwise build into something the arrangements could not survive.

Nobody is bombing our churches. I want to sit with that sentence for a moment because I think it is one of the most revealing theological facts of our current situation. Nobody is bombing our churches because our churches are not a threat. Our churches are a resource. Our churches provide social services that the state does not want to fund, keep the poor grateful and the comfortable generous, supply the vocabulary of virtue that the powerful need to feel righteous, and ask nothing structural in return. We are useful. We are well-integrated into the machinery. And we have convinced ourselves that this integration is faithfulness rather than surrender.

The charity trap. I need to say something about this because I have lived inside it and I recognize its seductions. The church does real good. Hospitals. Schools. Food. Disaster relief. I am not dismissing this. The goods are real and people depend on them and the

world would be worse without them. But. The charity, without the analysis, without the willingness to ask why the food pantry is always full of people and always will be, is the church doing empire's social services on a volunteer basis. Empire does not mind the food pantry. Empire minds the question of who controls the food supply and by what logic and at whose expense. The pantry absorbs the pressure. The question threatens the arrangement. The church has almost always chosen the pantry over the question. I have almost always chosen the pantry over the question. That choice has a name and the name is not neutrality.

What would it actually look like to choose the question. I have been lying here asking this and I do not have a clean answer but I think I have the shape of one. It would look like the church using its institutional weight, all those endowments and buildings and tax exemptions and cultural authority, not to maintain its position within the existing arrangements but to challenge the arrangements directly. It would look like

the church saying out loud what it knows about who is getting hurt and why and who is benefiting from the hurting and naming the beneficiaries by name. It would look like the church being willing to lose the donors who do not want to hear that. It would look like a church that is more afraid of the judgment of God than the judgment of the capital campaign committee. I know what that costs. I have seen what it costs. I have watched colleagues lose their pulpits for saying the easier version of this. The full version would cost more. I want to say something about repentance because I think it is the theological category that the church applies most readily to individuals and most rarely to itself, and that gap is not an accident. The church is very good at calling individual people to repentance. To examine their hearts. To turn from their personal sins. To seek forgiveness for their individual failures. This is real and it matters and I am not dismissing it. But the church has developed an almost complete immunity to institutional repentance, to the possibility that the structure itself, not just the individuals within

it, has sinned in ways that require institutional response. What would that look like here, in Guatemala, for the church that signed the Doctrine of Discovery and sent the chaplains and heard the confessions and gave the medals. I think it would look like the church returning land. Following the money all the way back to where it came from. Asking what is owed and then paying it without conditions. I do not think the church is going to do this. But I think the inability to even imagine it tells us something important about how thoroughly the institution has protected itself from the weight of its own history. There are men alive right now who gave the orders. This is not distant. This is not the Inquisition or the Crusades, not something you can hold at a historical remove and examine with the calm of settled judgment. The men who planned the disappearances are old now but they are alive. Some of them still go to church. Some of them still receive communion. Some of them may have grandchildren who are learning the catechism right now in the same parishes that

provided the moral infrastructure for what their grandfathers did. I do not know what the church owes to those men. I do not know whether the absolution they received was real in any sense that matters. I do not know whether God distinguishes between the absolution given to a man who confesses the ordinary failures of an ordinary life and the absolution given to a man who confesses to participation in a genocide and then returns to it the following week. I would like to believe God distinguishes. I would like to believe that somewhere in the divine economy there is an accounting that the confessional booth cannot circumvent. But I am not sure what I believe about that tonight, and I am suspicious of the version of faith that reaches for that accounting as a way of relieving itself of the responsibility to create one here.

I want to say something about the incarnation because I think it is the thing the church keeps trying to domesticate and cannot, the thing that keeps leaking out and making trouble no matter how carefully the institution tries to manage it. The claim of the

incarnation is not that God visited the poor. Not that God sympathizes with the poor from a comfortable distance. The claim is that God became poor. Became occupied. Became the person on the list, the person the empire had decided was expendable, the person whose death the authorities would find convenient and whose resurrection they would find inconvenient in ways they had not anticipated. If that is true, if the incarnation means what it says it means, then the church's job is not to bless the arrangements from above. The church's job is to go where God went. Which is down. Which is under. Which is into the ditch and the village and the bombed church and the lake.

I am new to thinking this way. I want to be honest about that. I came here with my theology relatively intact, relatively comfortable, relatively unaware of the distance between what I believed and what the belief required. Guatemala is doing something to that distance. Guatemala is collapsing it in ways I did not anticipate and am not sure I am ready for. I came here to see. I did not fully understand that seeing is not a

passive act, that it changes the seer, that you cannot look at what I have looked at this week and go back to being the person you were when you arrived.

Something is being asked of me. I do not yet know exactly what. I am sitting in the dark trying to hear it clearly before the noise of everything else I have to go back to drowns it out again.

Most of us will not do this. I want to be honest that I am not sure I will do this. I am a person in a hot room in Guatemala thinking about it in the middle of the night, which is very different from being the person who does it when the moment comes. I know the difference. I have watched people face that moment. Some of them did the thing and some of them did not and the ones who did not had very good reasons and the reasons were not good enough. I do not want to be pious about this from a distance. I want to be honest that the distance between thinking about courage and having it is real and I am standing in it right now.

The lake. I keep coming back to the lake.

It is out there right now and it is beautiful and it is full of the bodies of people the church did not protect because the church had decided its own survival was more important than their lives. I do not think this is the whole story of the church. I think the whole story is more complicated and contains more grace than this accounting allows. But I think this part of the story is true and I think the church I belong to has not looked at it long enough or hard enough or with enough willingness to let it cost anything.

I think about the families who live beside it. Who fish from it in the mornings. Who grew up knowing what is in it and who put it there. I think about what it means to live beside a body of water that is also a burial ground, to eat from it and drink from it and row your children across it, to love a place that has been used as a disposal site for the people you come from. I do not know how you do that. I think you do it because the alternative is to surrender the place entirely to what was done there, to let the perpetrators have not just the lives but the lake, the mountain, the morning light

on the water. You refuse. You go on living beside it. You fish. You row your children. You keep the lake as a lake and not only as a grave, and that refusal, that insistence on the ordinary life in the presence of the catastrophic, is a form of resistance that has no theology adequate to it. I am trying to find the theology for it anyway.

The smoke is in the air. The dogs have finally gone quiet. I am still here, still sitting with what this place is asking, still not sure I am equal to it. But I am here. I am not looking away. That is where I am starting. It is not much but it is something and I am going to stay in it until the dark lifts and see what I think in the light. Amen.

BOOK 6

The Basilica of the Swinging Dicks

Jeff Hood

2016

By 2016, the prophetic and priestly threads of Hood's vocation have begun to weave together in a new way, and the form that emerges is fiction. The Basilica of the Swinging Dicks is a novella — the only sustained piece of narrative fiction in this collection — and the choice of form is itself a theological statement.

The novel has always been the form that allows writers to say things that direct statement cannot quite reach. Flannery O'Connor, whom Hood inherits in more ways than one, understood that grace is most visible in the grotesque — that the sacred refuses to appear in the places and forms we have designated for it, and shows up instead in the unexpected and the uncomfortable, often with a violence that is not merely metaphorical. Hood has absorbed this lesson deeply.

The novella follows a pastor on a road trip through the American South that becomes something between a crusade and an education. What he finds along the way is the full strangeness of American religiosity: its contradictions, its hypocrisies, its genuine holiness appearing in the most unpermitted places, its capacity for both harm and grace, often simultaneously.

The title is not provocation for its own sake. It is a declaration of the prophetic imagination's fundamental claim: the sacred does not observe the boundaries that the respectable church has drawn around it. God is in the basilica and God is in the places that the basilica has locked its doors against. The prophet's job — and the fiction writer's job, when they are doing the same work — is to go to those places and report back.

What Hood discovers in the writing of this book is that fiction allows the witness function to operate at a different angle than direct testimony or argument. The

characters in the novella can say things that Hood as author cannot quite say directly. They can embody contradictions that the essay form must resolve. They can be wrong and right at the same time, in the way that actual people are wrong and right at the same time, which is the way that truth actually lives in human experience rather than in theological propositions.

The Basilica is the book in which Hood finds his fullest voice as a writer — not just as a theologian or a preacher or a witness, but as a writer in the literary sense, someone for whom form is not incidental to content but constitutive of it. The way the story is told is inseparable from what the story is saying. That lesson will shape everything he writes afterward.

The Basilica of the Swinging Dicks

a novella by

Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood

For ALL the Queens I've Loved Before.

The Drive

"If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet as you leave that town."

-Matthew 10:14

The highway sun played tricks. What was I thinking? I guess I wasn't. Just when everyone got used to me in Jefferson, Mississippi, I had to up and go on a damn crusade. Riding in that car, I prayed for God to guide me. When I considered his guidance was presently leading to Texas, I started to reconsider the whole praying business. Truthfully, a hot plate of seafood was all I believed in at the present moment. When I sat down at the only restaurant in all of Molasses,

Louisiana, there was no way I could've predicted what was next.

The waitress approached the table and tipped her breasts while taking my drink order. While a little sidetracked, I managed to tell her that I would take a glass of sweet tea. Before leaving the table, she told me her name was Mary and asked, "What do you do?" I guess my satchel gave away that I was heading somewhere for something. "I'm a preacher," I replied. Mary blurted out, "God told me you were coming!!!" Mary raced over to the kitchen door. The first time I noticed that there was a bell on the wall she was ringing it. I hadn't noticed how many people were in the restaurant. Feeling the Spirit and climbing the counter, Mary declared at the top of her lungs, "We've got a preacher in the house tonight!" I couldn't believe my ears. I resisted. Then the entire restaurant started begging for a few words. I obliged. Letting out a fart that I prayed no one heard, I climbed up with Mary and started preaching. That short sermon was unforgettable. "Jesus was an interesting guy wasn't he?

The more I read about Jesus the more I question how I was raised. Honestly, I doubt our part of the country would've liked Jesus too much. While we're running around trying to keep gay marriage from happening, we forget that Jesus ran around in a skirt with a bunch of men. We shouldn't even need to have all these conversations about sexuality. The Bible is pretty clear that Jesus was gay. I guess all this gives new meaning to Jesus declaring his love for the whole world? Do you know what I mean?" I'd gotten so into the preaching that I hadn't done much looking. When I finally did, I realized that someone was choking on a piece of fried shrimp on the other side of the restaurant. What I assumed to be the man's wife screamed, "Leroy! LeRoY! LEROY!!!" One of the cooks darted out of the kitchen and gave the old guy that maneuver named after Heimlich. A piece of shrimp flew across the room and landed right on my shoe. The manager looked at me and yelled, "You almost killed Leroy with that crazy ass shit. Here, take these pieces of bread and two fish. Don't you ever be coming round here no more! You

understand?" People have always told me that I don't have a proper understanding of place. Regardless, I shook the dust off of my feet and told them that they could all just kiss the rainbow flag on my bumper. I thought it was a damn good sermon.

I ended up sleeping in my car. I guess I was too afraid of encountering another town like Molasses. The yellow lights of the gas station were mesmerizing. I slept hard until someone banged on my window. A man with an erect penis coming out of his zipper stood at my door with a smile on his face. I rolled down the window slightly and asked, "May I help you?" "Are you Max?" "Nope, I'm Christian." "Oops...sorry to bother you...I was just looking for Max. This is a really popular spot for hook ups and I saw your rainbow flag and well I...I...You wouldn't want to do anything would you?" "No!!!" I cranked up the car and drove off as fast as I could. What in the hell just happened? I will never forget the image of that erect man in my rearview. I didn't have time to think about all that shit...God was calling me to Texas.

The miles quickened. Before I knew it...I saw the sign. "Everything is bigger in Texas." After a hell of a trip, I was finally here. Pulling over, I knelt down beside the sign to pray. I knew God called me to pastor a church plant and that's exactly what I was going to do. When a tough looking dude pulled over to ask me what I was doing, I figured that it was time for me to get back into the car.

I only stopped once more. I had to. Everyone always told me about this place called Bullseye's. The joint didn't disappoint. With over 50 gas pumps and a convenience store as big as any grocery store, I was in heaven. As I put my mouth under the frozen drink machine and turned it on, I didn't count the cost. I called the property management company to let them know I was on my way. Before I got to my new apartment, I started to feel my stomach quake. Upon arrival, I ran to the toilet as fast as I could. I jumped onto the seat and let out the biggest shit I'd ever experienced. When I finished, I walked into the living room to be greeted by Tom from the management

company. I missed him on the rush in. Due to the smell and theatrics of it all, Tom looked as if he was in toxic shock. Through it all, Tom maintained his composure and gave me all of the information I needed. I couldn't wait to try out the pool. Before he left, I let him know that I was here to plant a new church.

The First Days

Darkness filled those early morning hours. At the time, I loved it. I felt like I was the only one. Now, I know better. I moved quickly to press the coffee. Once the cup was poured, I took three deep breaths. I dared not take another. I felt like it would be wasteful. Every step reminded me of my loneliness. They say that you're never alone when you've got God.
"They" are full of shit. The carpet crunched. I could feel the excess cleaner getting caught beneath my toenails. I thought about getting my slippers from the bathroom...but I knew the slippers were right next to the lotion and that would just lead to getting lost in a round of morning masturbation. I couldn't have that. I

had to keep my mind right. God called me to plant a church damnit! Regardless of my will, I was stuck to the floor somewhere between masturbation and meditation. Frozen in time, I could feel every bone in my body. I never thought I'd be alone like this. I guess God called me to something more than anyone else was ready for. I finally retreated to the small balcony. I loved that place. I can still feel the cold Texas air. I opened the Bible and stumbled toward the feeding of the five thousand. I figured that if Jesus could feed the five thousand then she could certainly turn a miracle out of me. For the first few days, I wandered around Jackson, Texas. I'd never been in a city so large or diverse. I met many different types of stories. The homeless man told me about the apocalypse. The teacher asked me to pray for her. The landscaper told me about the drought. The police officer demanded that I quit talking to him. The nurse told me about the healthcare shortage. I heard it all and then some. I wanted more. There was a spiritual hunger growling within me. I knew I was doing the Lord's work. By the

time Friday came around, I was more than ready for BoysTown. I don't think anyone knew I fucked men back in Jefferson. Well, I guess the men I fucked knew but no one else did. When you're religious in Mississippi, being flamboyant is just part of the territory. We are a flamboyant people. No one was suspicious of anything. I had the little rainbow flag on my car...but that flag is so common these days. When I asked God to heal me, she laughed in my face. I quit asking and decided to live. That night, I prepared my body like I was preparing the sacraments for church. I guess in my mind I was. I put on the nicest underwear I owned. I figured it would help me stand out in the crowd. When I got in the car, I turned on the ventilation system to keep from choking to death on the cologne I bought at the drug store. Nothing was going to stop me tonight. When I got to the club, I used the valet service. Tossing my keys to the young attendant, I felt bad as shit. As the doors opened, I made sure I gently jiggled my ass back and forth all the way to the bar. An older queen I knew back in

Jefferson taught me that trick. After ordering a drink, I told all who would listen that I was planting a church. No one seemed too impressed. One man leaned over and said, "We already have churches and we hate them all. Why do we need another?" One woman declared, "God is like shit. The best thing you can do is squeeze it out, flush and be done with it." When someone asked for my name, I proudly declared, "Christian." Three people laughed so hard they spit out their drinks. I guess they thought my life sounded like some crazy novella or something. Everyone started bringing friends over to meet the guy named Christian who was planting a "Christian" church. Stiff drinks seem to make everything funnier. I got tired of being the blunt end of everyone's jokes. Humiliated, I knew it was time for me to go. Walking down the street to Swinging Dick's, I was ready to get shitfaced. Stumbling out a couple hours later, I ran into the hottest man I'd ever seen. I still don't know how much the alcohol factored in. When we started to flirt, I was in heaven. The celestial warmness extended to every crevice of

my body. Before I got carried away, I had to make sure he was a Christian. I started preaching: "Jesus said, 'I am the light of the world.' In these few short seconds, you've brought much light into my life and I want to make sure that you know who the source of light is." When I became assured he had all kinds of light in him, I went in full force. As we started to kiss, he stopped me and asked for some money before we went any further. Though I didn't even know his name, I would've given him anything he wanted. I was so in love. Before I could get one more kiss in, police swarmed in from everywhere. The female officer informed me that I was being arrested for solicitation of prostitution. My last words as I was being put in the squad car echoed throughout BoysTown, "But I came here to plant a church!!!"

With no friends or family close enough to get me out, I sat in that filthy Jackson County Jail for much longer than I anticipated. Throughout my time there, I met all kinds of people who were there for all kinds of crimes. I started building my church with those that Jesus

referred to as "the least of these." I led meditations, yoga, lessons, readings and whatever else I thought would get people interested. When I finally stepped out of the cell to go home, I realized that I'd been in that joint for 5 days. The guard told me that the charges were dropped for lack of evidence (aka they lost the tape). I was so happy that I shit slightly in my pants. "God is so good!!!" Over the last week, I'd passionately kissed the hottest guy I'd ever met, I collected a roster of over a hundred people for my new church and God busted down the jailhouse doors. "Hallelujah!!!" Walking out, I knew I was more than just a church planter...I was the rainbow prophet of God.

The Start

"I was in prison and you visited me..."

-Matthew 25:36

For over two weeks, I fasted and prayed. Jailhouse religion did a number on me. I kept rejecting the idea that I could plant a church with all the crazy ass people

I met on the inside. I wrestled back and forth over and over. I looked at the list and then I put it down. While I knew God was calling me to plant a church, I was having trouble calling all the guys I met in jail. Then, it happened. The story of Jonah hit me like an oversized sack of potatoes. After sleeping with everyone he could get his hands on in Nineveh, Jonah ran away. God commanded him to go back and minister to the community. Just like me, Jonah didn't want to go back. When he finally did, the Ninevites were restored. Truth be known, I slept with too many men while I was in prison. I'd even enjoyed sex with three at one time in the shower one morning. I ain't proud of it...but that's what I did. Though I felt like I'd already done more than my fair share of straining, I decided to heed the call of my fellow gay brother the Apostle Paul and "strain toward what lies ahead."

The phone rang three times before he answered. "Tony?" "Yeah! Who's this?" "This is Christian from jail." "Oh shit! I didn't think you'd actually call." "I'm calling to invite you to the first service of the new

church God has called me to plant." "Will you and I get some alone time?" "Let's just keep it about the church Tony. The service will be at my home in two weeks. I know God is moving." "I do too. I can really feel it. I'm erect as hell." "Ok Tony, see you at church." Obviously, the first call went a little sideways on me. I told myself that I couldn't let it happen again. I needed better boundaries. So, I decided to attend a boundary training that one of the denominations was offering.

Before my class, I'd never considered that dinosaurs might still roam the earth. Professor Price shuffled across the floor, put both hands on the lectern and prepared to teach us about boundaries. When she told us that hugging before marriage was a sin, I about fell out of my chair. I couldn't let the moment past. "Have you ever hugged anyone before Professor Price?" Immediately, she locked eyes with me and stared straight into my soul. "One of the boundaries that I keep is that I don't reveal details of my private life." Breaking the lock that her eyes had on me, I managed to respond, "Maybe if you gave some examples from

your private life then all of this bullshit that you're teaching would be a little more believable." The room froze. Nobody moved or dared say a word. Death seemed to be approaching quickly. Though frightened, I kept pushing. I refused to avert my stare. After less than a minute, Professor Price lost it and screamed, "Get out! Get out!! Get out right now!!!" I refused to move. I think everyone gained strength. Together, we started to teach the class on our own. Professor Price stormed out of the room and we finally had a round of boundary training that was relevant to our work. Now I'm not saying I won't slip up again, but I'll be damned before I live like Professor Price and all the other dinosaurs. I was ready for them to all go extinct. In those moments, the freedom of Christ took on new meaning.

Thinking that a public place would be safer for work, I met up with Roy at a coffee shop in BoysTown. We had sex in prison too. Before I could go any further, I must admit that I had more sex in prison than I'd ever had before. When I looked at the list of the guys that I was

supposed to start my church with, I'd had sex with a majority of them. Roy was a large guy with a sweet smile. I was really looking forward to reconnecting. When we saw each other, Roy ran up and kissed me right on the lips. Back in Jefferson, a public kiss on the lips between two men would've gotten someone killed. Relaxing, I reminded myself that Jackson was different. For over two hours, Roy and I enjoyed majestic conversation. In addition to committing to the church, Roy wanted to serve in leadership. I praised God. I knew we were ready to lead the church together. Before we got up to leave, Roy asked me to put my hand on his thigh to pray for a blood clot he had. Though I thought I felt an erect penis, I just continued to pray, "Oh God we need you to sock that clot!" Without provocation, Roy assured me that it was just his keys. Regardless of what it really was, I left invigorated.

Though I kept having all kinds of weird encounters, the church was taking shape. With about eighty people committed, we were ready for our first service. I

wanted to meet with one last person before the night arrived. Charlie knew everyone. We met at a bar when I first moved to town and we immediately hit it off. In the course of conversation, Charlie made the drunken promise that he would bring over a hundred people to our first service. Though unsure of whether or not he could follow through, I decided to call him up. Charlie and I met at the same bar that we met at in the first place. I gave him all the details about our first church service. Looking about as serious as anyone I'd ever met, Charlie assured me that he never made a promise that he didn't keep. I began to weep uncontrollably and assured him that I would never forget his help. The hand came out of nowhere. Charlie slapped me clean across the face and scolded me, "Pull it together! We've got a church to plant."

The Service

"...let each one of you serve his neighbor..."

-1 Peter 4:10

Have you ever woken up in total bliss? I did that day. The pillow felt softer than ever before. The sheets were the perfect temperature. The mattress floated under my body. The Holy Spirit filled the room. I began to speak in a language I'd never heard before. I raised my hands to the sky. Electricity shot about the room. In the midst of it all, I could hear the voice of Jesus saying, "Plant that damn church Christian!" Distracted by a hot wet tongue traveling up my leg, I shot awake in bed. My new dog Harvey was sitting there staring at me. Was it a dream? I didn't have time to think about it. Today was the day. It was time to for the service. Preparation looks different for each preacher. Today, I needed some deep prayerparation. For over an hour, I went to God for every person who might walk through the doors of my apartment. I prayed so long that I think I even heard God say, "You've already named them twice." I guess even God gets worn out. Regardless, I was ready to stop praying and start walking. Passing through the kitchen, I rebuked the food for tempting me to end my fast and rushed down

the stairs. When I got to the car, I looked in the mirror and felt like I even looked like Jesus today.

Do you remember that old story about the wedding feast? I was praying that our church service would look something like that. I thought about Jesus coming up on those she loved and wanting everyone to have a good time. When the alcohol gave out, Jesus gave them more. I bet Jesus could dance with or without the alcohol. I can't...but that's another story. Jesus got these folks drunk and showed them what love looks like uninhibited. Can you imagine Jesus twerking his ass off? I bet nobody then or now had ever seen a robe bounce around like that. The Lord's moves were/are always divine. Over and over, I kept thinking about new things I'd need to make happen. A short trip turned into a long one, I had to hurry. After I packed everything into the car, I raced home. Initially, I didn't notice the blue lights. While it is usually a good idea to stop for the police, I was tired of being targeted for my sexuality. I knew I wasn't going that fast. I was now. Praying to God, I reached some of the fastest speeds I'd

ever driven. The Holy Spirit was so thick in the car that I felt invincible. Then, it all ended. The squad cars peeled off and let me go. Driving away, I couldn't figure out what happened. When I got home, I turned on the television and saw that the biggest donut shop in town was on fire. I realized that the Holy Spirit sent that fire to distract the officers. Praise the Lord!

With just a few hours left, I rushed through the door. The smell was terrible. I looked around and saw a big pile of shit. Seconds later, I found Harvey hiding in the bathroom. I knew the connection. Regardless, I didn't have time to deal with it. Jumping in the shower, I washed off and tried to keep from getting any friction in the process. I didn't need any distractions. Jumping out, I dried off and went for the body odor killer. While at the mall earlier, I purchased some expensive cologne. Trying not to get carried away, I held myself to six sprays. Running back into the kitchen, I managed to get all of the food and drinks out. As the time drew near, I grew nervous that no one would show up. Seconds felt like hours. Then, the doorbell chimed.

Harvey barked loudly from his cage. I opened the door and it was Professor Price. "I wanted to see what this church plant was all about and decided to bring some friends." Behind her, were four other dinosaurs. Together, they stomped in and sat down in the living room. I offered them all food and drinks. While retrieving their requests, I heard a scream. Running back in, I realized that Professor Price's friend Donald sat in Harvey's shit. I assured him that it was chocolate and gave him a pair of pants to wear for the rest of the night while his were in the wash. The doorbell chimed again, Tony and Roy came in together. Behind them, came a bunch more people. The doorbell rang incessantly. Before I knew it, I had over forty people ready for church to start. I couldn't even remember how I knew each person. I didn't care. When the musician arrived, we kicked it off singing some funky hipster Christian lyrics with our hands up. Crying and singing, I knew something magical was happening. Right before I got to the sermon, I heard a bang on the door. Apologizing, I went to see what was going on.

True to his word, Charlie barged in with over a hundred people. "How did you get all these people here?" I figured it out quickly when Charlie placed a big block of marijuana on the table. Communion began early. Even Professor Price and her friends took a few hits. It's probably an understatement to say that everyone was mesmerized by the sermon. I didn't disappoint: "Love is God and God is Love. When we make love we are making God. In the beginning was love, love was with God and love was God. Without love we are nothing. With love we are everything. For love so loved the world that love gave love's only begotten love that whosoever believes in love will not perish but have everlasting love. Make no mistake, love will win my friends." One by one, people stood up and chanted over and over, "Love! Love! Love!" Everyone seemed so happy. I couldn't resist. I decided to give an invitation. "Who wants to accept the power of love tonight?" The whole room was ready. The Holy Spirit was strong in the place. We sang and sang and sang. I think I even gave communion three times. By

the time the night was over, I'd collected everyone's information on clipboards and knew that I would need a much bigger space for the second week. I got Donald's clothes out of the wash. Before I could apologize, he told me not to worry about it and that he'd even tasted a little bit of the exquisite chocolate he sat in. Looking around, every shred of food in the house was eaten and every drink was drunk. I even realized that someone had eaten half of a roll of paper towels. I gave everyone a hug and found myself alone with Charlie. "Do you want to make some of that love you were talking about and have a victory fuck?" I was very tempted. Then, someone banged loudly at the door. "Open up! It's the police." Charlie was gone before I even blinked. The last thing I heard him say was, "I'll take care of Harvey." I opened the door. "You are under arrest." Trying to run from the cops finally caught up with me. Though no one from the church remained, I yelled out, "I'll be back next week."

The Church

"...upon this rock I will build my church...and the gates of hell will not overcome it."

-Matthew 16:18

Before I knew it, I was out. To be honest, all of it seemed like a dream. I didn't have any money but somehow I made bail. Who saved me? I sat down on a bench and breathed the fresh air. In my ears, I heard a familiar voice. When I opened my eyes, there was no one there. I closed my eyes and listened, "Take the church to Swinging Dick's and I'll be there." I knew I was losing my mind. "Swinging Dick's?!? I can't take the church to a gay bar!" Despite my hesitation, I couldn't shake the voice. I started walking. When I got to the Washington Bridge, I paused to take in the sunset over the Jackson River. The world was electric. The colors exploded across the horizon. Though I'd heard the voice before, it sounded different this time.

"The colors of your church will be this brilliant."

As tears streamed down my face, I raised my hands, closed my eyes and leaned into the sunset. Oops! The

next thing I knew, my feet were over my head and I was falling fast. The river raced toward me. I just knew that this was it. Right before I hit the water, I felt a hand grab my ankle. When I woke up in bed, Harvey was asleep at my feet. Next to my alarm clock, I found a note. "Keep your eyes open next time."

The apartment was a wreck. Each room looked like every cabinet and closet revolted and threw all of it's contents out into the middle of the floor.

Unfortunately, I didn't have time to clean it up. I had to call Swinging Dick's. The phone rang three times before Angela picked up. "Can I talk to you about renting the bar on Sunday mornings?" "You need to come over here right now if you want anything out of me!" I knew God wanted us to be at Swinging Dick's.

So, I jumped in my car and raced over there. I passed one police car and prayed that I didn't get caught speeding again. I didn't need another incident. The rearview let me know that all was clear. Parking in the second spot, I ran upstairs. The back office was darker than I thought it should be for a business meeting.

When Angela walked in, I knew why. For a general manager, Angela was nuts. Today, all she had on was a bra and a thong. "I'm going to need to fuck you in order to close the deal." While I'd had a few relationships with women in my teenage years, I hadn't had sexual intimacy with one in a very long time. Regardless of my readiness, I knew that God would see me through. I really needed the church to be at Swinging Richard's. When Angela dropped her thong, I was surprised that she was hairy as I was. Regardless, I offered her my penis and we did it Pentecostal style...hands in the air, full body shakes and a whole host of tongues. I could tell this was a very serious business deal. The small piece of me that liked women was awoken with a vengeance. The Lord made a way out of no way. When all was finished, Angela leaned in and said, "Not only can you use the bar every Sunday...you can use it for free and I'm going to be a member of your church." Angela softly kissed me one more time and left. Though I know this was a strange way to secure a church location, I had to do what I had to do. With

seating in the bar for over six hundred people, I figured we had a long time to grow into the space. So to keep it familiar, I decided to name our community, "The Church at Swinging Dick's."

Over the next few days, I started calling as many people as I could. "We're meeting next Sunday morning at Swinging Dick's!!!" While most people were ecstatic, Bob didn't like anything abnormal. I think he came to the church to control it. I got line after line from Bob. "You're not safe!" "You're not really gay!" "Your lifestyle is anathema." "You're dangerous." "I can't believe there was marijuana at the first service!" "You don't have the right education to be doing this." "We can't meet in a bar!" I wondered whether Bob hated his self or me more. I tried to help him but Bob just wouldn't quit. On and on, Bob kept sending me crazy messages and slamming me on the Internet. This cat was bat shit crazy. Why does God afflict us with the calling to minister to everyone? Against my better judgment, I let it go. When he went silent for a period, I

thought everything was going to be ok. Then, he pushed me to the limit.

The first morning as The Church at Swinging Dick's was amazing. Through a generous donation, our hipster guitarist turned into a full hipster band. People just kept coming. We had donuts and coffee ready for every mouth and a seat for every ass. By the time everyone got settled, there were over two hundred people in attendance. We rocked out for Jesus. Charlie was on the front row winking at me. Professor Price gave a stirring prayer about justice. Tony and Roy passionately held each other on the third row. The morning was perfect. When I arose to give the sermon, everyone cheered. I was preaching hard on Jesus calling the disciples when Bob popped up and popped off. "You are a controlling, manipulative, psychopathic charlatan. I will not sit here and let you teach any longer." I'd had enough. I wasn't the only one. Everyone in the church started shouting him down. I realized I was going to have to have him removed. Larry and David were our security team. When they

approached Bob, he bit one of them. I demanded they not retaliate. Bob was drug out of the building screaming about what he was going to do to me. I reminded him that he would be arrested for trespassing if he ever came back to The Church. Unfortunately, he did.

The Details

"The one who is faithful in little will be faithful in much..."

-Luke 16:10

The lights danced as the music pulled us deeper into worship. Hundreds and hundreds of people raised their hands and sang love songs to God. I did too. I still couldn't believe that God brought me to this moment. Never in my wildest dreams would I have thought that anything like this was possible. How was I leading one of the largest progressive churches in Jackson? How? Occasionally, pastors need to stop and smell the roses. With a guest preacher filling in for me, I decided that

today was my day. When Charlotte started to masterfully break down The Beatitudes, I checked out and let my mind wander a bit. The last few months at The Church at Swinging Dick's were not for the faint of heart or head.

Not long after we started meeting at Swinging Dick's, we hired a guitarist named Tim. This young man was the prettiest of pretty boys. Coming out of the Church of Christ, Tim was interested in experimentation. Often, this cat came to us straight from the bathhouse. As he ran in tardy, I didn't really know what was dripping off him. In the midst of it all, I tried to be as understanding as possible. There was a time when I was interested in experimentation. That was before I got saved and found the Lord. Regardless, I'm sure you can imagine how all the folks at church took to Tim. That brother had boyfriend after boyfriend after boyfriend. The folks at our church were all over him. On multiple occasions, I pulled Tim aside and told him to tone it down. He didn't know how. By the time everything blew up, Tim was dating two men in the

church and they were starting to get jealous. One was our video technician named West and the other was our worship drummer named Steve. That Sunday morning, I was getting ready to preach when West projected a video on the screen of him giving oral sex to Tim. I guess this was intended to intimidate Steve once and for all. We got the video turned off and I managed to preach a lousy sermon on grace. When it was all over, I went to Tim and said, "I'm sorry but you can't play in the band once your dick has been exposed in worship." West left quickly and quietly. I haven't seen him since. Oddly enough, our church grew when people heard we played a pornographic video in church. The Lord works in mysterious ways. Pretty boys don't make the best church musicians.

Amy was a runaway living on the streets of BoysTown. I met her late one night while out walking the streets trying to hear a word from God. When she called out to me, I almost didn't answer. I was in another world. However, I was trying to get better about not being so heavenly minded that I was of no earthly good.

Stopping to talk, Amy told me her story. To be honest, there were details that I wish she'd left out. Nevertheless, I heard about how the abuse, the drugs and the relationships kept taking from her. Touched, I invited Amy to live with me. When she declared that she had a deep desire to be a minister, I made Amy the first intern at The Church at Swinging Dick's. Everything went well for a time, then some of Amy's old destructive habits resurfaced. Returning home early one night, I found Amy having sex with a young teenager. Though every part of me resisted, I had to call the police. Thinking back to my childhood, I wished someone called to help me. Now, I minister to Amy in jail. We pray that she will only get probation when she goes to trial. Thankfully, Amy repented and is seeking help. I was just trying to do some good. People don't know a damn thing about money. In those early months, we went through three treasurers quick. Suzanne was stuffing money into her bra. Luther was depositing money into his own account. Chris was putting money in his shoe. Money was going

everywhere except to the church. Against my better judgment, we decided not to press charges against any of them. I tried to keep up with it for a time. How in the hell is someone with no background in accounting supposed to do all this shit? I decided to hire a permanent accountant. Money is always an important detail. Thankfully when I got the mechanics and processes right, we started rolling. Now, I love money. When I came back to the service and refocused on Charlotte, I began to realize that something was bothering her. She repeated her lines about The Beatitudes over and over. Looking out into the audience, I realized that Bob was here with a gun on his hip. Earlier, I'd told her the story and asked her to be on the lookout. Though it is clearly posted that we don't allow guns, Bob was here to prove a point. I motioned for Charlotte to keep going. When I confronted Bob and asked him to leave, he pulled his gun and pointed it at me. Pandemonium broke out. Then, Bob squeezed off two shots. I dropped to the floor. Professor Price fell right next to me. Despite my

pleas, Bob put the gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger. I will never forget the sight of his head exploding. Leaning back, I could see that Professor Price was in trouble. "Hold on! This is not the end. Hold on! I love you." Looking up, Professor Price managed to mutter, "I love you too." Unfortunately, the bullet hit her heart and she bled out in my arms. Right before me, I saw the life go out of her old dinosaur eyes. When the paramedics arrived, I realized that I'd been shot in the arm. For days, I was so depressed that I didn't know if I could keep going. After much prayer, I decided to push forward. I knew that's what Professor Price would've wanted. The media swarmed me when I was released from the hospital. Everyone wanted to know one thing, "Are you going to keep The Church at Swinging Dick's open?" I shouted out to the microphones as loud as I could, "God called me to plant a church and by God that's exactly what I'm going to keep doing." The following Sunday, half the city greeted us for worship.

The Explosion

"The day of the LORD is here for all nations..."

-Obadiah 1:15

In those days of grief and recovery, Harvey became my primary source of strength. I didn't go anywhere that he couldn't. I never thought I'd love a dog so much. When it came time to return to church for the first time since the shooting, I couldn't leave him behind. In front of all the cameras, Harvey walked in with me. Looking around, I couldn't believe it. People were everywhere. The building didn't have room to hold all the support. The walls were covered with people. The bar was covered with people. The seats were covered with people. The balcony was covered with people. The stage was covered with people. It was absolutely insane. People were chanting over and over at the top of their lungs, "Swing--ing Dick's! Swing--ing Dick's! Swing--ing Dick's!" The entire city came out to show their support for The Church at Swinging Dick's. It was beautifully shocking.

Right before the service started, the Fire Marshall informed us that the space was way beyond capacity. We had to ask hundreds of people to step outside. Thankfully, we were able to quickly erect screens to show what was going on inside. When I came back in and walked to the front of the church, I was reminded of Professor Price's last wish. There she sat stuffed on one of the front chairs. The taxidermist did an incredible job of making her look so alive. Throughout our founding, Professor Price told us to stuff her and put her at the front of the church if she died early. I think she wanted a visual representation that she was watching over us. I venerated her. When I was about to walk up the stage to deliver my first sermon since the shooting, I stopped to kneel and pray in front of her. As the cameras snapped and filmed away, I looked into her eyes with tears running out of mine. I felt like we'd resurrected a dinosaur. The longer I looked at her, the more it looked as though she was going to speak. When her mouth started moving, I knew I was having a vision. Professor Price declared, "Get on up there and

preach. I'll be here when you get back." That's exactly what I did.

Looking out into the sea of people, my eyes locked onto one woman in particular. Bob's surviving widow Monica sat directly in front of the pulpit. A prominent Transgender activist in her own right, Monica desperately tried to get Bob mental help. Nothing seemed to work. After the shooting, she was one of the first people to call me at the hospital. I felt so bad that she'd lost Bob. I knew how much she loved him. Stirred in my spirit, I couldn't let this moment past. I brought Monica on stage. In the presence of many, I wanted everyone to know that we forgave Bob and would stand by Monica at all costs. The entire room erupted in tears and cheers. I knew God was working some heavenly magic.

When I finally started the sermon, I firmly declared, "The Church at Swinging Dick's is a resurrection community!" Looking straight into the cameras, I shouted to thunderous applause, "We will not be undone by the terror of death!" Then, I hit the gas...

"We won't let tragedy make us hate nobody. We love Bob. We're a resurrection people! We won't be intimidated by violence. We're too busy preaching peace. We're a resurrection people! We're going to be the strongest voice of peace and justice that this city has ever seen. We're a resurrection people! Hallelujah! We're a resurrection people! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!! We're a resurrection people! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!! Hallelujah!!! We're a resurrection people!" I collapsed in a hot sweat. Harvey licked me to make sure I was ok. The people wanted more. I didn't have more. Everyone in the room cheered wildly. One of the young women I'd been mentoring named Anne stood up and went to the microphone, "The power of God that you just felt is available at this church every week. The Church at Swinging Dick's is God's gift to Jackson. We thank you for your presence. Let's go be different in order to make difference!" I was amazed at her courage and tenacity. I knew that our congregation would be seeing more of her.

Multiple folks helped Harvey and I get past the cameras and into the car. I was exhausted. When I got situated, Charlie started to drive me home. "Stop!!!" I forgot something and needed to go back in. I couldn't leave her. By the time I told Charlie to go ahead, Professor Price was buckled up next to me. After briefly dozing off, I woke up to find Harvey gnawing on her foot. Scolding him, I made Harvey promise to never touch Professor Price again. When I got home, I put Professor Price in the guest bedroom and went to bed. Over the last few days, an explosion happened and it was more powerful than anything I ever imagined.

The Limelight

"Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works..."

-Matthew 5:16

In the year after the shooting, my profile grew tremendously. Regardless of where I was, the people

chanted, "Christian! Christian! Christian! Christian!" In city after city, I did interview after interview after interview. I was exhausted. After multiple failed relationships, I didn't trust anyone. Through it all, Harvey was the closest thing I had to a friend. Most of the people who helped me start the church got angry when they didn't get the accolades they thought they deserved and left. I was alone. After everything that happened, I learned to talk about God in superficial ways that didn't reveal the true questions that festered in my heart. I was struggling. I didn't know what to do. Masturbation seemed to comfort me more than anything. In spite of it all, our church was huge. Literally, every gay man from within a hundred miles was there every time we opened the doors. When we hit four thousand people coming to the bar at multiple times for multiple different services, I knew we needed our own space.

When I organized a committee, I did it just for show. I knew that I was going to be the person who made all the building decisions. I found a piece of property right

in the middle of BoysTown. Before consulting anyone, I bought it. Nobody seemed to care. Then, I flew to San Francisco and found an infamous architect named ReRe to design it. Everyone was so excited. We didn't have to worry about money. People from all over the world were desperate to fund this unique of a project. At the groundbreaking, everyone chanted our name, "Swing--ing Dick's! Swing--ing Dick's! Swing--ing Dick's!" Though I'd thought about it, I knew we weren't going to be able to change our name. We also unveiled a statue of Professor Price. We actually bronzed her this time. The entire facility was built within six months. The space was enormous. With room for over six thousand congregants, we were amongst the largest churches in the entire world. Before we moved in, we held one last meeting to determine what we would call the place. Almost immediately, someone blurted out the name we all knew we wanted, "The Basilica of the Swinging Dicks!" When the day came to introduce everyone to our new space, I was particularly proud of three things. At the front of the Basilica, we created a

pink triangle altar to memorialize our struggle. At the top of the Basilica, we placed a phallic steeple shooting up to heaven with a cross coming out of the domed tip. Throughout the Basilica, we made everything as ornate and glitzy as possible. I loved it. I could feel the Spirit of God in the place. When the day of our first service arrived, every major network broadcasted it live. Before I preached, I quickly masturbated in the bathroom. I guess I developed the habit to soothe my nerves. Moments later, I climbed into the raised marble pulpit and declared, "The Basilica of the Swinging Dicks will swing as long as God does." Everyone clapped loudly. I basked in the beauty of it all. The cheering continued incessantly for many years. Though I poured my heart and soul into making it as diverse as possible, The Basilica grew whiter and gayer each year. I guess we should've anticipated the name "The Basilica of the Swinging Dicks" might have consequences. I wasn't thinking about the future. I was only thinking about keeping the space growing. I guess I got caught up in the glow of it all. We sustained a

regular attendance of well over five thousand people for all those years. I had the largest progressive church in the world. I wrote more books than I can count. Everyone sought my advice on everything. I was a renowned figure. For some reason, it wasn't enough. Over the years, I developed a habit of masturbating ten times a day just to keep my head on straight. When Harvey died on his twelfth birthday, I started to reevaluate things. For many years, I gave the church everything I had. I knew I couldn't give much more. With ideas of quitting or retiring jumping around my head, I knew I needed to find someone who could achieve the diversity that I dreamed of. I began to travel the country searching for someone to work with me for a few years and then step in as pastor of the Basilica. I interviewed so many people that my head was left spinning. I couldn't find anyone. While visiting family in my hometown of Jefferson, Mississippi, I met a woman by the name of Rev. Dr. Val Buffington. After a few minutes, I knew I'd found the next leader of "The Basilica of the Swinging Dicks."

The Exit

We spent the afternoon packing. Mississippi can be enchanting. Glaring outside, I just wanted to go out and play in the leaves. I knew better. I had to get all of Rev. Dr. Val Buffington's final things into her small car. The rest was shipped a few weeks earlier. I loved getting to know Rev. Dr. Buffington's wife Letitia and her daughter Clarissa. The Buffington's were an amazing family. Upstairs, there was a purple box full of pictures that I took a second to look through. Lifting off the top, I got to see many intimate moments from her past. I knew this was holy ground. With each picture, we grew closer.

As we were packing up the final things, we talked about the future of The Basilica of the Swinging Dicks. I loved every part of her plan. I hadn't been this excited about the church since we started. Rev. Dr. Buffington passionately kissed Letitia and Clarissa goodbye. Though she knew they would join her soon, two weeks was the most time they'd ever spent apart. Clarissa had to finish school. I'll never forget that final goodbye. We

became the closest of friends on the car ride. We talked as if we were sprinting a marathon. Truth be told, we were still talking and not really paying attention when we passed into Louisiana. The two trucks came from both sides. I saw the red one first. Rev. Dr. Buffington never had a chance. The truck dropped a log through her window. By the time we stopped, I was banged to hell and Rev. Dr. Buffington's head was sitting in my lap. I thought these types of decapitations only happened in horror films. "What was going to happen to The Basilica of the Swinging Dicks?" "What was going to happen to Letitia and Clarissa?" "What was going to happen to me?" The blue truck spilled gasoline. The car was burning. I could smell the flames on my flesh. I'd never felt such a sensation. The fire was rising higher and higher. The last person I saw was a huge redneck trucker wearing a confederate flag hat with chewing tobacco drooling out of his mouth. He picked me up and saved me. Before the car blew up, I heard someone assure me that things were going to be ok. Three weeks later, I woke up under the most

intense white light I'd ever seen. I was covered in bandages. The doctor leaned over my face and said, "You're going to be ok."

Lying in that hospital bed for over six weeks was all I needed. I was done. Though it was nice to see news coverage all over television about my progress, I knew that I didn't have the passion to keep ministering. Phoning my leadership, I asked them to open up a national search for my replacement. Once the process started, I instructed my leadership that I would lead interviews with the three finalists. Is it bad that I already knew exactly who they would be? People stayed by my bedside throughout my recovery. There was one new person that I grew to love. Wearing his confederate flag hat that he had on when he saved me, Chuck refused to leave me alone. I grew to see him as a trusted friend. When it came time for me to go back to Texas, I told him he could go back with us if he left the confederate flag and his racism in Louisiana. Chuck obliged and became a trusted member of my inner circle. Though people were practically beating down

my door, I refused to do any interviews. I honored the family of Rev. Dr. Buffington, preached like I'd never preached before and championed multiple local initiatives. All of it was well and good, but I just wanted to find the next pastor of The Basilica of the Swinging Dicks.

Over two weeks, I met with the three finalists. Rev. Dr. Phillip Fuller was full of hot air. Everything he said was so dumb that I couldn't help but laugh. Rev. Dr. Fuller also kept farting in the interview. When your ass makes your potential employer throw up, you don't get the job. Rev. Dr. Bob Pinkston came in with a full erection and pulled out his dick. I guess he thought he was going to fuck his way to the job. When I told him that I was calling the police, Rev. Dr. Pinkston got the hell out. After interacting with the first two sacks of shit, I was scared of what would come next. Then, Rev. Dr. Angela Utopia walked in. For years, Rev. Dr. Utopia ministered on the streets of Jackson. For some time, I admired her passionate work. This was a real prophet. By the end of the fourth question, I knew everything I

needed to know. I hired Rev. Dr. Utopia right there on the spot. A black transgender woman of color would eventually lead The Basilica of the Swinging Dicks. The last thing I told her was, "It's time to shake it up baby!"

The Entrance

Only my closest advisors knew about the hiring of Rev. Dr. Angela Utopia. Knowing that the congregation would be surprised, we didn't want anyone to find out early. I've always been a fan of big splashes. When I discussed my plan with her, Rev. Dr. Utopia assured me that she wanted the announcement to be as "shocking of a moment as divinely possible." Planning to roll her out in less than a week, we started working ferociously on the arrangements. On Friday, we sent out a press release letting everyone know that the next service at The Basilica of the Swinging Dicks would be one of the most important ever. Not long after that, we sent out a similar message to the congregation. I dined with Rev. Dr. Utopia the night before the service. Since neither one of us had a partner, we were able to take

our time and get to know each other. Nothing was off limits. I told her everything I knew about The Basilica. Since I was the founder and sole leader for many years, everything I said was everything that needed to be said. When we got bored with church stuff, we moved on to more intimate topics. There were multiple moments that we just stopped and looked across the table into each other's eyes. I knew something was happening. I could feel it. This was too important of a moment to be distracted. I had to keep my mind on tomorrow. When the hour came, we were ready. Sitting in my office, I thought about how my life was going to change over the next couple of years. I thought I was ready. Nevertheless, I had a job to do. When Rev. Dr. Utopia arrived, I encouraged her to identify as a transgender woman of color from the very beginning. Knowing my congregation, I thought it would be better to just make it plain. When we started to pray, Rev. Dr. Utopia ran her fingers across my Bible and grabbed my penis. I was beyond aroused. Things only got more heated when I reciprocated her advances. In that

moment, Rev. Dr. Utopia's name changed forever. While I had enough sense not to continue, I realized I had strong feelings for Angela. Once I collected myself, the service was already going. We rushed down the steps. Angela and I waited to climb up on stage. In those fleeting moments, we confessed our feelings for each other. The loud music let us know that it was time for our grand entrance. As the cameras clicked and turned, we raised our hands together in triumph. The loudness and brightness kept me from being able to hear or see how the congregation was reacting. Then, it all abruptly stopped. I was alone at the microphone. Looking at all the people I'd shepherded for decades, I had no question how they felt. "For many years, I've struggled with how to transition out of my current role as pastor of The Basilica of the Swinging Dicks. Rev. Dr. Val Buffington was intended to be my successor. Before I continue, I want to acknowledge that Dr. Buffington's family is with us today. The car accident changed everything. Lying in the hospital, I had much time to seek God about what to do next. I knew that we needed

a national search. After looking everywhere, I know that we've found the best person. Rev. Dr. Angela Utopia has become an intimate friend of mine in a short amount of time. I'm impressed with her total package. Honestly, I've never seen someone who knows their way around a Bible like Rev. Dr. Utopia. I've never seen someone so passionate about the confluence of grace and justice in our world. I've never seen someone like her. I'm amazed. She's an unorthodox choice for an unorthodox congregation at an unorthodox time. I ask all of you to get on your feet and welcome Rev. Dr. Utopia!" I can always read their mood. I knew they weren't enthused about our choice. I knew that many of them were racist. I just didn't expect this many of them to be. Only about sixty percent of the congregation stood to clap. Everyone else sat in their chairs with their arms crossed and their bottom lip puffed out. As Angela went to the microphone, we were in trouble. There was a big part of me that didn't care. I knew the time for change had come. Angela started her salutations very strong and

then the next big piece dropped. "I am proud to say...God has sent me to you today as a transgender woman of color." Six of the oldest queens in the room fainted. The cameras snapped away as one of the younger queens fanned an older queen with a silk handkerchief. Gasps filled the room. Multiple people walked out. Someone even had the nerve to yell at me from the audience. I heard unbelievably offensive words from otherwise nice people. Before it was all over, The Basilica of the Swinging Dicks proved to be the most racist and transphobic space I'd ever encountered. After the service, Angela and I had the best sex ever. We committed to fighting through the adversity we met earlier that morning. For the next six months, we fought was hard as we could. I'd always had suspicions our efforts might not be good enough.

The Escape

"The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack..."

-2 Timothy 4:18

Day and night, we made love over and over. I couldn't get enough. I wanted to be wherever she was. We were so in love. Though I wanted to marry her, I knew I couldn't right now. Rev. Dr. Angela Utopia was the most amazing thing that ever happened to me. We kept it secret. I knew what the consequences were if anyone were to find out. The Basilica of the Swinging Dicks was in a tailspin. I tried to stay out of it. I wanted Angela to have the opportunity to prove that she could do it. While I tried to help behind the scenes, nothing seemed to work. The Basilica of the Swinging Dicks became the epicenter of racism and transphobia. Maybe it already was? Throughout the period, I preached that a better way was possible. No one listened. Late one night, I told Angela that I thought our time at The Basilica was quickly coming to an end. I don't think she believed me. I think she saw them for what they might be. I saw them for what they were. In the middle of her last sermon, we found out that it was worse than we ever imagined.

Our services were broadcast live on local television. Whoever tuned in that Sunday, got much more than they bargained for. I don't know what it was about that line that set The Basilica of the Swinging Dicks off, but things got wild quickly. I guess love has a way of revealing unbridled hate. I was sitting right behind Angela when it happened. In the middle of the sanctuary a man screamed, "Shut the fuck up you fake ass bitch!" Then, someone stood and yelled, "We don't want all that nigger preaching in here!" From the other side of me, I heard, "Get that sack of shit off the stage!" Though I knew tensions were boiling, I had no idea this was even a possibility. I thought that building The Basilica with white gay men would make it inevitably progressive. I was wrong.

In the midst of the chaos, I froze. Before I could collect myself, I realized that a group of ten white men carried Angela out the door. These folks literally ejected her from the church. "Where in the hell are the security guards?" I had no answers. Honestly, I was worried that the crowd that grabbed Angela was going to do

something worse. Unsure of what to do next, I oscillated between running after Angela or jumping on the microphone to try to calm everyone down. Deciding to split the difference, I grabbed one of the live mics and ran after Angela. When I finally reached her, I pulled the men off of her. I'd never seen such ravenousness. Angela looked up at me and said, "I'm ready to get out of here." I knew exactly what she meant. From the doorway of The Basilica, I declared to the congregation, "Rev. Dr. Angela Utopia and I got engaged last night. I love her with all my heart. Due to your racism and transphobia, we will no longer be part of your lives. We are both resigning our positions at The Basilica of the Swinging Dicks. Though I've loved you for many years, your actions today have given me reason to leave you with two words...fuck you." The congregation didn't know what hit 'em. We made our escape. Kissing passionately in the car, Angela and I drove off to make a new life. The road never looked so promising before.

The Vacation

"She makes me to lie down in green pastures; She leads me beside the still waters. She restores my soul..."

-Psalm 23:2-3

"You saved me." Angela whispered the words over and over again in my ears. I never got tired of hearing them. Not long after we arrived in Venezuela, we married on the whitest sand I'd ever seen. The local priest assured us that we were children of God. Those words are always nice to hear. We were the only three people at the ceremony. On the way down, I decided to take Angela's last name. In those seconds, I officially became "Christian Utopia." Once the pronouncement dropped, Angela and I ran and dove into the bluest water imaginable. Embracing in the consistent waves, I couldn't believe I was so lucky. We bought a condo and started to make a life in the obscurity and absurdity of it all. Each day, I got better at training my brain to never think about The Basilica of the Swinging Dicks again. Angela helped. We swam. We danced. We sang.

We ran. We climbed. We did it all. Before we knew it, over nine months had passed. For the first time in both of our lives, we were happy. Then, things changed in an instant. Walking down the street early one morning, someone approached me and questioned, "Christian Utopia?" Afraid to respond, I just froze. I guess I thought he would disappear. "I'm Quincy from The Basilica of the Swinging Dicks and I was sent to make contact with you." For many weeks, Quincy followed me around. Honestly, I didn't want to have anything to do with him. I was done with all that bullshit. Each night, Angela encouraged me to at least listen to what he had to say. I wasn't interested. Eventually, I engaged him because Angela assured me that it was the right thing to do. When we finally sat down with him, Quincy extended us an apology and asked us to come back to The Basilica of the Swinging Dicks. Immediately, I said, "Fuck no!" Then, Angela said that forgiveness was the only way we could make a life worth living and that she was interested in returning

as an act of grace. I started to have mixed emotions. Struggling greatly, I had no idea what to do.

The Return

"The Lord will come like a thief in the night..."

-1 Thessalonians 5:2

Perfect turned to partial in one plane ride. The ocean turned from blue to brown. The air went from refreshing to suffocating. The bounce in my step turned to a drag. What in the hell was happening? Everything was getting worse. Thanks to Angela's reckless grace and compassion, I was being drug back to a world I tried to leave forever. The only thing that kept me from jumping out the window was Angela. In the midst of it all, Quincy warned me that there would be a greeting party from The Basilica of the Swinging Dicks at the airport. I told him, "Unless you want to be embarrassed, you better phone ahead and tell them to go home." When we got off the plane, I couldn't believe all the media that was still interested in Angela and I. I

thought a year would be enough to suffocate the frenzy. I was wrong. Until we got in the car, cameras and journalists confronted us at every turn. That shit was crazy.

Still confused, Angela and I spent three days at a retreat center praying about what to do next. When we felt a peace, I called the governing board of The Basilica of the Swinging Dicks to tell them we were ready to talk. Over the last year, The Basilica had declined by thousands, gained a nasty reputation and the physical premises sat in ruins. There was no question in my mind that they were desperate. I guess you could call us their last chance. We were ushered into the secretive basement room where the board typically met. I couldn't believe it was so cold. Noticing me shivering, one of the board members whispered that they were behind on the electric bill. For many hours, the board apologized repeatedly, outlined a plan to deracist and detransphobe the community, handed us a check for a hundred thousand dollars for what happened and begged us to consider coming back as

their pastors. Before I said no, Angela loudly declared, "There is not a single chance in hell that we'll be coming back as your pastors. Try again." After some discussions, we were both offered positions as "Dean of The Basilica of the Swinging Dicks." We were to be the figureheads of The Basilica. I didn't give a shit if they were offering me the title of "King of the Fucking Universe," I didn't want it. I just wanted to be done with it all. In the midst of my silence, Angela accepted the positions for both of us. Immediately, people swarmed us in jubilation. What had she done? I just wanted to be done with it. The entire situation felt very violent to me. On the way out, Angela looked at me and said, "How are you going to love your enemies from Venezuela? We're going to be right in the middle of them here." I felt betrayed. I was betrayed. Now, I was in a prison that I never chose.

The Dean

"...you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free..."

-John 8:32

The months turned into a year. Despite the fact that I was personally miserable, my presence at The Basilica of the Swinging Dicks brought the people and their money back. Nobody wanted to see what happened ever happen again, so everyone put down their racism and transphobia and played nice. Hell, Angela became the most popular pastor at The Basilica. As far as the leadership was concerned, all the problems were solved. They weren't for me. Angela and I were growing apart. While I didn't blame her, I quickly realized that she used me to get the gig she wanted. Now, Angela could stay at The Basilica forever. Even though we went to counseling, nothing seemed to help. Though we were no longer sleeping in the same bed, I still loved her desperately. Part of our job was to assist The Basilica in their search for a new pastor. After attending meeting after meeting and flying all over the world with the committee, we found our man.
Even though Rev. Dr. Charles Kingston was from Russia, our congregation thought that he was brought

down from the Gods. With every step, Kingston showed off his physique. With every sermon, Kingston showed off his education. With every article of clothing, Kingston showed off his fashion prowess. Kingston had it all and then some. We all knew that the community would love him. We were right. The congregation voted unanimously to call him as their pastor. I was there to congratulate him. I told him that his big swinging dick was just what The Basilica of the Swinging Dicks needed. Kingston loved that compliment more than any he received all day. Leaving the service, I told him I'd stop by his office later in the week to talk about our future work together. I wish I'd made an appointment.

When I walked up the steps, I was feeling better than ever. Kingston was doing a great job and I really liked him. Plus, he wasn't too hard on the eyes either. I was also getting to do the work that I wanted to do. Nevertheless, I opened the door and got the surprise of my life. Right there in front of me, I could see Kingston's tongue buried deep inside the crack of

Angela's ass. She was up on the table spread as far as the east is from the west. I knew what was going on. Both tried to explain, but I'd already seen enough. I never had a second thought. I was done with all of it. I resigned my job as Dean. I divorced Angela. I dropped Utopia. I quit everything. I never talked to any of them again. I was back to where I started and it felt divine.

The Beginning

"In the beginning, God created..."

--Genesis 1:1

Mississippi remained as enchanting as ever. As the wheels turned, I knew I was heading in the right direction. Alone, I was exactly where I needed to be. For minutes and years and moments and hours, I gave my body and soul away piece by piece. Now, it was my time to utilize some of what I had left for good. Home called. There'd never been a progressive church in Jefferson. I was no longer interested in biggest or best anymore. I was most interested in being.

Sometime later, I heard Angela won a sexual harassment suit against Rev. Dr. Kensington. Millions of dollars exchanged hands. I wasn't surprised. I knew we'd created a monster. I had to run away. I had no choice. Though I tried not to think about it, I occasionally prayed that all the people that I left behind would finally realize how fucked up they were. I knew that was impossible. As I grew older, I stopped praying for them. I was most interested in prayers that had a chance of working. Upon opening the doors, my new church filled with loving and courageous women. Though I resisted, they were adamant about the name, "The Church of the Fierce Vaginas." Time has been good to us. Daily, we strike fear into the heart of the capital of backwards. I love every minute of it. Looking back over the crazy years at The Basilica of the Swinging Dicks, I realize the queerest thing I ever did was leave. I found God out here just beyond the walls.

BOOK 7

High Country Theology

Jeff Hood

2021

The year 2021 arrives after a decade of ministry that has taken Hood into places and experiences that most theologians encounter only at a theoretical level. He has been present at executions. He has sat with the dying. He has walked through the aftermath of a genocide. He has written about the damage done by the traditions that formed him. He has gone where he was needed and stayed.

And then — wilderness.

High Country Theology is the book in which Hood goes to the mountains, and the mountains say things that the rooms could not. This is not retreat. This is a different kind of formation — the formation that comes not from the extremity of human suffering but from the extremity of creation itself, from the altitude at which the ordinary frameworks of institutional

religion simply do not function and the encounter with the sacred must be, by necessity, more direct.

The mountain theology Hood develops here is rooted in the oldest strands of the tradition. The Hebrew prophets did not receive their formative encounters in temples. Abraham, Moses, Elijah — the wilderness is where the word comes. Not because God is absent from human community, but because the altitude strips away the accretions that human community inevitably deposits on the sacred. The mountain does not permit management. It does not accommodate the professional distance that institutional religion cultivates. It requires you to say what you actually see.

What Hood sees in the high country is a God who is genuinely wild — not in the Eldredge sense of masculine aggression, but in the older and truer sense of a presence that exceeds every container human hands have built. Creation itself is the text. The granite and the sky and the particular quality of silence at ten

thousand feet are the testimony. The theology that emerges is not systematic but experiential — a theology of encounter rather than proposition.

After a decade of priestly and prophetic work in the hardest human rooms, there is something almost necessary about this turn to the wild. The priest who has held too many hands through too many deaths needs to be reminded that the ground of all being is not exhausted by human suffering — that the same God who is present in the hospital ward and the execution chamber is also present in the mountains at dawn, in the absolute indifference of altitude to human categories, in the silence that is not absence but fullness.

This is the book that names what Hood has always known but has not always had the language to say: that the encounter with the sacred does not require permission.

The Vision

Behold, I stood at the altar of the great hardwood...

The four prophets stood beside me. Silence filled our mouths. There was no confusion. We knew that God was in the life before us. Suddenly, a question arose from somewhere behind the bark. "Where did I come from?" I didn't know what to say. However, the prophets did. "You came from God." "You came from a seed." "You came from the unknown." " You came from the ground." The tree answered. "You are correct. Go and believe likewise."

In the beginning...God created.

In the midst of the darkness, mountains began to grow. Slowly, peaks formed. Smoke surrounded the new forms. God called it..."earth."

Despite the beauty of the new creation, God couldn't see the mountains. Desperate to take in the beauty,

God created light. For the first time, God watched the sun come over the horizon. In the midst of the moment, God called it a sunrise. Realizing that this might be the last time God would see it, God created night so that the sun would rise over and over again. In the darkness, God set the moon in the sky. The ridges of the mountains turned blue under the glow. In the midst of the cycle of transformation, God called it..."day."

Early, God took in the sunrise again. Looking up, God called the spotless perfection..."sky."

Realizing that life needed more to thrive, God opened the earth. Water spewed forth. With both hands, God bent down to take a drink. Gushing between the mountains, the water formed rivers, lakes and streams. Rapids developed between the rocks. The rivers, lakes and streams flowed down the mountains to flatten out the land and create the seas. God differentiated the two as..."high" and "low."

Hungry, God produced vegetation. From apples to corn to wheat to blackberries, God did not hold back. Seeds were slung. In the midst of eating, God created even more vegetation. Forests covered the mountains. Wildflowers covered the grounds. Beauty was everywhere. The days dictated the colors and shapes of the trees and plants. Cycles and cycles and cycles... There were developments all the time. God called it..."life."

Realizing that frequent change is good, God created time. In the midst of the land called high, God slowed time down. This was to be a particularly special place. God wanted people to have time to take in the beauty of it all.

In the waters, God placed all sort of living creatures. Fish filled the water. Birds ruled the sky. Multitudes of animals roamed the land. Astounded, God wanted the creatures to continue. Thus, God created various

means of reproduction. In the lands, bears came together. In the waters, trout came together. In the sky, hawks came together. The land was to always be full of life. God loved the colors most of all.

Desperate for a companion, God created humanity. They filled the mountains. Particularly stubborn, they argued with God from the very beginning. Though they were often difficult, God loved them. Knowing that they would be tough and resilient, God gave them everything. In their mountains, God let them live without limit. Everything belonged to them. The people thrived...and God was with them.

As the mountain peoples' numbers grew, God encourage them to grow further. There is no scarcity here. They did just that. Joy filled the hills. Everything was right.

God rested in the beauty of the mountains.

Something dreadful opened the divine eyes.

On top of one of the highest mountains, lived a couple that God had uniquely made. The couple worked hard to cultivate their land...but they were greedy for more. One day, a wealthy stranger from somewhere else came to visit their home. In the midst of an extravagant meal, the wealthy stranger promised them everything they could ever desire. When they protested that God said that God was all that they need, the wealthy stranger exclaimed that God was holding them back. After some thought...the couple agreed. After some negotiation, the wealthy stranger gave them a huge sum. As soon as the sum touched their hand, they were banished from their home...industry took over and they were never allowed back on the mountain again. When they cried out to God for help, they were led to more difficult spaces. Paradise was gone.

The story played out over and over again.

Greed began to destroy it all.

God wept.

Since their fall off the mountain, people have consistently traveled back to search for hints of paradise.

Many years later, two brothers were trying to make their way through the confusion of it all. One evening, God spoke to them both. "If you stay on this mountain...you will be blessed." One brother followed the words that God spoke. Thinking that he knew better than God, the other brother went down the mountain. After some time, it became apparent that God's words had come true. One brother was content. One brother was miserable. Slowly, jealousy took over. Eventually, one brother returned to the mountain to confront the other brother. Without saying a word, the

brother climbed the mountain and killed his brother. The blessing was gone.

In the age of the ancestors, God grew tired of the wickedness that had invaded the lands. The pollution was overwhelming. People cared more about money than they did about life. From low to high and high to low, evil was everywhere. One day, God approached the ancestors and said, "Retreat to the highest peak. For I am going to cleanse my creation." Some did and some didn't. Many had started to believe that God was purely superstition. The faithful ancestors did as God told them to do. Immediately after they reached the peak, the heavens opened up. Water flooded the lowlands. Those who had not loved God or creation were washed away. It rained for forty days and forty nights. Eventually, the rain stopped. As the sun came out, God spoke to the faithful people, "From this day forward, you will be called the mountain people...and I will be called your God...now go and reclaim your

paradise." In the generations that followed, the mountain people clung to God as best they knew how.

The lands returned. Paradise was once again theirs. The mountain people thrived. One family lived at the very top of one of the mountains. The youngest son of the family was very smart. Seeing his promise, his father sent his youngest son to a renowned school, bought him the nicest clothes, gave him the best of everything he had and prepared him for a life of abundance. Knowing that they weren't as smart as their younger brother, the older brothers grew more and more jealous. "Doesn't he know he's supposed to stay right here on this mountain and do like the rest of us?" One day, the youngest brother left for school. Before he had gone too far, his older brothers ambushed him and tied him up. They were determined to kill him until they saw a wealthy landowner coming up the road. After some discussion, they decided to sell their brother into slavery. When they got back to the house, they told their father that

his youngest son had been murdered. The father grieved without end.

Many years went by. A great famine came upon the mountains. The family had nothing to eat. The father sent his sons to search for food. They looked and looked until they stumbled upon a mountainside filled with crops. One by one, they rubbed their eye. They just couldn't believe what they were seeing. When they got closer, they saw a figure descending from the mountain. As the figure got closer, he joyfully shouted out, "Hello brothers!" Immediately, the brothers cowered in fear...for they knew who it was. The youngest brother explained that he had been freed to grow his own place and that God had rewarded his efforts. "These mountains are for the free." Without delay, the youngest brother sent for the rest of his family. "Now, you will all live with me in Paradise." The victim of injustice was now the purveyor of grace. Justice was known throughout the land.

Countless years passed. Few mountain people remained. Most sold themselves to the highest bidder. The owners of paradise became slaves of the outsiders. No one remembered the name of God. The mountains were dead.

People grew anguished. People grew sick. People died. This was not what the bidders had promised. The mountain people were broken...and imprisoned.

High in the hills, there was a family who had managed to quietly resist. Daily, the family had practiced an earthen spirituality. Their youngest son was out with the cattle late one night. Noticing something flickering in the brush, he raced to see what it was. There right next to the creek was a small bush on fire. Multiple times, the young son tried to put it out. Nothing happened. Then, all of a sudden the bush began to speak. "I am the God of your ancestors. I sat your people down in these mountains. I am deeply grieved about the oppression they're now facing. I intend to

free them with your help." "But... I can't read. I can't write. I can't speak. I can't..." The flames exploded. "I am the only thing you need."

Journeying down the mountain, the young son took only his staff. His mind was set on one thing, bringing his people back to the mountain. Entering the camps around the industries, the young son raised his staff and said, "Let my people go!" The rich refused to budge. For weeks, the people organized and acted. Still, the rich refused to budge. The young son warned the rich. "Disaster is coming." Then...without warning...the lands began to collapse. The industries were destroyed. The young son led his people back to their promised land, the mountains. There, God dwelled with them in the clouds. Everyone had everything they needed. It was a land beyond plenty. In that space, the evils of the present became a thing of the past.

Slowly, the people forgot God.

Despite the waywardness of their neighbors, two women remained faithful to both God and each other. Incessantly, they were shamed for their love. Through it all, they remained strong. Jealous of the love that they shared, their neighbors demanded that they leave each other or face the consequences.

Desperate, one woman turned to the other and said,

"Please leave me. I don't know what I would do if anything happened to you."

In a fury, the woman replied,

"Don't urge me to leave you! Where you go I will go. Where you die I will die. Our love will never fail!"

As the two kissed, their neighbors walked away in shame.

Thus is the nature of love.

This is the song of the seeker,

"God has to be in these mountains.
I shall not want.
The endless pastures whisper of love.
The cleansing waters flow through me.
It all restores my soul.
God guides me to the questions.
I shall not want.
Though death comes near.
I fear no evil.
I feel you with me.
I know your touch.
You keep my enemies behind me.
Your leaves anoint my heard.
Surely your shadow will be with me.
As my soul rests in these mountains forever."

This is the creed of the seeker,

"I will find refuge in these mountains.
I will know the whisper.
I will be saved by the questions.
No evil will befall me.
I will be covered by your faithfulness.
No terror will come close.
I will make these mountains my fortress.
No disaster will I know.
For God loves me.
I feel it in my bones."

I still don't believe what happened.

The hand of God was upon me. Behold, I found myself high upon a mountain. Pointing down, God showed me that the valley was full of bones. I knew them and they knew me. In the midst of my bewilderment, God turned to me and said, "Can these bones live?" Scared to speak, I simply said, "Only you know."

God raised the mighty hands of divinity and demanded, "Preach to the bones!!! And I will raise them up!"

So I preached as I was commanded. The ground began to shake. The world turned upside down. God called from the four winds. All of a sudden, flesh started to grow on the bones...breath entered the bodies...eyes opened...mouths began to praise. The valley was full a vast army of justice.

Then God said to me, "These are the people of the High Country."

The project of the liberation is to place the oppressed and marginalized at the center of the message of God. Thus, struggling mountain people are the very essence of God. The High Country is where God lives.

In the beginning, God placed them in paradise. If we want to get back to paradise, the path goes through the mountains...the path goes through those who have struggled for generations to reclaim their dignity in the midst of economic oppression.

Behold, I found myself on the side of a mountain. I heard the whispers of God in my ear. The crunch of leaves under my feet produced a symphony of encouragement. I didn't think I was going to make it. The path was to steep. I fell. The path was too rocky. I was thirsty. The path offered no water. There was no rest for the weary. The whispers pushed me on. I heard them over and over. "I am at the end of the path." Trust the epicenter of perserverence. In wasn't long before I dropped to my knees. The rain tested me. The thunder disturbed me. The lightening rattled me. Regardless, I kept going. I just placed one knee in front of the other. I had to be close. I dropped to the mud. I felt something lift me up. When I opened my eyes, I was near the end of the path. I was scared. I didn't

know what I would find. I managed to stand up and make it to the top. There, I met the mountain people. They revealed to me the mysteries of creation. Paradise was amongst them. God was too. I wish it all had lasted so much longer. Before I knew it, I was at the bottom of the mountain...seeking to hold tight to what I just experienced. Then, I looked at my arms. Written on my soul was the instruction to take the message of the mountain people to the world...so that all my join them in paradise.

Murder visits oppressed and marginalized communities far too often...it's been that way since the beginning. Desperation births desperate actions. Thus, it is with the High Country.

High on drugs and waving a gun around, a man loudly declared his intention to commit suicide. The neighbors called for help. The police arrived at the scene quickly. Negotiations began immediately. After an extended amount of time, the police grew

exasperated with the man. Snipers were placed across the street and directed to shoot to kill. The man leaned his head out to surrender...and before anyone else could react...a sniper shot him dead. The murder of the desperate is common outside of paradise. The only way to stop it is to go back.

Water cleanses. Water causes growth. Water is the cornerstone of life.

I was led to the foot of the mountains. There was nothing there. Then, the heavens opened and rain began to fall. I saw a great forest appear in front of me. Each tree represented all the peoples of the mountains. The rainbow was overwhelming. I wanted to stay their forever. The vision cleansed my soul. The vision grew empathy. The vision gave me life. Then, it all disappeared.

Injustice is fueled by inhumanity. When people become comfortable with the suffering of their

neighbors...they become comfortable with death. In fact, they seem to enjoy it. Everything quickly dies.

The weather was gruesome. Everyone was concerned about staying warm. In fact, people were so concerned about themselves...that they failed to notice the man laying by the road. Fifteen hours later...someone finally decided to check on him. They were fifteen hours too late. He was frozen.

Exodus is a concept that is central to an understanding of how God engages poor and marginalized people. There is no High Country Theology without the idea of Exodus. God will save all who suffer the indignity of bondage.

Time disappeared. I was taken high upon a mountain. There I saw the images of enslaved persons running from their abusers. Repeatedly, I watched them find shelter in the pockets of paradise that remained. In the mountains, they became mountain people. They

redeemed the notion of exodus and sought to redeem a fallen exodus people.

Love is love. There is no paradise without it. Those who create barriers to love/paradise are the enemies of God. Behold a diversity of loves stands at the beginning of the trail and invites people to hike up the mountain.

There was a small wooden shack tucked away on the side of a rocky peak. Inside, love had found love. Outside, hate had found hate. Late one night, outsiders came with torches. They were determined to punish the perceived fornicators inside. When they opened the door, they found two men making love. As they pushed their way inside to seize the men, a bright light appeared. Loudly, a voice declared, "Love is love." When they tried to push further, God threw them off of the side of the mountain.

God sings. The mountain people were made in God's image. They sing. In fact, songs are the greatest weapons against injustice. Only the strongest can keep singing.

I saw the clouds part. The beings of heaven came down. Songs filled the land. Evil was silenced. The people of the High Country opened their mouths and sang their future. The melodies led them on.

History is never past...for history is always being made.

The bodies of those who have fallen victim to various evils cry out for justice. Their graves are open. Can these bodies be raised? Does paradise still have room for them? Is there room for truth? Behold, I saw God take the hands of the entombed. With a single tug, God brought them back. The resurrection happened throughout the land. A vast army prepared to storm the lands of the evildoers. As they pressed on, God declared, "these are the true mountain people...those

who follow my voice and are committed to justice." They carried paradise with them.

Justice is the only name of High Country Theology...and love is the only expression.

I didn't know what was going to happen next. I just knew that things were getting bigger. I just knew that paradise was growing. I just knew that I wanted to be in that number. I just wanted to be found on that mountain.

God became dormant. Silence overtook the land. Nobody knew anything. Nobody went anywhere. The only thing that everyone knew was absence. Except on the few occasions that they didn't.

In the midst of a very long time, there were three times.

The child was looking out over the cliff. Surely, there was more to life than this. Squinting, something very bright appeared on the horizon. Almost instantaneously, the light engulfed her. Both arms were thrown back. The light picked her up. Thought she was gone for an eternity, she came back down in seconds. She tried to tell everyone that they were not alone...but nobody listened. The chosen one wasn't chosen.

The family was thirsty...but the well had dried up. Just before dehydration turned into death, a light shot down from the heavens. The blast sent water spraying to the sky. They were saved...but nobody listened...everyone just wanted their water.

Snow grew on the ground. Nobody could move. People were dying. Then...in the western sky...a ball of flame appeared. Everyone called it "Hope." Mountain people hung on for something more.

Then, it happened. Nobody saw it coming. Darkness turned to light. All of creation stood in awe. Paradise was back.

Birth is the only representation of new life. We explode from the womb. We explode from the self. We explode past death. We explode.

Paradise exploded into being.

In the beginning was the High Country. The High Country was with God and the High Country was God. Without the High Country, there was nothing. With the High Country, there was everything.

All things were made in the High Country...and without the High Country nothing was made.

In the High Country was life...and the High Country was the life of all humanity.

The light of the High Country shines through the darkness of modernity. The darkness of industrialization cannot overcome it.

God sent a woman into the High Country. It was her task to testify to the beauty of nature as the embodiment of God. The light was with her. The light was in her. The light testified to the world of the glory of God in all of creation. The High Country was to be the sight of the return of the incarnation of God. She preached from the mountaintops. Few listened. It didn't matter. God was back. God never left. God was revealed anew.

The perfection of the High Country was now flesh. The flesh was on the ground. The High Country would never be the same. God spoke through the glory of creation. God spoke through the prophet. God spoke through her.

"The High Country that comes after me will surpass all that has come before. For it shall be a return to paradise. It shall be a return to God. It shall be everything that God created the High Country to be. It shall be the Christ."

No one has ever seen God. Everyone has seen God. The Christ shall clarify all things. The Christ shall reveal all things. The Christ was born into the High Country.

Awaken from your slumber. The Christ is here.

God is not restricted by time and space. God is anywhere. God is everywhere. Open your eyes. Liberation is at hand. Liberation is within you. Go to the High Country! Be the High Country! Only the oppressed and marginalized can free you from the bonds of the valley dwellers. The mountain people can show you the way to Christ. The mountain people are the incarnation of Christ. For Christ was born to them.

"May our souls glorify God!

May our spirits rejoice!

For God has remembered us!

We will all be called blessed!

For God continues to do great things!

Holy is the name of God!

God's mercy constantly returns!

God continues to be revealed!

God scatters the trees!

God raises the mountains!

God showers his love on all people!

God does not forget the poor!

God does not forget the hungry!

God does not forget the marginalized!

God does not forget the oppressed!

God's name is justice!

God is with us!

God is in us!

God is through us!

We are not alone!

We are the people of God!
We are the incarnation of Christ!
We are."

Liberation names the liberation. There is no liberation without the naming. For without the naming, others do the naming. How can the people of God name God without the naming? Surely, if we do not name God then all of nature will cry out. The naming is one of the primary weapons against injustice. Whoever controls the naming controls the future. Do not give up your birthright! Justice is ours. The naming is ours. Hallelujah!

In those days...like most days...assholes ruled the Earth. Such power never deters God. For God has the power of justice. God is justice. Injustice cannot survive the presence of God. The incarnation of God is us. We are the High Country. We are paradise. We are the rescue mission. We are salvation. We were born in Bethlehem.

Late one night, a star appeared. It looked as if it was just sitting on the peak of the tallest mountain. Scholars from the west observed the star for many moons. Eventually, they realized that this was the God star. Quickly they left for the High Country. The journey was exhausting. Each time they wanted to turn back...they were reminded of what lay ahead. God was with them. In fact, God was riding on their brains.

Scholars are always desperate for something more than the end of knowledge can provide.

Dust was about all they had. Money was extinct. Food was scarce. Patience was in short supply. In the midst of the misery, they had each other. Love kept them alive. Many nights had past since she became pregnant. They didn't know if they were ready. They didn't have a choice. The dust was too much. They had to find somewhere else for her to give birth. In time,

they found a small cave on the side of a mountain. He ran out to get the softest hay he could find. Things were ready. Then, the pangs of birth began. Slowly, he walked her down the side of the mountain. Lying there, she felt the power. All of a sudden, a light exploded from the heavens. It was as if it was pulling the baby out. When it was born, the baby floated in the air for minutes. Then, the baby slowly descended into her arms. Their hearts exploded with love. Nobody could believe it. For in the High Country, God had arrived.

Trees grew louder. Winds cried out. Thunders roared. Grounds shook. Species gathered. Slowly, they saw the future. The entire world stopped. Everything was different now.

The angels banged on every door. Some listened. Some heard. Some rolled over. Some got up. Some opened an eye. Some awoke. Some lifted their head. Some understood. Some thought about it. Some

walked. Some followed. Some flew. The angels banged on every door.

The child was asleep. The professors didn't make a sound. They didn't have to. For everything they needed to know had already been revealed in the air. To live for love, they just had to breath. In time, the breaths changed everything. They still do.

Paradise was her birthright. The High Country was her playground. The waters spread her invitation. The thirsty could finally drink.

Each generation births confusion that the previous generation is too scared to try and understand. Salvation spoke from the mountaintop. The generation complained about the noise. Salvation spoke at the market. The generation complained about the economic impact. Salvation spoke at the church. The generation complained about the disrespect. Salvation spoke in the streets. The generation complained about

the distraction. Salvation spoke...the generation complained. Salvation speaks...the generation always complains. Regardless...salvation still speaks.

Understanding is never completely understood. Mystery always grows more mysterious. Salvation still waits.

The child grew beyond the parents. They could no longer maintain the lead. There only option was to follow. OR I guess they could have died. Many people have chosen to die rather than change. Choose quickly. Life is up front.

"Missing!" That was the word on every lip. "The child is gone!" Tears were flowing everywhere. "Paradise is at stake!" The people knew that they couldn't stay there without him. "Find him now!"

For days, the people looked. Every rock was overturned. Every bush was shaken. Every tree was

climbed. Nobody could find the child anywhere was successful. The energy of the place was rapidly draining. In such a moment of uncertainty, the people finally asked the question..."Has he left paradise?" They knew they had to do the one thing they'd never done before. Leave.

Unsure of what to carry, the people brought everything. The caravan slowly scaled the side of the mountain. Nobody said a word. Prayer was the only language they knew at the moment. Following the creek, they stopped at the waterfall. They knew they were close. They could feel it. Pressing on, they traveled until they heard loud shouts.

"Repent! The realm of God is within you!"

Down in the river, stood the child baptizing the world. One by one, the marginalized and oppressed took their turn. In the midst of it all, the child looked up to his family and declared..."Paradise is now with them."

Those who wanted a relationship with God were tasked with following those that they had long considered enemies of God. Many turned back. The ones who stayed carried paradise with them. Nothing would ever be the same.

The High Country was finally open for all.

Something opened my eyes. I arose from my bed. Whispers of love filled my ears. I followed them. Down the hill. Over the ridge. Through the forest. Up the rocks. I didn't know what to expect. I just followed. Then, I was there. I'd never seen such a sight. Water crashed over the rocks. It was more than a waterfall. It was divine. In that moment, the heavens opened up and revelation fell upon me. "You are the water. Flow fearlessly. Cleanse the nation. Don't stop." Then, I opened my eyes. The child stood before me with an outstretched hand. I took hold of it...and I've never let go.

I can't.

We don't get to choose our parents. Our parents don't get to choose us. Our choices were and are always limited.

To the dismay of all, the child left for good.

The world was changed forever.

Those who searched...found.

Paradise was no longer paradise. How could he leave the High Country? Perhaps the High Country was no longer the High Country? Perhaps the High Country was within? Perhaps the High Country was always within?

In the end, the location that matters will be the location that matters.

Incarnation is incarnational.

God never left.

In the last days, I saw a great evil rise up to destroy. Then, I saw the child rise up justice. For eternity, they battled to a stalemate. Then from the High Country, came an eternity beyond eternity...the masses of humanity marching in love. It was over before it began. Suddenly, the cosmos was back where it started...

Behold, I stood at the altar of the great hardwood...

The Cost September 16, 2020

Ashe County, North Carolina: Racism Definitely Lives Here.

You wouldn't think it would matter that much...it does. For close to ten years, we lived in a place where all we had to do to dispose of our garbage was roll it down to the curb. Since we moved up in the mountains, we have to drive our garbage to a collection site. I probably go a couple of times per week. Interestingly enough, these collection sites can turn into a social gathering. One day, I spent no less than twenty minutes talking to an older woman about her health problems. On another occasion, a young man let my kids play with his small dogs. These types of encounters seem to happen every time I go. In the midst of trash, something beautiful happens...until it doesn't.

"Hey boy! Do I know you?" Startled, I turned to get a better look. The driver wasn't familiar to me in the slightest. "I don't guess so. We just moved here two months ago." The man leaned in further. "Where are you from?" Thinking this would turn into an encounter like all the others, I replied... "We just moved here from Texas two months ago." The man turned off his truck. "What brings you here?" Still thinking nothing of it? "My wife is a professor at Appalachian State." Then, he got out of the truck. I began to realize that this was not an encounter like the others. This man was not interested in having any type of community with me. "Quit the bullshit. I know why you're here." I gave him the strangest look that I could muster. "Why?" As he leaned in, I noticed how red his face was for the first time. "You're the one that got those cops killed in Dallas...screaming and shouting and all that other bullshit. Here in Ashe County, we don't tolerate no blacks or wannabe blacks. Don't start no shit here. Do you understand me boy?" Courage came. "I am a follower of Jesus. I will fight for justice

and equality as long as I have breath... and I want to make sure that you understand me... your words here this afternoon have only affirmed what is going to be required of me." As I turned and began to head toward my car, the man loudly shouted... "We'll come burn your house down if we have to...with you in it." Right before I got into the car... I turned and said... "Bring it on you racist asshole." As the guy stumbled toward me, I just drove off.

This encounter is actually an amalgamation of two encounters at two different locations (though one happened specifically at the collection site). Both happened in our new county of residence...both were intense...and both involved the person recognizing me from my prior work/specifically my wide media exposure following the Dallas Police Shooting of 2016. To be quite frank, I expected this county to be hostile to any type of difference at all. Although, I didn't expect the hostility to begin before I have even done anything remotely close to activism or organizing (we really are

just beginning to get all of the boxes opened). However, I do believe that God moves irrespective of our expectations. Though my location has changed, my calling has not. I look forward to many more encounters with racist assholes. In fact, God has made it pretty clear that's why I'm here.

Amen. September 27, 2020

Threats & Consequences at 3:20am: An Update from Ashe County

It is the dead of night. I can't sleep. I thought I had escaped living like this. Now, I know this will never be true. The clock ticks. The huge plate glass window seems to be my only comfort. The authors of various evils lurk in the darkness. I can hear their words. I know they're close. They have been close since we got here. I thought that life would be simpler here. I was wrong. The darkness tells me that. I position myself in the middle. I want to be easily seen. If my elimination

is what these people want, I am offering them a target. My only hope is that I will be enough. I imagine my family sleeping in their beds. If something happens, I know that I am the only life that will suffice to keep them alive. I sit. I pray.

God comes. The rifle rises. The finger squeezes. The shooter smiles. The bullet shatters the window. I see the glass fall. I see the bullet coming...it stops in front of my eyes. Nothing moves. God remains.

I'm not afraid to die. The pursuit of justice is dangerous. Some might call me a fool. I simply know that I am called.

The threat and actualization of violence has always been a part of my work. There are people who want to kill me. Strangely, such people legitimize my work. They let me know that I am close to the evil that they want to protect. So, on some level these threats are helpful. I'm used to them. They're part of me.

We moved to North Carolina two months ago. From the beginning, people began to recognize who I was and started making threats (most recognize me from organizing the rally before the July 7, 2016 police shooting in Dallas/and the subsequent media firestorm that followed and some from knowledge of my more recent work). Now, things have escalated. This past week, numerous neighbors started posting pictures of our house and our address...with the implicit encouragement (from both comments and from the original poster) to, "Get the trash out of Ashe County." Not long after that, I realized that our children had been compromised. Good people throughout our community contacted us to warn us that we are at great risk. After realizing that things had escalated beyond just me, I surprised myself by contacting the Sheriff's Department.

Early this morning, I filed a criminal complaint against the woman who was orchestrating all of this evil.

Though I often tolerate threats against me (with the belief that my grace should be endless), I will not tolerate threats against my family. That is my line. Cross it...and there will be consequences.

The darkness remains.

Sleep comes quickly.

In my final moments of luminosity, I hear the sweet words, "Lo, I am with you always..."

Amen. October 16, 2020

The Morning Blast: Continued Harassment in Ashe County

Ashe County, North Carolina

Exhaustion crept in. I resisted the urge to stop. I just wanted to get home. Every sign brought me closer and

closer. I'd drive eleven hours to see my grandfather before his next chemo treatment. Though I'd do it all over again in a second, I needed sleep. Pulling up to our home...and barely taking the time to turn out the lights...I drug myself to my bed. Sleep was almost instantaneous. Before I could even get to a deeper cycle of sleep, my kids woke me up to start the day. Though I was still exhausted, the next day belonged to them. We played outside. We played inside. We went to the park. We went up in the woods. We ate lunch. We ran errands. We ate dinner. We did it all. At the end of the day, I was determined to get some sleep. I felt like a zombie roaming the halls of our house. When I got in the bed, I experienced one of the deeper sleeps of my life. In the midst of such rest, I don't wake up. In fact, I have never found an alarm clock that can wake me up in such times. Then, it happened.

Around 5:38 am, I was awoken by a shotgun blast right outside of our home. Shooting up in bed, I raced to check on the kids. Immediately, I knew what the

sound was. Initially, I couldn't find our dog. Looking into one of the bedrooms, she slowly came out of one of the closets. I have never seen her so terrified. After a short time, I went outside to see if anyone was still there. On some level, I prepared to get blasted. Trying to make sure I wasn't mistaken, I looked all over for another cause...before I was reaffirmed in what I knew that I heard. My wife and I discussed the situation and realized that there was nothing we could do...except to make sure that all of the kids and the dog were safely with us. I stayed awake until daylight (which couldn't come fast enough)...then, I went back to sleep. Later on the next day, I filed a police report/documentation of the incident. I still don't know what else to do.

There is no question in my mind that the blast is a continuation of the harassment we have constantly faced here in Ashe County. The threats online and in person have created a situation that is incredibly dangerous for our family. The blast could have easily struck one of our children. I guess this is how it works

here. Life has little value until these locals get what they want. Regardless, I think it's important to make something very clear. I will not stop my divine vocation. I will continue to fight for the marginalized and oppressed. If one day my life is required of me, so be it. At the end of the day, we are a family that knows the risks. We are not going anywhere. Despite the evil that is close, let there be no doubt that God is with us.

Amen.

October 26, 2020

"Somebody's In Our House!" Continued Escalating Harassment in Ashe County.

I've long believed that people are intrinsically good. I've long believed that all people carry the undefiled image of God. Moving to Ashe County has certainly tested those beliefs.

Nights are tough. Days are spent taking care of our children. Nights are for working.

Every night, I have a similar ritual. After most (hopefully all...) of the children have gone to bed. I sit down at our kitchen table and dream. I work on articles. I work on books. I work on correspondence. I work on my vocation...following Jesus/changing the world. It is always a very spiritual time for me. I stay up most of the night and then I do it again the next day. I can't stop. I find the work too important.

The front of our house is made up of sliding glass doors. In the dark, it is easy to see in...and hard to look out.

Last night, it took me some time to get to my normal spot. The kids weren't cooperating... Such is the nature of parenting. My writing is of course the least of their concerns. After everything settled down, I went to my library and gathered some commentaries

on the Gospel of Luke. In the midst of our current societal chaos, I've been dreaming about new birth. Such dreams have repeatedly taken me to Bethlehem. The birth of Christ has long made me think about the nature of radical interruptions of oppression and marginalization. So for a few hours, I prayed/typed...worked. Early the next morning, I was still at it. In fact, I might have been more productive then than I was earlier in the night. Life was quiet...until it was violently interrupted.

The hallway to enter our house is behind our kitchen.

In the midst of my pounding on the keys, I heard the knob on our front door turn. I knew immediately that there was something very wrong. Throwing my chair back, I raced to check on the rest of the family. "Somebody's in Our House!" When I opened the door to the bedroom, one of my oldest sons ran out to see what was going on. The door behind the kitchen was wide open. My oldest son saw a young white man with

cropped hair racing up the mountain behind our house. The entire side of the house smelled of sweaty cheap cologne. The dog was barking incessantly. After making sure that our family was ok, I took the dog outside to give chase. Of course, it was of no use. The guy was long gone. In fact, I later found fresh tire marks on a road up the mountain/behind our house.

Even though I am very skeptical of engaging law enforcement, I did call 911. The Sheriff's deputies arrived about 30 minutes later (we live out to say the least). Though they were kind and professional, they told me what I knew already...there was little they could do. After taking a report and trying to affirm our family, they left. One of the deputies actually stayed near our house for most of the night.

I couldn't sleep. How can you sleep after some bullshit like that? I just watched our whole family finally sleep and wondered what following Jesus might require next.

Late this afternoon, I met with the Ashe County Sheriff and his Chief Deputy about our situation and other concerns I had about the department...again...they were very kind and professional. Together, we came up with something of a plan. I hope it works before the situation escalates even more.

With that said, I want to make something very plain to the pieces of shit terrorizing our family that might read this. You have made it very clear that you want me (you hate my past work/you hate my present work/ and you hate my future work)...so come get me...and leave my family alone. I am not afraid of the consequences of pursuing justice.

Further action will be forthcoming. This situation has escalated to the point that it is necessary to take it to the streets. The entire community/county should not be able to ignore what is happening.

Amen.

The Conclusion

Theology originates in the High Country. How could it not? God always dwells amongst the marginalized and oppressed. If you dare go, remember there is a cost...

BOOK 8

Out of My Head: Freed Thoughts

Jeff Hood

2021

The second book of 2021 requires a different kind of attention than anything else in this collection. It is not an argument. It is not a narrative. It is not commentary or criticism or journal. It is a ten-minute recording made late at night — the mind running without management, without the shaping that craft imposes, without the professional frame that every other document in this collection carries to some degree.

It is Hood without the frame.

Read in the context of the full arc of his work, Out of My Head: Freed Thoughts becomes something more than it might appear in isolation. It is the underground river that all the other books draw from. It is the interior from which the prophetic speech emerges, the ground state of the priestly presence, the raw material

of the witness's testimony before it has been organized into language adequate to a reader.

What the recording reveals is that the categories this collection has used to organize Hood's vocation — prophet, priest, witness — are not roles he performs. They are what he actually is, at ten minutes past midnight, when no one is watching and there is no occasion to perform anything. The driving. The rooms. The hands. The names of the dead. The bread and wine. The three in the morning. The persistent sense of a presence that does not explain itself and does not leave. All of it is here, running together the way the actual interior of a life runs together, without the separations that form imposes.

The decision to include this document in the collected works is itself a theological act. It says: the vocation is not only what appears in the finished work. The vocation is also this — the unmanaged interior, the mind that cannot stop circling the rooms even when it

is not in them, the exhausted hope that keeps returning to the table. The priest does not leave the priesthood when the rite is over. The prophet does not stop hearing what he hears between the utterances. The witness carries what has been witnessed into every space, including the late-night space where there is nothing to do with it but let it run.

This is the most vulnerable document in the collection, and therefore in some ways the most essential. It is the evidence that the vocation is not a posture or a project. It is simply what is there when everything else is set down. Stripped of argument, stripped of narrative, stripped of the forms that make theology communicable — this is what remains.

It is enough. It has always been enough.

*Late one night, I decided to record my thoughts for ten minutes. This is the transcription.

evening grows quiet there is no sound here there never is just something more something beyond something visceral something real something near bowing my head to pray I ask for God to take my sins away this is not my home this is not my day this is only something or someone that I once knew yet here I am here I dream what will tomorrow bring things grow harder as the hours pass why I am I not asleep death stalks me from the outside I cant let it in there is more to say more to do more to love the air grows thinner and thinner grows thinner there is no food here only hunger is this how we are supposed to live is this who we are supposed to be I am ready to eat I am ready to be more than just a moving sack of skin however it is night everything is asleep except something that is not lurking in the shadows something that is stalking me something that is real something that is invisible death always finds me during nights like this I ponder the journey home miles birth miles birth miles birth miles birth miles will it ever stop why am I going where am I going do I know the way the way the truth and the life

god is close or at least closer than she was before prayers shoot out the window like exhaust from the backside what will I say what will I do is there life out there hope of some kind I drink the wine and taste the bread were you there I can only cling to what I know but where is your faith I think I left it at the last gas station I just drive then I drive and then I drive and then I drive everyone be quiet now were almost there death will meet us at the door and we will know him and he will know us for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever and ever and ever and ever and ever does god believe in death does death believe in god everything looked the same and nothing looked the same death stalked somewhere in the hills stay back stay back or it will take you too memories cant save you now hope is gone prayers fall on deaf ears what would they hear if they could hear nothing fresh nothing new nothing real nothing so what is the purpose of hearing if all that hearing is hearing the same the game is up the curtain has drawn there is nothing else to say there is only death why did

I come here ghosts are behind every tree every tree wont move yet there is a small light coming from a strange place I move toward something I have not known before though death distracts the senses I can still see something I can still hear something I can still know something I can still something words flow like tears and tears like words is it the end I do not know I just know that I hear the sounds of tomorrow and they seem to be coming close some say it is a mirage I call it hope regardless of what you call it you call it what you know you call it what you feel you call it I couldnt leave I didnt want to something was pulling me back in voices upon voices told me to leave but I stayed I stayed I gripped the hands of the past our father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name thy kingdom come stop stop stop they will be done on earth as it is in heaven no more no more no more give us this day our daily bread and forgive us of our trespasses pause pause pause as we forgive those who have trespassed against us please please please led us not into temptation evil is closer and closer and closer but

deliver us from evil love is closer hope is closer deliverance is closer for death is the kingdom the power and the glory forever and ever not today not on this day not forever death cannot win everything is so alive but everything is going to die but everything is breathing I am choking on your lies hope springs eternal but not in this place stop I will not settle for less I will cling to what I know love I will find life in the midst of this foolishness I will find life listen to me I will find life please listen to me I will find life death is coming but it wont kill me I have finally figured out how to inhale exhale maybe even to beat death exhaustion wont leave day was long and long was day every step draws sleep closer dont fall asleep until you get there or you will die stop the roll I want to get off you cant get off this is your ride sleep comes quicker than I thought it would am I asleep or simply misunderstood the day is short I think it was the morning brings a familiar voice get up get up get up am I dreaming could it be the one voice I have always longed to see I drove to far I drove to long to miss this

maybe I did maybe I didnt maybe is the only word I remember eyes open mind alert what are you what are you doing to me am I home do you remember memory is faint do you know me there is power in knowing but maybe you dont know me maybe I am just fooling myself maybe I am lost someone point me in the right direction remember me when you go remember me when you come into the place where we all want to go ok ok ok I will arise I will go forth I will do my job I will remember you I will I will not delay good morning where is my life where is my hope where is the is can I do anything to help you do you remember what I look like do you know my name are we bound for all of eternity or do we just look the same help me I cry out but nobody knows I am afraid that you nobody knows my fears collect yourself it is time to eat the gods are calling is today the day that this all ends I open my eyes it was a dream again the floor knocks me back I have fallen again hand me my phone I have to call someone someone who can help me get to the table I need to eat the bread I need to drink the wine ashes to

ashes eat up what are you thankful for is there anything to be thankful for when death is in the way remember me communion festers here something is warmer than the next there is a coldness that is coming light departs to warn us what is coming for now we shall eat until our stomachs are full to do anything else would be to blaspheme the blessings of today or would it maybe the blessing is to starve maybe the blessing is to identify with the hungry maybe is a strongly seductive word but it says it all do you hear me there is good news to be had by all or something like that is good news good to the good and bad alike who knows I just say it in hopes that it might be maybe dreams and visions are more real than the present reality but all my dreams and visions are culminating in this moment the laughs the smiles the love is it real I cannot be sure I can only experience it as if it might be I guess that is all that we can do for now and throughout eternity I dont know why the assholes return in a time of thanks am I supposed to pray for them or be thankful that they have died I am

just not sure are they dead I dont think so they feel more alive than ever or maybe they feel more dead than ever I am simply not sure I drank the cup remember me remember them remember something how can their be salvation in all of this foolishness how can there be salvation at all the sky is falling the party is over did you get your fill I did what do you do when there is nothing left to do sleeping wont save you from your sins in dreams they will find you your eyelids are no barrier to the truth then they are wiped away they are forgotten they are obliterated they are destroyed but occasionally memories of the fall slip back in I wake up in the garden the serpent hands me the fruit I dont think twice I am too hungry to do that I just eat I just embrace the moment I just embrace the future isnt that what I am supposed to do smells fester here the food is hot conversation laughs how could I ask for more I guess we always ask for more is it enough to stand or must we run I need some air this is the first time that I have breathed in a long time what are we to do when there is nothing else to do be minds

grow wild when minds rest yet rest is supposed to tame the mind wildness and rest seem to be at odds I know which one I would rather have one can rest when they die am I dying I dont think so but I see something beyond when I close my eyes come and go with me pain drips slowly life drains out I cant feel anything except the tear rolling down my cheek I close my eyes and then Im gone dreams birth reality and reality births dreams I never thought I would make it maybe I havent maybe is a strong word I need strength right now

something is breaking open I can feel it the seams of the night are tearing apart I did not ask for this I never asked for any of this but here I am with my hands out again begging for something I cannot name the walls know my name the floor knows where I have been I have left marks on everything I have touched and none of it was enough I tried to tell them I tried to say the words but the words kept falling short like a prayer with no address like a letter with no stamp just floating

in the dark somewhere between what I meant and what I said there is a canyon I have been falling into it for years the bottom is not what I expected there was no bottom there is never a bottom just more falling more reaching more grasping for something solid you called to me once and I answered and then the line went dead was it you or was it me who hung up I keep redialing but nobody picks up the phone just rings and rings and rings into the empty like a church bell in a ghost town everyone left but the echo the echo stays it stays it stays it stays I am the echo now bouncing off walls that cannot hear me the needle on the record keeps spinning even after the song is done there is a groove worn so deep the music stopped but the motion kept going this is what survival looks like this is what breathing sounds like when you do it alone night after night I have sat with the dying and they have sat with me and neither of us could say what we came to say so we sat in the holy silence of two people who already know the whole thing is almost over and somehow that was enough somehow that was more than enough god

walked in with muddy boots and did not apologize the furniture was ruined and nobody cared because god was finally in the room you cannot sweep that away you cannot mop that up you just live in the holy mud and call it grace I have been to the table so many times empty so many times I brought nothing and found everything I brought everything and found nothing the table does not ask what you brought it only asks if you are hungry I am always hungry I have never not been hungry this is not a complaint this is a confession there is a difference between the two I have confused them my whole life one asks for forgiveness the other just names the truth I name it now I am hungry I am scared I am trying something is pushing against the back of my chest from the inside wanting out wanting to be known wanting someone to say yes I see you I have seen you all along come in sit down the door was never locked you were just afraid to knock and I know because I was afraid to knock too we are all afraid to knock we are all standing at the door with our hands half raised not sure if we deserve what is on the other

side you do you do you deserve it you have always deserved it the lie said otherwise the lie was good at its job but it was still a lie I woke up once in a room I did not recognize and God said good morning like it was the most natural thing in the world like she had been there all night just waiting for me to open my eyes and maybe she had maybe that is what love looks like when you strip everything else away just a presence that stays when everything goes just a light under the door just a voice that says your name correctly I have heard my name said wrong so many times that I forgot what the right way sounded like but then sometimes in the dark something says it correctly and I stop and I listen and I remember who I was before I learned to disappear I am not gone I was never fully gone just scattered just distributed across too many distances that is what grief does it spreads you thin it folds you into a thousand different envelopes and mails you to places you never meant to go but love is the return address love is always the return address even when the letter gets lost even when the letter never arrives

love wrote it love sent it love is standing at the mailbox still hoping and that hope is the whole religion every other word is commentary we are almost to the place we have been trying to get to our whole lives I think we have been there before I think we keep passing through it without knowing I think the place does not look the way we expected it is not golden it is ordinary it is a kitchen it is a cup of coffee going cold it is the sound of someone sleeping in the next room it is the particular silence of a life that is actually yours the night will not last forever I keep saying that to myself not because I believe it but because the saying is the believing sometimes the act of naming the light is the light itself and so I name it I name it again I name it one more time until it sticks until the morning comes and finds me still here still holding still calling it hope the room is smaller than you think it always is smaller than you think there is a table in the middle and a man on the table and the man is alive but not for long and you stand there because that is what you do you stand there because someone has to you stand there because

god asked you to or you asked god or you cannot remember anymore who asked whom the lights are bright too bright the kind of bright that has nothing to do with seeing the kind of bright that has everything to do with not looking away they want you to see they need you to see this is what justice looks like they say and maybe it is maybe it is I do not know what justice looks like I have never seen it I have only seen this the straps the ceiling the man who is trying not to cry and the man who is trying not to look at the man trying not to cry and the clock the clock the clock I have never not noticed the clock the needle goes in and I watch his face I always watch the face because the face is the last frontier the face is where the person lives longest after everything else has gone slack the face holds on it holds on until it cannot and then it lets go and that is the moment that is always the moment when I do not know what I believe I believed something five seconds ago and now I believe something else now I believe that the world is a room and the room is too bright and none of us asked to be here and all of us are strapped

down in one way or another and the needle is coming for all of us the only question is whether somebody will be there when it does whether someone will hold the space will bear witness will say you are not alone even in this even here even now I said those words I said them and I meant them and I did not know if they were true and I said them anyway because what else do you say what else can you possibly say at the end of it all when the body gives out when the breath stops when the face goes still you say you are not alone and you hope to god that god can hear you saying it because you need her to make it true you cannot make it true yourself you are just a man standing in a room that is too bright holding the space and saying the words and hoping hoping hoping that somebody somewhere is catching what you cannot carry the drive home is the part nobody talks about the part where you get in the car and you put your hands on the wheel and you sit there in the parking lot for a while and the engine is not running and neither are you and you just sit there with your hands on the

wheel looking at the concrete wall in front of you thinking about the face thinking about the hands thinking about the moment when everything stopped and you were still there you were still there breathing while he stopped breathing and what does that mean what does that cost what do you do with the fact that you drove there and you will drive home and tomorrow you will eat breakfast and there will be toast and there will be coffee and somewhere a family will be beginning a grief that will not end for a very long time and another family will be beginning a different grief and the state will say it is finished and you will know that nothing is finished that nothing is ever finished that the dying keeps happening and the living keeps happening and somehow both are true at the same time the radio comes on when you start the car it is always something wrong it is always something too cheerful or too sad or too ordinary and you drive anyway because what else do you do the highway at night is its own kind of honesty nothing hidden everything exposed just the white lines coming at you

and the dark on either side and somewhere behind you a building where something happened that cannot be undone you pass the gas stations the fast food the motels with their vacancy signs all lit up vacancy vacancy vacancy and you think about that word you think about what it means to be vacant to have the vacancy sign lit to be open and empty and waiting and you think maybe that is all any of us are we are all just vacancy signs waiting for something to pull in and stay the night to fill the space for a little while before driving on the face is always the last thing you see before you sleep the face and the hands the hands in particular because hands are where the living shows up most plainly in the hands in the way they hold and reach and let go you have held hands with people as they died as the state killed them and each pair of hands was different each pair of hands was a whole world a whole history of touching and being touched of building and breaking of praying and giving up on praying and you held them anyway you held them and you hoped that the holding meant something meant

anything meant that they knew they were not alone you will never know if it meant that you will never know if any of it meant anything but you did it anyway you got in the car and you drove there and you stood in the room and you held the space and you said the words and you held the hands and you drove home and you did not sleep and you got up in the morning and you drank the coffee and you did it again that is the whole of it that is the whole of a life get up drive there hold the hands drive home do not sleep get up do it again and somewhere in all of that is god or the absence of god or the thing that is both at once I cannot tell the difference anymore I am not sure the difference matters the coffee in the morning matters the light through the window matters the particular way the light comes through the blinds and makes a pattern on the floor and you stand in the pattern and you are a person standing in the light and that is something that is not nothing that is the beginning of something maybe not hope exactly but the raw material of hope the pre-hope the state just before

hope when you are not sure whether you are alive enough to hope but you are alive enough to stand in the light and drink the coffee and that has to count for something it has to be enough because it is all there is some mornings the grocery store is the strangest place in the world you go there and people are buying cereal and comparing prices and talking about nothing and you walk through it like a ghost like someone who has seen something they cannot unsee and you buy your things and you go home and you think about how the world just keeps going how ordinary it is how relentlessly ordinary how tuesday still comes how bread still needs buying how the checkout person still says have a nice day and means it or does not mean it and either way says it and you say you too and you both know and neither of you knows and that is just what life is just two people saying words at each other across a counter in a fluorescent light while the world keeps its appointment with itself I have not told most people what I have seen I have not told them what the room smells like what the sounds are I have not told

them what it is to watch a person die by committee to watch the legal careful methodical ending of a human life and then to drive home and eat toast and I will not tell them not because it is secret but because there is no language for it or rather the language exists but the listener does not the listener has not been in the room and cannot hold what the room contains and so you keep it you carry it you add it to the pile of things you carry and you walk around with the weight and you call it faith you call it vocation you call it purpose because the alternative is to call it unbearable and if you call it unbearable you have to stop and you cannot stop there are more rooms there are always more rooms there are always more men on tables with straps and needles and bright lights and you have to be there you have to be there you have to be the person who is there this is what you were made for or what you made yourself for or what god made you for you still cannot tell the difference most days three in the morning is its own country a country with no laws and no borders and no language that works in daylight it is

the hour when the names come back when the faces come back when you lie there in the dark and they come back and you cannot make them leave and you do not want to make them leave because they are the reason you are still in this you are still in this because of the faces because of the names because each name is a whole person and each person deserved better than what they got and you cannot fix that you cannot undo any of it but you can say the names you can say them into the dark at three in the morning you can say them and mean them and let them matter and that is a form of prayer I think that is what prayer is not the words not the posture not the church with its stained glass and its comfortable distance from the actual it is the saying of the names in the dark it is the lying there with the weight of what you know and saying anyway I was here I was here I was here I am still here god if you are there I am still here I am still saying the names please let the names mean something please let the having been there mean something please let the holding of hands mean something even if I never know

what the something is god is so quiet at three in the morning she is so quiet you almost mistake the quiet for absence but I have been in enough rooms now I have been present at enough endings to know the difference between absence and a presence that does not need to speak the quiet at three in the morning is not empty it is full it is so full it has no room for words it is just full of the weight of everything that has happened and is happening and will happen and god is in all of it god is in all of it whether I can feel it or not whether I can name it or not whether I am lying in the dark at three in the morning or standing in a room with too much light watching a man die god is in all of it and that is either the most comforting thing I know or the most terrifying thing I know and most nights it is both the names I carry are not metaphor the names are people the names are hands the names are faces at the end and I will not let them become abstract I will not let them float up into the comfortable symbolic I will keep them in the body I will keep them in the room the forgiveness question is the one I keep coming

back to not whether I forgive but whether it is mine to give whether forgiveness is something a witness can extend or whether forgiveness belongs only to the ones who were there at the beginning at the crime at the wound who am I to forgive who am I to withhold I stood at the end not the beginning I hold the end not the wound and yet I carry something that feels like the before and the after all at once because that is what the room does it collapses the before and the after into one thing and you stand in the one thing and try to breathe I do not know if I believe what I say I believe I have said the words enough times that I no longer know where the saying ends and the believing begins maybe there is no ends and begins maybe it is all one thing maybe belief is just the act of continuing to say the words into the dark long after you have stopped being sure they are true the church failed me in a specific way it failed me the way anything fails when it chooses comfort over honesty when it chooses the nice version over the true version when it says resurrection without sitting with the dead when it says peace

without knowing the room when it says god loves you from behind glass while the state kills in the next building I do not fault the people I fault the distance I fault the refusal to be in the room the refusal to let the thing that is happening change you the church that does not get changed by what is happening is not the church it is a building and I have too many buildings in my life I need a church that smells like what death smells like that has held hands that has driven home at midnight that has lain awake at three that has said the names that does not know what to do with the names and does it anyway the god who stayed is not the god I was taught the god who stayed has muddy boots and does not apologize and does not explain and is there when I look up and does not have the answers and is there anyway and that is the whole of the theology right there that is everything I know for certain god is there and does not explain and stays and that is enough that is more than enough that has been enough on every night I was not sure it would be enough love looks different after all of it love looks less like a

feeling and more like a direction like a way of pointing yourself like something you decide every morning when you get up and drink the coffee love is not the thing that comes over you it is the thing you do when nothing is coming over you when you are empty and tired and have driven home from another room and the coffee is the only warmth and you decide to point yourself toward another person anyway and call it love and mean it love is what happens when you have nothing left to give and you give it anyway that is the definition I have landed on that is what the rooms and the drive home have taught me the bread and the wine mean something different now they meant something before but now they mean something else something more specific something that cannot be separated from the smell of a room the sound of a machine the face at the end the taste of them now is the taste of every table I have sat at after every room the body and the blood are not metaphor after you have watched the body and the blood they are the most literal thing in the world this happened and it is happening and it will happen

again and we eat and we drink and we say remember me and the remembering is everything the remembering is the whole point do not let it become abstract do not let it become a symbol do not let it float up into the comfortable do not let it leave the room keep it in the room keep it in the hands keep it in the face keep it in the drive home keep it in the three in the morning keep it in the names what resurrection means I do not know in a theoretical sense I have never been able to hold the theory for long it slips I cannot grip it but I know what it looks like in practice it looks like getting up it looks like driving again it looks like saying the names again when you thought you could not say them again it looks like the morning coming when you were sure it would not it looks like the light through the blinds making its pattern on the floor and you standing in it with your coffee deciding that today you will try again that you will go where you are needed that you will hold the hands that you will say the words that you will be in the room resurrection is not the end of death it is what you do

after you have been in the room with death and come out the other side and gotten in the car and driven home and made the coffee and stood in the light and decided to try again that is resurrection that is the only kind I know for sure hope I keep coming back to hope as though I have not been in the rooms as though I have not seen what I have seen as though hope is a reasonable response to the evidence and maybe it is unreasonable maybe it is the most unreasonable thing there is maybe that is the whole point of it maybe hope is only useful precisely because it is unreasonable because the evidence says something else and hope says no I say no I say not yet I say not today I say something else is possible something I cannot see from here but I am going toward it and I am not going to stop going toward it not because the evidence supports it but because I have been in the dark enough times to know that the dark does not last and I have been in the rooms enough times to know that even in the worst rooms something is present something that will not leave something that has no explanation and does not

need one something that stays the morning keeps coming that is the whole argument for hope the morning keeps coming and I keep being here when it does and the light keeps making its pattern and the coffee keeps being warm and the names keep meaning something and the hands keep reaching and the reaching keeps finding something to hold the word amen costs something it costs the acknowledgment that you have said what you have said and meant it and released it into whatever is out there to do with it what it will costs the admitting that you cannot control the outcome that you have made your plea and laid it down costs the trust that the laying down is enough that the saying is the thing and the outcome is not yours to manage amen is the hardest word in the language it is the word that means I am done I have said my piece I have named the names I have asked the questions I have confessed the fears I have held out what I have and I am letting go now I am letting it be I am trusting the dark with what I cannot carry I am trusting the quiet with what I cannot say I am trusting

the morning with what the night has held amen means I trust and I am not sure I trust and I say it anyway I say it into the quiet I say it into the three in the morning I say it into the drive home I say it into the pattern of light on the floor I say amen and I mean it as much as I can and I lean on the part I cannot mean yet and I wait and the morning comes and it is enough it is always just barely enough and that is the whole thing that is the everything the morning comes and you are here and you say amen and you mean it and you begin again light does something specific after you have been in the dark long enough it is not dramatic it does not announce itself it is just suddenly there the way a person is suddenly there the way you look up and someone is standing in the room and you do not know when they arrived but there they are and you are glad and the light is like that after the dark you look up and there it is and you are glad in a way that is below words in a way that is just the body responding to the basic fact of not dark the body knows even when the mind cannot name it the body knows the difference

the body opens toward light without being told there is something instructive in that the body is wiser than the mind in the things that matter the body does not need an argument for light it does not need to resolve the theological questions it just opens it just turns it just begins again and you follow you follow the body you let the body lead you toward the light and you drink the coffee and you say the names and you point yourself toward the place you need to go and you go this is what beginning again looks like not triumph not arrival not the end of the questions just the decision to move toward the light just the body opening just the coffee warm in your hands just the light making its pattern just the names still meaning something just the reaching still finding something to hold just the amen still costing what it costs and being worth it and being said and released and the morning taking it and the morning not being finished with you yet and you not being finished with the morning and all of it continuing all of it still happening all of it still real and you still here still breathing still saying still reaching

still beginning still beginning still beginning again there is a man I knew whose last words were thank you he said thank you to the room to the walls to nobody and everybody and I have been trying to understand that ever since I have been turning it over for years trying to find the bottom of it thank you for what for this for the straps for the needle for the audience for the bright lights for the years on the row for the crime that brought him there for the childhood that made the crime possible for the poverty for the violence for all of it he said thank you and maybe he meant something specific maybe he meant me maybe he meant god maybe he just needed to end on a word that opened instead of closed and that is a thing I think about when I think about how to live how to end the sentence how to close the chapter with something that still points outward thank you is an act of pointing it points at something it acknowledges that something was given even if the something was painful even if the something was unwanted even if the something was years in a small room and a table with straps and

a needle and a man who stood there and held the space because that is what he does thank you is a direction it turns you toward and I want to live turning toward I want to die turning toward I want the last word I say to be the kind of word that opens the door even as it closes the window the cold comes in the morning sometimes I do not know what to do with the cold except to put on the coat and go out into it and let it be cold and keep moving because the cold does not care whether you are ready for it the cold comes and you go out into it or you do not go and if you do not go you miss whatever is out there waiting on the other side of the cold and I am not willing to miss it I am not willing to stay inside because the world is difficult because the air is sharp because the journey costs something I am going I am going out into the cold and I am saying thank you for the cold because the cold is real and real is all I have ever wanted I have never wanted the comfortable distance I have wanted the room I have wanted the face I have wanted the cold I have wanted the thing itself not the idea of the thing

not the theology of the thing not the comfortable managed version of the thing but the actual thing the actual cold the actual room the actual hands the actual face the actual amen the actual morning the man on the row who taught me how to read the psalms did not teach me with words he taught me by the way he held them the way he held the words like they were the last water in a desert and he was not sure there would be more and so every word mattered every word was precious every word was drunk slowly and held on the tongue and I watched him do that for years and I learned something I cannot name I learned something about the difference between reciting and receiving between saying words and being changed by them he was changed by the words every time every reading every psalm was the first time and the last time all at once and I think that is how it is supposed to be I think that is what the sacred texts were always trying to do not to be memorized but to be received not to be recited but to be encountered not to be known but to keep surprising you with what you already know the

problem with hope is that it makes you vulnerable and vulnerability is the thing we are all running from all the time we are all building our walls and our distances and our systems of management and hope comes along and says take the wall down trust the thing you cannot see yet lean into the not yet and that is terrifying that is the most terrifying thing there is more terrifying than the room more terrifying than the needle because at least in the room you know what is happening at least in the room the worst thing is the thing that is happening but hope says the worst thing might not be the last thing hope says something else is possible and to believe that is to expose yourself to the possibility of being wrong to the possibility of another loss another grief another room and I choose it anyway I choose it every morning not because I am brave but because I cannot figure out how to live without it cannot figure out how to get up and drive and hold and say without the somewhere underneath it the possibility that it matters the possibility that none of it is wasted the possibility that even the worst rooms are

held inside something larger something that does not waste anything that uses everything that turns even the straps and the needle and the too-bright light into part of something that ends with thank you and means it what I know about god I learned mostly in rooms I should not have been in the theology I learned in school has been revised so many times by actual rooms that I barely recognize it I learned in school that god was orderly and god was safe and god could be known by the right methods and the right texts and the right prayers and then I went into the rooms and I found god in places god should not have been able to fit and doing things god was not supposed to do and being present in ways that made no theological sense and I gave up trying to make theological sense of it and I just started receiving it started saying thank you for the presence I did not expect in the places I thought were abandoned I did not expect to find god in the death chamber I found god in the death chamber I found god in the parking lot at midnight I found god in the three in the morning I found god in the coffee going cold I

found god in the thank you of a man who had every reason not to say it and if god can be in those places god can be anywhere god is anywhere and everywhere and the question is not where god is the question is whether I am willing to open my eyes wide enough to see it whether I am willing to stay in the room long enough to recognize the presence that does not announce itself the presence that is just there if you are there too if you are really there not managing your distance not protecting yourself not preparing your theology but just there in the room with your hands open and your eyes on the face there is a kind of exhaustion that is also a kind of grace you get so tired that you stop performing stop protecting stop managing the appearance of having it together and what is left is just you just the raw you the unmanaged you the you who does not know what to say and says it anyway the you who does not know how to pray and prays anyway and I think god is most interested in that you god is not particularly moved by the performance god has seen the performance god has sat through a lot

of performances and god prefers the real thing even when the real thing is a mess even when the real thing is I do not know what I am doing here I do not know if any of this means anything I do not know if you are listening but here I am and I need something and I do not know what to ask for so I am just going to stand here and see what happens god prefers that to the polished version every time I have the polished version down pretty well after all these years I can say the words I can hold the silence I can be present in the ways that look like presence but the times I have actually felt something the times something has actually shifted have almost always been the times I stopped performing and just stood there in the mess in the not knowing in the I have been in too many rooms and I do not understand any of them and I need you to explain but I know you will not explain so I am just going to keep showing up and I am going to need you to keep showing up too those are the prayers that land I think those are the ones that go somewhere the unpolished desperate honest ones the ones that do not

know the right words and say the wrong words and mean them anyway the ones that smell like a parking lot at midnight like coffee gone cold like the particular dark of three in the morning those prayers land maybe because they are the ones that have nowhere else to go maybe because they are the ones that have finally run out of options and arrived at the truth of the situation which is that we are all just people in rooms with our hands out hoping that something is there to catch what we throw into the dark and sometimes it is and sometimes we do not know if it is and we throw it anyway we keep throwing we keep showing up we keep saying the names we keep drinking the coffee we keep driving the highway we keep standing in the light and we keep calling it hope and maybe that is the whole thing maybe that is all of it maybe hope is just the decision to keep throwing into the dark and trust that the dark is not empty that is the whole of what I know the dark is not empty I have been in the dark enough times to know the dark is not empty something is there something stays something catches what we

throw something says your name correctly sometimes in the quiet something says get up and you get up and you go and you hold and you say and you come home and you begin and you say amen and you mean it as much as you can and you lean on the rest and the morning comes and you are still here and that is the grace that is the whole grace that is the only grace there is still here still breathing still saying still reaching still beginning again and again and again until the last morning comes and you look up and the room is not too bright and the straps are gone and the needle is gone and someone is standing there who says your name correctly and has been there all along and says good morning like it is the most natural thing in the world and you say thank you and you mean every word of it and that is enough that was always going to be enough

the window does not explain itself it just lets the light through that is the whole of what I am trying to do let the light through without explaining it without managing it without turning it into a lesson or a

sermon or a thing that fits neatly into a box I have been in too many boxes I have watched too many boxes lowered I am done with boxes I want the open I want the window I want the light coming through without permission without apology just coming because that is what light does it comes it finds every crack it does not ask if the crack is ready it just comes and you are changed or you are not but the light came either way that is the thing about grace it does not wait for you to be ready it does not check your theology before it arrives it just shows up in the crack in the parking lot at midnight in the face of the man on the table in the sound of the name said correctly in the coffee warm in your hands it just shows up and you receive it or you do not but it came it was there it is always there if you are willing to call it what it is which is grace which is the thing you did not earn and cannot earn and was given anyway and keeps being given and will keep being given long after you have stopped deserving it which is to say always which is to say it never required deserving in the first place I sat with a

woman once who had not spoken in three days and I sat there with her in the silence and at some point she reached out and took my hand and held it and that was the whole of it that was the entire sermon that was everything I have ever tried to say in every prayer and every word and every mile on the highway that hand reaching out and taking mine in the silence that is the gospel that is the whole of it if you can receive it if you can be in the room and let it be what it is without needing it to be more without needing an explanation without needing the words reach back and hold on reach back and hold on reach back and hold on that is all there is to do I fell asleep once in the middle of praying and I woke up and did not know if the prayer had continued without me and I decided it had I decided the prayer does not need me to be conscious it just needs me to have pointed myself in the right direction and then the prayer goes on with or without my participation god picks it up god keeps it moving god says I have this part you rest you rest and I will carry the rest of the words you meant to say I will take

them where they need to go and you just rest because you are tired and tired is real and rest is grace and grace lets you sleep in the middle of the praying and calls it holy there is a sound the world makes just before dawn I cannot describe it except to say it is the sound of the dark admitting it is almost done it is the sound of something releasing its grip it is the sound of the night saying okay okay I will go I will go now and you lie there and you listen and you do not move because if you move you might miss the moment when the dark gives way and the first impossible gray begins and if you have been awake in the dark long enough you know that gray is the most beautiful color in the world more beautiful than gold more beautiful than any of the colors of noon because it is the first color because it is the color that comes back when you were not sure it was coming back because it is the proof that the dark was not permanent that the dark was only temporary that the dark was only the dark doing its job and its job is to last until it does not and then it does not and then there is gray and then there is light and

then there is the whole ordinary morning and you get up and you make the coffee and you stand in the light and you say thank you and you mean it more than you have ever meant anything I do not pray for what I want anymore I gave that up I pray for what I need and what I need is usually not what I think I need what I think I need is answers and clarity and a god who explains herself and what I actually need is the hand in the silence what I actually need is the gray before the dawn what I actually need is the coffee warm and the light through the window and the next thing to do and the willingness to do it I pray now for willingness mostly I pray for the willingness to get up and go back into the rooms to hold the hands again to say the words again to drive the highway again to come home again to lie awake again to name the names again willingness is the whole prayer willingness is the whole of the spiritual life make me willing to go where I need to go and do what I need to do and be what I need to be and hold what needs holding and say what needs saying and let go of what needs letting go and

that is it that is the whole thing make me willing and then I will go I will go I have always gone the rain knows something I do not the rain does not ask what it is falling on it just falls it falls on the execution chamber and the cathedral and the grocery store and the highway at midnight and the parking lot and the garden where I wake up hungry it falls on all of it equally and calls nothing worthy and calls nothing unworthy it just falls it just keeps falling and I think that is a kind of love I think that is what love looks like at scale that unsentimental even generous falling that does not choose that does not sort that does not say this place deserves rain and this place does not it just falls it just keeps falling I have been that rain sometimes I have been in the rooms and I have tried to fall equally to not sort to not decide in advance what is worthy of presence and what is not to just be there to just let the being there be the whole of what I offer sometimes I succeeded and sometimes I arrived with my sorting already done and I had to unlearn it in the room had to let the room teach me again that there is no unworthy

place there is no unworthy person there is no face that does not deserve to be witnessed there is no hand that does not deserve to be held there is no name that does not deserve to be said and I know this and I forget it and I learn it again and I forget it and I learn it again and that is the whole of the spiritual life learning and forgetting and learning and forgetting and the grace is that the learning is always available the grace is that the room is always there ready to teach you again as many times as you need it the body is a form of prayer I have come to believe that the body kneeling is a prayer the body standing in the light is a prayer the body reaching across the space between two people is a prayer the body sitting in silence is a prayer the body driving the highway is a prayer the body lying awake at three naming the names is a prayer the body eating the bread and drinking the wine is a prayer the body crossing the threshold of the room and staying in the room is a prayer the body is where the praying actually happens the mind wanders the words fail the theology collapses but the body keeps showing up the

body keeps getting in the car the body keeps walking through the door the body keeps reaching the body keeps kneeling and in the kneeling and the driving and the reaching and the staying the prayer happens whether or not the words come whether or not the mind is present whether or not the belief is solid that day the body knows something the body goes somewhere the body arrives in the room and the room receives the body and something happens that does not have a name something that is more than the sum of what the body did and what the room held something that is the thing itself the thing you cannot get to by any route except through the body through the showing up through the being there I have been wrong about so many things I have said things in rooms that turned out to be wrong and I could not go back and unsay them and the man was gone and the words were wrong and I had to live with that I had to carry that as the price of not being god the price of being a person in a room who says words and sometimes the words are wrong and you cannot unsay

them but you can say better words later you can say the truest words you know at the time and hold yourself accountable for the truth and keep learning what true means keep letting the rooms teach you keep letting the faces revise your theology keep staying humble enough to be wrong again because the alternative is to stop speaking and I cannot stop speaking the words are all I have the words and the presence and the body in the room and the hand reaching and the name said and even when the words are wrong the presence was real the body was there the hand reached and that matters that counts for something in whatever accounting is being kept I do not know if there is an accounting I do not know if there is a record I do not know if anything is kept or held or returned I only know that it happened that I was there that the room was real that the face was real that the hand was real and I was there and I held the space and I said the words and I drove home and I will drive back and I will be there again and that is the whole of what I have to offer and I offer it I offer it I

offer it every time without reservation without guarantee without knowing what it means I offer it anyway the cup is always empty when I arrive and always full when I leave I do not know how that works I have stopped trying to explain it I just arrive empty and I leave full and somewhere in the being there the filling happens and I call it grace because I do not have another word and grace is the right word it is the exactly right word for the thing that fills you when you have nothing left when you arrived empty and the room was hard and the face was hard and the words were hard and the hand was heavy and you held it anyway and at the end you were somehow more full than when you came that is grace that is the only definition of grace that has ever made sense to me the filling that happens when you have nothing left to fill with the receiving that happens when you have given everything the thing that stays when everything else goes the word I need does not exist in English so I keep reaching for the edges of the words I have and hoping the reaching itself communicates something the

reaching is the point anyway the reaching is the whole of what prayer is the reaching toward something you cannot name reaching with words that do not quite fit reaching with a body that does not quite know what it is doing reaching in the dark in the room in the parking lot at midnight reaching and the reaching not always finding and the not finding not being the end of the reaching because you reach again you reach again you reach again and sometimes something meets you and sometimes the reaching is the thing itself and you cannot always tell the difference and that is fine that is the life that is what it means to be a person in a room trying to love what is in the room and being only partially successful and trying again there are birds in the morning that I hear before I see the light they start before the gray they are up before the dawn announcing something they cannot possibly know is coming except they do know except they have always known they have never not known the light is coming and they sing toward it they sing before it arrives they sing it into existence or they sing to welcome it or they

sing because singing is what they are made for and the light is just the occasion the singing would happen anyway the singing always happens I want to be like that I want to be like the birds before the dawn I want to sing toward something I cannot yet see I want my showing up to be its own kind of announcement I want to arrive in the room before the light arrives and start singing anyway start saying the words before I know if they are true start reaching before I know if something will meet me start holding the space before I know what will fill it just open just singing just reaching just already there when the light comes grief is slower than I expected it does not move through you it moves with you it does not leave it becomes a companion it changes over time it gets quieter it gets lighter but it stays it stays and it should stay because the staying is the proof that the thing was real that the person was real that the weight of the loss is proportional to the weight of the love and I do not want to put down the grief entirely because to put down the grief would be to put down the love and I am not willing to do that I

will carry them together the love and the grief that is shaped exactly like the love I will carry them together for as long as I am carrying anything I had a teacher once who said the goal is not to get over grief but to get big enough to hold it and I have been trying to get big enough ever since trying to expand to match what I carry trying to become a large enough vessel for the weight of all these faces all these hands all these names I am not there yet I do not know if you ever get there but the trying itself does something the trying expands you the sitting with the weight instead of running from it the letting it be as large as it needs to be the saying these names matter this love was real this loss is real the trying to be big enough does something to the size of you and I am trying I am still trying the silence after the last word is its own thing it is not the absence of the word it is the word still ringing it is the space the word carved in the air still holding the shape of the word silence after the right word is more powerful than the word itself it is where the word lands it is where the word does its work you say the thing and

then you let the silence have it and the silence does something with it the silence takes the word and opens it and what comes back out of the silence is larger than what went in that is why you do not rush to fill it that is why you sit in it you sit in the silence after the word and you let the silence work you trust the silence to know what to do with what you gave it and it always does it always does something with it always returns it changed always returns it larger always returns it as something you did not expect but recognize as more true than what you started with I am not afraid of the dark anymore I was afraid for a long time I ran from it I filled it with noise and motion and purpose I made myself too busy to sit in it and the darkness found me anyway in the rooms in the parking lot in the three in the morning it found me anyway so I stopped running and I sat in it and I found out it was not empty and I found out I was not alone and I found out the dark has things to show you that the light cannot show you things that only appear in the dark things that need the dark to be visible the way stars need the dark the way

the gray before dawn needs the dark to make it beautiful I needed the dark I needed the rooms I needed the three in the morning I needed the drive home alone on the highway I needed all of it to show me what I could not see in the comfortable light of the ordinary day the ordinary day is good the ordinary day is a gift but the dark is also a gift and I have learned to receive it as such I have learned to say thank you for the dark thank you for the rooms thank you for the three in the morning thank you for the faces thank you for the names thank you for the weight thank you for all of it because all of it made me and all of it is still making me and I am not done being made and that is the grace that is the final grace that you are never done being made that the making continues that every room is still teaching you that every face is still revising you that every name is still expanding you that the dark is still showing you things that the ordinary light cannot show you and that you are still here still in it still being made and the morning is still coming and the birds are already singing and you are already reaching and the

light is already on its way and you are going to be there when it arrives you are going to be standing in it with your hands open with your face turned toward it with your mouth open saying thank you saying amen saying yes saying I am here I am still here I am always still here and that is the whole prayer and the whole answer and the whole of everything there is to know and it is enough it has always been enough it will always be enough the table is set whether or not you come to it that is the thing nobody tells you the table is always set the bread is always there the wine is always there the seat is always there with your name on it and you can stay away for years and come back and it is still set still waiting still the same bread still the same wine still the same seat and the only thing that has changed is how hungry you are from having stayed away and the hunger is not punishment the hunger is just the fact of being away from what you need and when you come back to the table the hunger is the proof that the table is real that the bread is real that the wine is real that the need is real and the table does

not say where have you been the table does not say you should have come sooner the table says sit down you are hungry sit down and eat and that is the whole of the welcome and it is enough it is more than enough it is the only welcome I have ever needed I lost my way once for a long time I lost it and I did not try to find it I just sat down in the middle of wherever I was and waited and eventually the way found me which is how it always works which is the thing nobody tells you when you are lost you do not find the way the way finds you you just have to stay still long enough and honest enough and open enough to be found and the being found feels like nothing dramatic it feels like a slight shift it feels like the air changing it feels like a door opening somewhere you were not looking it feels like hearing your name said correctly after a long time of hearing it wrong it feels like coming home to a place you have never been but somehow always knew the whole of the life is the finding and the losing and the being found again and the losing again and the being found again and there is no final finding there is no

place you arrive and stop being lost you just get better at recognizing the feeling of being found you get better at staying open to being found you get better at not running when the finding starts to happen because sometimes the finding is uncomfortable sometimes being found means being seen and being seen means being known and being known means being responsible for what you know about yourself and that is the scary part that is why we run from being found we run because being found means we have to do something with the finding we have to be accountable to it we have to change or at least try to change or at least admit that change is possible and the admitting is the beginning of everything the admitting is the door the admitting is the first step back toward the table back toward the seat with your name on it back toward the bread and the wine and the welcome that does not ask where you have been I have one more thing to say and then I will be quiet which is that love is the only thing that outlasts the room love is the only thing that goes through the door that no one comes

back from love is the only thing that does not end when the ending comes I have been in the room when the ending comes I have felt what fills the room after the ending and what fills the room is love what stays in the room after the body goes is love what I drive home with what I carry at three in the morning what I set down and pick up and set down again is love and the love is not mine it belongs to the person who is gone it belongs to the faces and the names and the hands it belongs to the rooms and the long highways and the gray before the dawn it belongs to the table and the bread and the wine and the welcome and the seat that always has your name on it and I am just the person who was there I am just the person who held the space and said the words and held the hands and drove home and lay awake and named the names and got up and went back and I will keep going back I will keep going back as long as there are rooms as long as there are faces as long as there are hands that need holding as long as there are names that need saying I will keep going back and it will keep costing what it costs and I

will keep paying it and it will keep being worth it and the morning will keep coming and the birds will keep singing before the light and I will keep reaching toward something I cannot fully see and something will keep meeting me in the reaching and I will keep calling it god and I will keep calling it love and I will keep calling it hope and I will keep driving and I will keep arriving and I will keep beginning and I will not stop I will not stop I will not stop

BOOK 9

The Gospel of Mary: A Modern Commentary

Jeff Hood

2022

By 2022, Hood has been a prophet and a priest and a witness for nearly a decade. He has been in the rooms. He has named the harm. He has stayed when others left. And now he turns to a text that was itself a victim of exactly the dynamic he has been resisting his entire ministry: the suppression of a voice that was too threatening to permit.

The Gospel of Mary is not in the canon. It was discovered in the nineteenth century, long after the decisions about what counted as scripture had been made by the people who had the power to make them. It represents a strand of early Christian thought in which Mary Magdalene — not Peter, not the male disciples — is the one who most fully understands what the risen Christ has taught, and is the one commissioned to carry that teaching forward. The

male disciples resist her authority. They do not want to hear what she has to say. She says it anyway.

Hood recognizes this story. He has lived a version of it. He has been in communities where the most essential voices were the ones that made the powerful uncomfortable, where authority was distributed not by spiritual discernment but by institutional convenience, where the people who actually understood what was happening were systematically excluded from the positions that would have allowed them to say so. The Gospel of Mary speaks directly into that experience.

The commentary Hood writes is priestly in the deepest sense: it is an act of mediation between a buried voice and a present need. He does not approach the text as an academic, though his engagement is intellectually serious. He approaches it as a minister — as someone who needs this text to be true, who needs Mary's authority to be real, who has sat with enough silenced people to understand what it costs when a

community's most essential voices are suppressed in the name of order.

The format of the commentary — ancient text in bold, Hood's response following — enacts a dialogue across centuries. Mary speaks. Hood responds. The distance between them collapses. The questions she was asking in the first century are the questions he has been asking in the twenty-first: Who has the authority to speak? Who decides? What does love actually require? What remains when the disciples' fear and competition fall away and there is nothing left but the teaching itself?

The Gospel of Mary: A Modern Commentary is the book in which Hood's priestly vocation reaches its fullest theological expression. He is mediating not just between a suffering person and the presence of God, but between a suppressed tradition and a church that desperately needs to hear what it buried.

The Gospel of Mary

A Modern Commentary

Jeff Hood

Why This Book Matters

I almost didn't write this book.

That's the honest truth and I think you deserve to hear it before you read a single word of what follows. For a long time, I kept the Gospel of Mary at arm's length...not because I didn't find it compelling, but because I found it almost too compelling. It unsettled something in me. And I've learned over the years that when a text unsettles you, it's usually asking you to become someone you aren't quite ready to be.

I grew up in a tradition where the Bible was a closed book...not literally, but practically. The canon was settled. The interpretations were established. The people whose voices mattered had been determined long before I was born and none of them looked much like Mary Magdalene. You learned your place, you accepted what you were given and you trusted that the people who had shaped Christian history over two thousand years had, by and large, gotten it right. I don't say that with bitterness. I say it because I think a lot of people reading this book will recognize that story as their own.

But there was always something nagging at me. A gap between what I was told faith looked like and what I actually felt when I was quiet enough to listen. A distance between the God of rules and punishment I was handed and the Love that I kept stumbling into in the most unexpected places...in the faces of people the Church had cast out, in the grief of those who had been told they weren't enough, in my own dark nights when no doctrine seemed sufficient and only something rawer, truer, kept me going.

When I finally sat with the Gospel of Mary...really sat with it...that gap started to close.

This is not a comfortable text. It was buried for a reason. The version of Christianity that won...the one that built the cathedrals and the councils and the creeds...did not want you reading this. Did not want you sitting with the possibility that Christ's most intimate disciple was a woman. Did not want you entertaining the idea that there is no sin in the way we've been taught to fear it...that what we call sin is really just the tragic human act of running away from

love. Did not want you taking seriously the notion that Christ is already within you, not waiting to be earned, not locked behind a set of rules or a statement of faith, but present...here, now, inseparable from who you already are.

I want to be clear about what kind of book this is.

This is not an academic text. There are brilliant scholars who have spent their careers excavating the historical context of the Gospel of Mary...the Coptic manuscripts discovered in Egypt, the Greek fragments pieced together over a century of careful study, the debates about Gnosticism and early Christian diversity. I am grateful for all of it and I have learned from it. But that is not the work I am doing here.

What I am doing here is sitting with a text that has survived against all odds and asking what it is trying to say to us right now. To you. To me. To the person who picked up this book because something in their life has shaken loose and the old answers aren't holding anymore.

The format is intentional. The ancient words of the text appear in bold. Everything else is my attempt to follow those words as deeply as I can...to let them open up, to ask what they demand of us, to refuse to let them stay safely in the past where they can't disturb anyone. I wrote these reflections the way I write everything: quickly, urgently, without a lot of hedging. I believe theology should feel like something. It should cost you something. If it doesn't, you're probably doing it wrong.

Some of what I've written here will offend you. Good. Offense is often the beginning of honesty. If you've been in the Church long enough, you've been trained to treat certain questions as dangerous...to keep them behind glass, to visit them only with appropriate supervision. I'm asking you to put your hands right through that glass. Not because I want to be provocative for its own sake, but because I genuinely believe that the liberation Mary is pointing toward cannot be accessed from a safe distance. You have to get close. You have to let it in.

And here is the thing about Mary that broke me open: she didn't flinch.

When Christ ascended and the disciples fell into grief and fear..."How shall we go to the world and preach the Gospel? If they did not spare Christ, how will they spare us?"...it was Mary who stood up. Mary who greeted them. Mary who turned their hearts back toward the Good. And then, when she shared the vision Christ had given her, the vision the men around her had not received, Peter challenged her. Andrew dismissed her. The old familiar machinery of religious power ground into motion to silence the voice that had just brought them back from despair.

And Mary wept. But she did not recant.

I think about that a lot. I think about all the Marys.

I think about every person who has ever had a genuine encounter with the divine and then been told by the institution that their encounter was invalid. Insufficient. Unorthodox. Too female, too queer, too poor, too broken, too outside the lines of what was supposed to be possible. I think about every person

who carried a truth they knew was real and was made to feel ashamed of it...who wept, but did not recant, because what they had seen was too real to surrender. This book is for them.

It is also for the Peters. I say that without contempt. Peter's response to Mary is painfully, recognizably human. He had given everything to follow Christ. He had built his identity around his proximity to the sacred. And now here was this woman telling him that the most important post-resurrection vision had been given not to him but to her. The threat wasn't just theological. It was personal. It was existential. We do terrible things when our sense of self is at stake and Peter did what threatened men have always done...he reached for authority and called it truth.

If you find yourself in Peter anywhere in this book, that's not an accusation. That's an invitation. The Gospel of Mary doesn't ask you to be perfect. It asks you to be honest. It asks you to be willing to have your certainties loosened, your hierarchies questioned, your

sense of who gets to speak for God fundamentally reconsidered.

What this text keeps returning to...what I kept returning to as I wrote...is the question of the root. Christ tells us that all things will be resolved back into their own roots. That matter itself is on a journey home. That the Good came into our midst not to punish or condemn but to restore...to call every creature, every formation, every broken and beautiful piece of existence back to what it fundamentally is.

Love is the root. That is the message of this Gospel. Not love as a sentiment or a feeling or a social nicety, but love as the actual substance of reality. The ground of being. The thing you find when you strip away everything else. The thing Mary was pointing toward when the men around her wanted to argue about credentials.

I want to say something plainly before you go any further.

I am not asking you to abandon your faith. I am not asking you to throw out everything you've been given.

Some of what you've been given is good and true and worth holding. What I am asking...what I believe this text is asking...is that you hold your tradition loosely enough to let God move through it. That you remain open to the possibility that the Spirit blows where it wishes, that revelation did not stop at a council in Nicaea and that the voices which were silenced in the formation of our canon might have something urgent to say to us now.

We are living through a moment when the Church is hemorrhaging. People are leaving in numbers that would have seemed unthinkable a generation ago and they are not leaving because they stopped caring about God. They are leaving because the version of God they were handed no longer fits the size of the Love they have actually experienced. They are leaving because they were told that Christ was in the rules and then they met Christ somewhere the rules could not follow...in the margins, in the mess, in the faces of people the institution had decided didn't qualify.

The Gospel of Mary was written for that moment. Or rather...that moment has finally caught up with the Gospel of Mary.

Here is what I believe and what I hope this book will help you find your way toward: You have always been saved. Christ is within you. Not waiting to be unlocked by the right prayer or the right doctrine or the right leader, but present...sewn into the fabric of who you are, stitched into your matter by the Love that made you. The journey of faith is not the journey toward something you don't have. It is the journey of learning to recognize what has always been there.

Mary knew that. She had seen it. She had held it in her body and her mind and her soul. And when she was challenged, when the tears came, she stood her ground not because she was certain of her theology but because she was certain of what she had experienced. That kind of faith...embodied, costly, rooted in actual encounter...is the kind this world is starving for.

Read this text slowly. Argue with it. Sit in the places where it confuses you or offends you or breaks your

heart a little. Let it ask its questions without rushing to answer them. And when you get to the end, when Mary falls silent because she has said everything there is to say...sit in that silence too.

The Gospel of Mary matters because we are living in a time that desperately needs what she carried: a faith that begins in love rather than fear, a Christ that belongs to everyone rather than to those who hold the keys and the courage to say what is true even when the room falls silent and no one is quite ready to believe you.

Let us begin.

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood
April 11, 2023

A Note on the Format

The bold text throughout this commentary is the ancient scripture itself — the surviving words of the

Gospel of Mary, presented as closely as possible to the original manuscripts.

All other text is commentary.

The numerical references (21, 22, 31, etc.) correspond to chapter and verse within the Gospel, providing a way to locate each reflection within the text's original structure.

The first part of the manuscript is missing. The existing text begins below...

Chapter 2

Matter and Its Root

. . . Will matter then be destroyed or not?

2:1

The fundamental question of human existence. Every letter is a longing to breathe. Every syllable is a longing to know. Every word is a longing to be. Will my matter matter? The question is born out of despair but bathed in hope. The answer will either destroy or birth a new tomorrow. Mary is speaking for us all...and we all wait with great anticipation for the Savior's reply.

Christ said, "All natures, all formations, all creatures exist in and with one another,

2:2

Everything is connected. There is no separation between anything. We are what we are. We are everything. We are anything. We are.

and they will be resolved again into their own roots.

2:3

All things are collapsing into what is so that we might become what was and what will ever be. The collapse into birth is salvation. The collapse into creation is salvation. The collapse into God is salvation. The journey back is salvation.

For the nature of matter is resolved into the roots of its own nature.

2:4

Matter is slowly being released to return to the origin of matter...matter...the root of nature...God. The release of all that holds us back from the beginning is the beginning of redemption...the restoration of all.

Those who have ears to hear, let them hear!"

2:5

What about those who do not have ears? What about those who cannot hear? The exhortation goes much deeper than any physical characteristic. The exhortation is about one opening their heart...regardless of their physical state. It is an invitation to knowing...to being...to the epicenter of matter.

Chapter 3

The Question of Sin

Peter said to Christ, "Since you have explained everything to us, tell us this also:

3:1

It is human to long to know more. The problem with such longing is that it can complicate that which we already know...the root. Sometimes the answer to the question lies in the question...and perhaps that is where our longing should most generatively reside...being the question.

What is the sin of the world?"

3:2

Where did everything go wrong? Every civilization has sought to answer the question. Perhaps the answer is that there is no answer...there is only us.

Christ said, "There is no sin,

3:3

The idea of the nonexistence of sin is an invitation back to a space of wholeness in being...a formative place where there was no sin.

but it is you who make sin when you do the things that are like the nature of adultery, which is called sin.

3:4

We are the creators of the allusion of sin. Chaos enters our matter because we run around on the matter that really matters. Running around only makes you dizzy...unable to grasp hold of who and what ultimately is.

That is why the Good came into your midst, to the essence of every nature

3:5

Love is all that is good. Love came into our midst to lead us to love...the core of who we are. We were brought forth from love...we are being broken down to love...and we will return to both our origin and our destiny...love. Love is all that is good.

in order to restore it to its root.

3:6

Love is the root. To pursue anything other than love is to deny the root. We are nothing without the root.

Then He continued and said, "That is why you become sick and die,

3:7

Sickness and death flow out of a denial of love. We have denied the perfect and are left with the partial. The day is coming when love will do away with anything that is partial. Love is the only thing that can speed up such a process...the day when love will be completely restored...will win.

for you love what deceives you.

3:8

Love can never be replaced. The seeker will always be searching until they do away with all that might deceive them and turn to love.

Let all who have a mind to understand, understand.

3:9

Partial understanding is not understanding. One must commit to understand that which they understand.

How far will one go to grasp the fullness of understanding? It seems that it is worth everything.

Matter gives birth to a passion that has no equal, because it proceeds from something contrary to nature.

3:10

Our nature is love. Passion can corrupt such nature...because passion can blind us to what love really is...something that never fails.

Then there arises a disturbance in its whole body.

3:11

Our bodies matter. Our matter matters. We cannot love the neighbor until we love our body. Wholeness in our body is the beginning of wholeness in all that is. Disturbances in our body are a disturbance in all that is. Wholeness begins within the body.

That is why I said to you, "You shall become satisfied, and not persuaded. You shall be joined in the presence of the likeness of nature.

3:12

What does it mean to become satisfied in love? What does it mean to not be persuaded by passion? It means that you will be joined with the likeness of nature...love.

Those who have ears to hear, let them hear."

3:13

Love. That is the matter upon which all matter rests. Listen.

Chapter 4

The Peace and the Sending

When Christ said this, Christ greeted them all, saying, "Peace be with you.

4:1

The blessed one always brings the peace. We are called to be the blessed one. We become blessed when our matter connects to the ground of matter...love.

Receive my peace unto yourselves.

4:2

Be the incarnation of love as Christ was the incarnation. Be love. Be Christ.

Beware that no one lead you astray saying...

4:3

Cling to the teachings of love that you know are real within you...surely nothing else will ever be as real as the impression and expression of the root of your soul.

'Look here!' or 'Look there!'

4:4

There will be plenty who try all sorts of things to distract you from the work of love...resist with all that you are...for the integrity of your soul is at stake. There is nothing over here. There is nothing over there.

For Christ is within you.

4:5

This is a beautiful description of the Christ. The incarnation is Child of God yet also Child of Humanity. So too can we be... We are made to be/in/of/through Christ. We are the Christ child.

Follow It!

4:6

Follow the Christ that is within you. There is no need to get saved...you have always been saved...Christ is within you...follow your salvation.

Those who seek will find.

4:7

Those willing to touch the Christ within will be able to grasp the Christ within.

Go then and preach the Good News of Christ.

4:8

One does not change the world by changing people...you change the world by sharing with them that the change is already within them. We are made in the image of the Christ. Salvation lives within us. Salvation for the world (even the cosmos) lives within us. Go to the realm and be liberators of the Christ!

Do not lay down any rules beyond what I appointed you,

4:9

Fuck the rules. Love Christ.

and do not give a law like the lawgiver, lest you be confined by it.

4:10

Rules are a prison that always imprison their creator first. Rules are death. Love is life. Live into the freedom of love that is within you.

When Christ said this, Christ departed.

4:11

The Christ declares that the Christ will never leave us nor forsake us. How could the Christ? The Christ is within us all. However, there are certainly times where

the Christ is more real than others. Hold on to such times...for they are always the starkest reminder of what is within.

Chapter 5

Mary Stands

But they were pained. They wept greatly, saying,

5:1

Hopelessness often births tears. When one has touched the root of the Christ, they realize that there is no hope apart from it. Despair can set in. Until one realizes that hope remains eternally embedded in the hope that remains within.

"How shall we go to the world and preach the Gospel of the Christ?

5:2

The danger of the external Christ is it fosters a belief that one can be alone. The internal Christ teaches us that we are never alone. No one can stop the message of the Christ. Despite what is going on around us, the Child of Humanity has already prepared us for whatever is to come.

If they did not spare Christ, how will they spare us?"

5:3

Fear is not of Christ. Our prayer mustn't be to not be spared. Our prayer must be that we follow the way of Christ.

Then Mary stood up, greeted them all, and said,

5:4

Mary is the inheritor of the mantle of Christ upon the ascension of Christ. History has tried to silence oppressed and marginalized peoples since the beginning of time...but Christ gives the mantle to Mary. The Christ within us will become most apparent when we unite our person to the marginalized and oppressed. Mary is one of the greatest embodiments of Christ to ever live...and she has not often been given her due. She greets the disciples as their leader and we should treat her as such.

"Do not weep or grieve or doubt,

5:5

Death is synonymous with pain. Pain is synonymous with tears. Tears are synonymous with doubt. But they don't have to be. The Christ calls us to not engage such

things as those who are without hope. There is freedom in knowing that Christ lives.

for Christ's grace will be with you and shelter you.

5:6

Grace is too often thought of as simply a pardon. In the realm of the Christ, grace is a restoration...or as if nothing wrong ever happened. Meaning, the shelter of grace is such that love always wins. In the realm of love, the restoration never dies.

But rather, let us praise Christ's greatness,

5:7

Praise is too often thought of as fawning to the floor in awe. Perhaps praise is something much more...namely, love...or a way of being complete in the presence of another. Praise is about wholeness.

for Christ has prepared us and made us Human."

5:8

In all divine splendor, Christ created us to be human. In Christ, we are most fully human. Perhaps in us, Christ is most fully human as well.

When Mary said this, she turned their hearts to the Good,

5:9

Turning toward the good is about turning toward the path of restoration...for there is nothing good apart from restoration. Turned hearts are restored hearts.

and they began to discuss the words of Christ.

5:10

The words of the Christ are most fully illuminated in discussion with the Christ. Surely, Christ bumping into Christ births more Christ...or illuminates the exponential nature of the Christ.

Chapter 6

Hidden Knowledge

Peter said to Mary, "Sister we know that Christ loved you more than the rest of the women.

6:1

Peter can't make sense of Christ's love for Mary...so he has to qualify it amongst all the women. Truth be told, it is possible that Mary was closer to Christ than anyone else...not just amongst the women. Certainly, it is beyond possible that Mary was erased from most accounts.

Tell us the words of the Savior, which you remember, which you know but we do not...those that we have not heard."

6:2

Mary has something that the other disciples want...hidden knowledge. Christ manifests exponentially in those who create room for that which is hidden. Mary has created such room. The male disciples have not.

Mary answered and said, "What Christ has hidden from you I will tell you."

6:3

Despite the stifling patriarchy that surrounded her, Mary took pity on the other disciples and granted their request. The nature of the love of Christ is that it is not a collector or keeper of wrongs...but rather a liberator of the Christ that is in us all.

And she began to speak to them Christ's words.

6:4

Deep within her humanity, Christ gives Mary the ability to put into words that for which there are no words.

Chapter 7

The Vision

"I," she said, "I saw Christ in a vision

7:1

Christ grants the power of "I." When we are one with the Christ within, we have the ability to declare who and what we are. The "I" is a symbol of possession. "I" possess myself. "I" possess the Christ within. "I" had a vision...this is mine and out of the love of Christ within me..."I" am going to share it with you.

and I said to Christ, 'I saw you today in a vision.'

7:2

Mary engages the Christ again...not because Christ doesn't know that Mary saw the Christ...but rather to remind herself of what she saw. In the midst of this moment of vision, Mary keeps coaching herself to stay in/with the vision.

Christ answered and said to me, 'Blessed are you because you did not waver at the sight of Me.

7:3

Christ affirms Mary's persistence...and in doing so...lifts her up as an example of the unwavering spirit that everyone should have. Mary is keeping her mind right.

For where the mind is, there is the treasure.'

7:4

Mary's mind is concentrated on her treasure, the Christ. To concentrate on anything else is not to concentrate on treasure...but rather death.

I said to Christ, 'How does one who sees the vision see it, through the soul or through the spirit?'

7:5

In asking the question, Mary wants to know about the soul and the spirit. Which is most necessary to ascertain the things of God? This is not just a question for the moment. Mary sees this question as the question of existence.

Christ answered and said, "One does not see through the Soul or Spirit,

7:6

Immediately, Christ rebukes the question entirely...to direct Mary to a secret higher truth.

but it is the mind between the two that sees the vision.'"

7:7

Unlike most other writings about the Christ, Mary is directed toward the mind as a means of salvation...perhaps not as the only means of salvation...but certainly an integral part of any transformation.

Major gap in manuscript...

Chapter 9

The Soul's Ascent

Note: Due to the incomplete nature of the surviving manuscripts, a significant portion of the text is missing here. The existing text picks up mid-narrative, describing the Soul's ascent toward God and its encounter with opposing powers.

"And Desire said,

9:1

Desire is one of the manifestations that is keeping the Soul from uniting fully with God.

'I did not see you descending, but now I see you ascending.

9:2

Desire speaks as if it is an old acquaintance of the Soul. It speaks to the direction that the Soul is going. Desire is sure that it can stop the Soul from ascending to God.

Why do you lie since you belong to me?'

9:3

Desire clearly expresses a belief that it owns the Soul...and can do with it whatever it wishes. Thus is the nature of desire...

The Soul answered and said, 'I saw you. You did not see me or recognize me.

9:4

The Soul basically replies that it has been looking out for Desire. The Soul has prepared for this meeting.

I served you as a garment

9:5

The garment speaks of the Soul's shell...i.e. what Desire thought it saw, it didn't see because it wasn't looking deeply or beyond the Soul's garment or shell.

and you did not know me.'

9:6

Everybody/Desire thinks they really know somebody...know their heart...and most of the time they don't have a clue. The Soul is declaring that Desire never took the time to actually look at the Soul. "You don't know me!"

When the Soul said this, it went away rejoicing greatly.

9:7

The Soul escaped the trap of Desire by being most authentically the Soul.

Again it came to the third power, which is called Ignorance.

9:8

In numbering the power, the passage illustrates that Ignorance is one of many ascent obstacles the Soul faces.

The power questioned the Soul, saying, 'Where are you going?

9:9

Ignorance is like a guard demanding to know where a trespasser is going. The question is as much of a demand to stop as it is a question.

In wickedness are you enslaved.

9:10

Often...in our ignorance...we name things before they can name us. Wickedness named without is wickedness denied within.

You are chained...

9:11

Ignorance declares the Soul to be so wicked that the Soul can't even name Ignorance's wickedness...i.e. you can't even begin to talk about me.

do not judge!'

9:12

Ignorance declares the Soul to be in no position to judge so that Ignorance doesn't have to face judgment.

And the Soul said, 'Why do you judge me since I have not judged?

9:13

Preemptive judgment is one of the foremost tools of Ignorance. The Soul resists the temptation.

I was chained, though I have not chained.

9:14

Ignorance declares rule over the Soul and gives the Soul no opportunity to challenge such rule.

I was not recognized. But I have recognized that all matter is being dissolved, both the earthly things and the heavenly.'

9:15

Regardless, the Soul knows more than Ignorance. The Soul knows that all things are being freed...you can't simply imprison someone by calling them wicked anymore. Earth and Heaven are uniting to push back against such Ignorance. All is being made free.

When the Soul had overcome the third power, it went upwards and saw the fourth power,

9:16

Ignorance can never beat...or even respond to...freedom. The Soul moved onward toward freedom.

it took seven forms.

9:17

There are seven forms that the Soul had to respond to.

The first form is Darkness,

9:18

Darkness is that which obscures the Light...which is the eternal guide.

the second Desire,

9:19

Desire is that which disorients the Path...which can confuse the senses.

the third Ignorance,

9:20

Ignorance is that which blurs the Knowledge...which can distract the mind.

the fourth is the Eagerness for Death,

9:21

Eagerness for Death can destroy Eagerness for Life.

the fifth is the Realm of the Flesh,

9:22

Realm of the Flesh can destroy hunger for the Realm of the Eternal.

the sixth is the Foolish Wisdom of Flesh,

9:23

Foolish Wisdom of the Flesh can distract from Eternal Wisdom of the Soul.

the seventh is the Wrathful Wisdom.

9:24

Wrathful Wisdom is the opposite of the Wisdom of Grace.

These are the Seven Powers of Wrath.

9:25

The informed Soul knows that the seven Powers of Wrath will never be any match for the beauty of Grace.

They asked the Soul, 'Where are you coming from human-killer, or where are you going, place-destroyer?'

9:26

By labeling the Soul as a human-killer and place-destroyer, the Seven Powers are trying to confuse the Soul into thinking that the complete Restoration of all things is no longer a reality.

The Soul answered and said, 'What binds me has been slain, and what turns me about has been destroyed, and my desire has been filled, and my ignorance is dead.

9:27

Rules are dead. Grace reigns. Eternal focus rules. Death is dead. Righteousness abounds. Evil has been washed

away. Knowledge is complete. Ignorance is dead. The Soul is being completely restored.

In a world I was released from a world, and in a mold from a higher mold, and from the chain of forgetfulness…which is temporal.

9:28

The Soul has been released from time and space so that the Soul might fully be time and space...all knowledge now belongs to the Soul. The chain of destruction is finished. The Soul will never die. Holiness is eternally holy.

From this second on, I will attain the rest of time, of the season, of the generations, I will rest content.'"

9:29

In Silence, the Soul waits until the restoration is complete...leaving only the Soul's path/light to guide all that might come after.

When Mary said this, she fell silent,

9:30

Mary waited in the Silence with the Soul until the vision was complete.

since it was to this point that Christ had spoken with her.

9:31

After the Way of the Savior was expressed, there was a heaviness that came over the room.

Chapter 10

Andrew, Peter and Levi

But Andrew answered and said, "Say what you want about what she has said.

10:1

Andrew thinks he knows the Christ better than anyone else. Fundamentalism takes us to places where we close our ears. Fundamentalism causes us to miss the Christ.

I do not believe that the Christ said this. For certainly these teachings are strange ideas.

10:2

I do not believe... The passage could end there. The point is that Andrew doesn't believe anyone beyond Andrew. We have to get over our hesitancies to embrace the strange...the Queer...the Christ.

Peter answered and spoke concerning these same things. He questioned them: "Did Christ really speak privately with a woman without us knowing about it?

10:3

Can you imagine if someone responded by saying, "Did he really speak with a man without our knowing about it?"? Of course not...which is why it is abundantly clear that Peter is discounting the teachings of the Christ simply because they are being shared with him by a woman.

Are we to turn about and all listen to her? Did Christ prefer her to us?"

10:4

The truth drops. Peter...and the rest of the men...are scared that the Christ might have chosen a woman over them. Male fragility cannot silence the Christ.

Then Mary wept and said to Peter, "My brother Peter, what do you think?

10:5

Mary begs Peter to believe her. Why would she lie? Peter is stunned by her conviction. I guess he thought she was just going to step aside. However, the Christ never steps aside.

Do you think that I have thought this up myself in my heart, or that I am lying about the Christ?

10:6

Mary will not let go. This is her truth for the world...and she is not going to let anyone deny it. The Christ has been revealed and she is not going back in the closet...for this is the day of salvation...this is the day of the Christ.

Levi answered and said to Peter, "Peter you have always been an angry person.

10:7

Levi wants to be found with Christ. In the teachings of Mary, he has found the Christ once more. Nobody is going to turn him around.

Now I see you contending against the woman like the adversary.

10:8

Peter's sexism is dramatically challenged. Levi laughs at him for throwing around his masculinity as if it has the weight of divine revelation. Christ alone...and nothing else.

But if the Savior made her worthy, who are you to reject her?

10:9

Mary teaches us that it is Christ who does the incarnating...not us...so look for Christ...not the desired places that you would hope to see Christ.

Surely the Christ knows her very well. That is why He loved her more than us.

10:10

Christ is trustworthy...Christ chose Mary...Mary becomes trustworthy...Mary becomes Christ. The incarnation of the Christ keeps happening incessantly. Christ chose Mary because Christ knew that she would pass the teachings on so that they might become Christ for others. Christ loved Mary because Christ knew that Mary would joyfully share the teachings of the Christ...and never stop loving all she would find along the way.

Rather let us be ashamed and put on the perfect, and become righteous as Christ commanded us

10:11

In the midst of it all, Levi feels shame...shame that the gathered are about to miss the Christ because they can't see past themselves. In this moment, Levi demands that they put on the Christ...and engage the situation as they know the Christ would.

and preach the gospel,

10:12

The Christ...the incarnate God who loves us...is the forever good news. Levi demands that the gathered realize that the teachings of Mary are good news. There is no reason to sit and argue about them any longer. Simply, go out and use them to take Christ to the world.

not laying down any other rule or other law beyond what Christ said."

10:13

Earlier, Andrew tried to lay down the law. Earlier, Peter tried to lay down the law. Earlier, they were all trying to lay down the law and not listening with their hearts. There is but one law of Christ...that of love.

Nothing else matters. Mary knew that and that is the power of her message.

After he said these things, they started going out to teach and proclaim.

10:14

Emboldened, Mary and Levi left to share the love of Christ. Surely, there is no greater calling.

❖

The Gospel according to Mary.

10:15

The Gospel of Mary is good news for all that are willing to embrace the power of love. There is liberation here...if we can get over ourselves long enough to experience it.

BOOK 10

The Is of Is

Jeff Hood

2022

On This Book

The second book of 2022 is the most philosophically sustained work in the collection — the book in which Hood steps back from the particularity of experience and asks the foundational question that underlies everything else he has written: What is real? What counts as real? And why does theology so consistently choose the abstract over the actual?

The Is of Is is an argument for what Hood calls tangible theology — a theology that insists on remaining in contact with bodies, with rooms, with the irreducible specificity of this person's suffering and this person's joy. It is a sustained polemic against the tendency of theological systems to achieve coherence at the cost of contact with actual human experience, to become more articulate and less true as they become more abstract.

The argument is grounded in Hood's decade of ministry in the hardest rooms. He has been present at enough moments of genuine extremity to know that the theological frameworks that survive those moments are not the tidy ones. They are the ones that have submitted to the pressure of the actual — that have been in the room with the dying and the condemned and the traumatized and the abandoned, and have held rather than collapsed. The frameworks that collapse in the rooms are the ones that were never quite touching the ground.

What Hood proposes in their place is not a new system. It is an orientation — a way of doing theology that begins with the question "What is actually here?" rather than "What should be here?" It is a theology of the is rather than the ought, which is where the title comes from. The is of is: the insistence on the actual as the starting point and the constant reference point of any theological claim that wants to be more than a performance.

This book lands just before the last book in the collection, and its placement is not incidental. The argument it makes — that tangibility is both the question and the answer, that what is real is what is touchable, that the sacred is not elsewhere but here — is the philosophical foundation for the final movement of the collection. It is Hood preparing the ground for the most expansive and most liberated work he has yet produced.

The prophet has named the harm. The priest has stayed in the room. The witness has testified to what was actually there. Now the theologian asks: what does it all mean? What is the ground? What is the is of is?

The answer, when it comes, will take the form of science fiction.

The Is of Is

Tangible Theology for an Intangible Time

Jeff Hood

Tangibility is both the fundamental question and the fundamental answer

of human existence. It speaks of who we were. It speaks of who we are.

It speaks of who we are to become. But what is it saying? Everything

Preface

This book did not begin as a book. It began as a feeling — one of those persistent, nagging feelings that something is missing. Not something misplaced or forgotten, but something essential that we were never told we had.

I have spent a lifetime in spaces that promised tangibility and delivered performance. Sanctuaries with all the right words and none of the right weight. Institutions that named themselves after freedom while quietly legislating its absence. Movements that gestured toward wholeness while demanding

conformity as the price of admission. Something was always missing. That something is what this book is about.

Tangibility is not a theological concept in the traditional sense. You will find no footnotes here, no careful citations, no dutiful engagement with the canon. This is not because those things lack value — they have their place. It is because the tangible has no patience for the bureaucracy of ideas. It simply is. And if this book does anything, it attempts to bear witness to the is.

I have written these pages in the way that truth sometimes arrives: in fragments, in pulses, in declarations that refuse the comfortable arc of argument. If you are looking for a systematic theology, you will not find it here. If you are looking for something that feels like the ground shifting beneath your feet — something that feels like waking up — you may have found it.

Read these pages slowly. Read them the way you would walk through fog — not with a map, but with your

hands out, feeling for what is real. Some passages will stop you. Let them. Some passages will frustrate you. Good. Friction is, as these pages will insist, among the most sacred things we know.

The is of is is not a riddle to be solved. It is a reality to be inhabited. My prayer — and I use that word with all of its weight — is that something in these pages touches you where you are most real, and that from that place of touching, you are moved toward the one destination that matters: yourself, in God, tangible.

— Jeff Hood

I

The Ground of Existence

Tangibility is both the fundamental question and the fundamental answer of human existence.

Tangibility is both the fundamental question and the fundamental answer of human existence. It speaks of who we were. It speaks of who we are. It speaks of who we are to become. But what is it saying? Everything. There are moments — precious moments — when something changes, and then, from nowhere, we are overwhelmed with who we are and where we're from. Our consciousness of the divine is tangible in our knowledge of self, and we learn where we are, and something calls out to us to tell us to keep going. Our becoming is not yet finished. We are a product of the now and the not yet. We are a product of the divine, and we are becoming the likeness of the divine. In that precious moment, hope returns and our wholeness is whole. We are.

Tangibility is more than a simple object of modern definition — it is our essence. It is our tangible. Our tangibility gives definition to our God. What does difference sound like? How is difference read? What does difference feel like? Have you ever felt love? Have

you ever chased it? Have you ever caught it? Have you ever let it catch you? Such is tangibleness. The tangible nature of the process. The is of the is.

Life sometimes tricks us into thinking that knowledge is the end. We forget that the knowledge of now is not the knowledge of days gone by or days to come. Our knowing is temporary. Our being is not. Our tangibility is about the space that we inhabit, not the knowledge that we have. Our space is moving through a celestial space that creates space in and of itself. There is strength to be found here. We are the definition of space. We are the tangible.

❧

Courage is a lost virtue. Normality has killed it. Tangibility is the resurrection. Can these bones live? God only knows — yet God has told us. The stone of unbeing has been rolled away. We take our stand. We walk into the light. We breathe life. We share love forever. We take our stand for God. We take our stand for us. We take our stand for all existence. We shall not be afraid. We shall be more than what is. We shall be

what we are. Love will not fail us now. Our tangibility is courageous. Our tangibility is.

"The is of the is."

II

Friction and Freedom

People love it. People get mad. People swoon over it. People get upset. People like it. People get violent. Such is the consequence of tangibility. Movement creates friction. One cannot do the work of tangibility without such consequences. We are all free — and we have to deal with the consequences.

Creation creates renewal, and then does it again. The source of creation is the tangibility of the creation, the creator. Where is the creator? There is a space called tangibility that is realer than real. There the creator lives in all tangibility, calling us to become more tangible, more real, more whole. Do you remember tangibility? There is a hope there. Such hope is born out of our creation. Such hope is our creation. Such hope is tangible, our tangibility. Creation springs forth from who we were, who we are, who we will always be. Tangibility is God and God is there, here, now, and forever.

❧

Discord. Disagreement. Difficulties. Divinity. There is power here. The creator created us to be unique. The creator created us to be obstinate. The creator created us to be cantankerous. The creator created us to be. Such freedoms make us tangible. We are the tangible of God. We walk away. We walk back. We are able to walk towards anything. Tangibility rests in our walking; our walking rests in our God. The friction of the tangible is the power of tangibility.

We are a walking, talking existential manifestation of the tangibility of friction — the slamming together of God particles. Our hope is built on nothing less than the tangible nature of friction. There is no hell. There is only friction, the tangibility of being made in the image of God.

There is no hell. There is only friction — the tangibility of being made in the image of God.

Gatherings are nothing more than suppression unless they are gatherings of freedom. Tangibility brought us together. The desire to be more than what is kept us

together. The fear of what could be kept us apart. What if what we are is enough? Surely, in our hopes is hope. Surely, in our dreams are dreams. Surely, in our love is love. There is more than what is. There is the tangibility of us. The God in us.

❧

Tangibility burns. Deep within, it fires us up and pushes us out of spaces of nonexistence. There is no more desperate a place than no place, for there we are but we are not. Something is missing in the perceived safety of it all. It is all a lie. We are not safe. We are never safe. We are only tangible when we exist in the risk of tangibility — the unknowing of presence, of being who we were created to be, the very tangible God. The God who is neither past nor future, the God who is here and never silent.

There is no terror in the tangible. There is only love. There is no fear in love; perfect love casts out fear. When we take the tangible risk of leaving the illusion of nonexistence, we are fully tangible in God and God is fully tangible in us. Tangibility is about making

known that which we were created to know: I am. The tangible of all religion is found in such words. Our wholeness is our holiness. Such wholeness can bring about the holiness of the world. Love. The very essence of I am. The tangibility of the tangible.

III

The Temptation of Safety

Evil uses the threat of nonexistence to convince us that tangibility is too risky an endeavor. We stay behind the lines. We listen to our fears. We convince the core of who we are that there is nothing out there. Yet we cannot help but feel like something is missing. Something beyond the lines. Something beyond our fears. Something out there. We are told not to go. We are told that our tangibility is partial.

Yet tangibility — the wholeness of our tangibility — is the only path out of nonexistence. The path to real existence. I am. Tangible.

Tangibility flows from the tangible God, the tangible I am that leads us to the tangible I am. When we approach the lines that we have drawn, we begin to realize that the only thing that is blasphemous is our timidity. When we step over, we are getting saved — saved from a life of nonexistence, saved from hell. The only terror that stalks us in these moments is the

comfort of living like everyone else. Tangibility knows that such notions are meant to kill us. We pray thousands of times, but we forget to pray with our feet.

We pray thousands of times, but we forget to pray with our feet.

We forget to take the step. We forget that we can embrace I am. I am tangible. We must leave who we think we are to become who we were, are, and will always be. Safety is the biggest obstacle toward taking that step, the only one that matters, over the line. There is no safety in tangibility. There is only us, and us needs no qualifier, for we were created to be us without qualification.

❧

Tangibility is about being on the outside. Tangibility is about being free. Tangibility is about knowing the unknowable. Can these bones be tangible with tangibility? Can these bones be made whole? Can these bones stand on their own? With tangibility, the answer is yes. Every time, the answer is yes.

Do not be envious of all who embrace safety to the detriment of tangibility. They are empty clothes. They are the walking dead. They are the great mirages. We are the holders of life. We are the tangible. We are the very image of God. Why would we look to those still trapped behind the gates? Forget what you have heard about their perfection. Forget what you have heard about their comfort. Forget what you have heard about their normality. Forget it all. Know yourself. Know tangibility. Be the tangible.

Forgive them, for they know not what they do — but here and now, embrace tangibility. Do you.

IV

Wildness and Righteousness

Tangibility should not cost someone else their body, their life, their being. One can be free without having to destroy the other. Tangibility is about building, not destroying. Tangibility should call others out of their boundaries and into the light of their possibilities. Wildness is contagious. The world grows wilder as people grow more tangible.

Righteousness is tangible. You can touch it. You can grow it. You can be it. The world can touch it. The world can grow it. The world can be it. Touch. Growth. Being. Righteousness is our hope. Our hope is tangibility — something real. Let the tangible continue.

❧

Wildness is about being unrestrained, figuring out who we are, creating where we are from, knowing that it is okay to fail — perhaps even preferable — so that we might live into the tangibility of our creation, our wildness.

Everyone thinks you're crazy, you keep building. People laugh, you keep building. People beg you to stop, you keep building. People be damned; keep building. Then the waters start to rise, and all the laughing ceases. People start wanting to know what it is that is keeping you alive. What do you have? What do you tangibly possess? Tangibility is oxygen — and they don't have it. So how will they get it?

Tangibility is oxygen — and they don't have it.

You look to the fences. People scream to be set free. Why are you still staring? Tangibility requires movement. When we are who we are, we set the captives free by our example. Who we are becomes the means by which the walls crumble. Let my people go. Let my person go. Let me go. Let go. Freedom is free. It is within us.

There might be outside obstacles, but that doesn't change the fact that the initial choice is yours. The gates cannot contain tangibility. When we touch freedom we are free. When we touch tangibility we are

tangible. We are — not we are not. Nonexistence cannot be an option.

Our tangibility serves as a guide for others. To not become tangible is to do violence to our neighbors. To do violence is to not be tangible. Our hope is built on the freedom of the self, but our ability to cling to our freedom is based on fighting for the freedom of others. The tangible is about being with the self while giving the self to others. If the divinity within makes us free, we can be free. If the divinity without makes us free, we can be freer. If we become tangible and tangibly embrace all of it, we will be free forever.

The plagues rest in our hesitation. However, there is dry land that parts the seas of despair. It is our path, the path of being who we are, our path of tangibility.

V

The Wilderness

Fear makes us think we have gone too far. I assure you that you have yet to go far enough. One can always push farther, further. Just because you are safe does not mean that you are really safe. Safety makes one think that they have overcome. Unfortunately, such thinking doesn't push us to stop and take survey of our own soul.

We journey out into the wilderness with no idea of how we are going to survive. Though we are surrounded by others, we think we are the only one who is free. We think we are the only one who has redemptive knowledge. We go at it alone. This is the point where most get lost. This is the point where most start worshipping the idols of perceived meaning, the temptation of security, nonexistence. We forget that there is nothing safe about such a place.

When things go wrong, we try to run back to such places. We forget that those places no longer exist. We

burned all of the ships. Once we exist, nonexistence is a temptation but not really an option. Perhaps this is our hope, our future, our salvation: the fact that yesterday no longer exists. So let us burn the idols and keep on moving. The promised land of tangible tangibility knows that we are coming. We just have to keep going. We have to fight to be tangible. We have to fight.

❧

Fear pushes back. Conformity chokes our will. Normativity masquerades as tangibility. There is no in. There is only out. But we forget. We were never out. We were always in. Nothing is ever so lost that we can't find it within. God created us as such.

Nothing is ever so lost that we can't find it within.

The room was vast. The temperature startled me. Ice. There was one table. Two people sat stoically. I was early. What an opportunity to share. Then I realized that there were no chairs. I was not deterred. I just stood and started to deliver. I'm in, you're out — pray this prayer and you will be in. Both obliged. Now we

are all in. But were we ever really out? In is God. Out is not. We all come from God. We all come from In. We were all in before we entered the vastness of the room, the vastness of time and space. The universe is vast, but we were always in it. There is no end. There is only in.

Prayer is tangible. Prayer is connecting with the In who has placed us into being. Hell has always been associated with out. Hell didn't create us. So why do we always focus on our out? Prayer is a tangible weapon against the temptations of hell. We cannot be left behind, because we have never been behind. God cannot leave God's self. We are the very image of God. We are the tangible in. Hell is the tangible out. Hell only exists in the temptation of out, the temptation to believe that we were never really in. We must leave hell and return to in, the tangibility of our existence. Salvation can be found there.

VI

The Mirror

I began to walk around. I didn't know what I would find. I just hoped to find something else tangible to touch. It seems that tangible becomes more tangible when tangible meets tangible. Maybe it just feels that way. Maybe I was wasting my time. Maybe it was real. Maybe I wasn't wasting my time. Maybe the mess was of my own making.

Maybe I just needed to meet the tangible to know that I am tangible. So I confronted the stranger. I demanded to know where I was. I demanded that they present their credentials of tangibility. I kept demanding. I wanted to know if they were real. Then I realized that I had arrived at a mirror. I was unable to identify my own tangibility. I thought that everyone else was lost — but really it was I who was lost. It was I who couldn't see.

I shattered the window because I couldn't see, I couldn't know. I was scared. I was scared that the

window was going to tell me more than I wanted to know. I was scared that truth might somehow be revealed. So I kept speaking to the hell of others, trying to forget that I was really talking to myself. Do you accept God? How can one accept the God without when they can't accept the God within? The tangibility in the mirror. The God in the mirror. The it of the it. The only confrontation necessary was the confrontation with the self. The confrontation with the tangibility staring right back at you. Eternity is found in the mirror.

The only confrontation necessary was the confrontation with the self.

❧

Friction presents as hell. However, friction can also be salvation. Crashing into the false realities that we find opens our hearts to the real realities within. Sometimes the illusions reveal the tangible. Friction is the great revelation of the in. However, society tells us that friction is bad, even hell. The discomfort of the mirror is hell. Perhaps the discomfort of the mirror is

salvation. The eyes might be fooled, but the heart doesn't lie.

In the lies of the intangible I sat. I knew that I was real. I knew that it was my right to feel the tangible. However, I had chosen to believe the lies of hell. I had chosen to believe that I had no right to feel. The room was full of people. We had gathered to hear the lies. I suppose we all just wanted salvation, something tangible to hold on to.

However, friction wouldn't let the lies continue. The leader screamed. Hell burst forth. Lies hit me in the face one after the other. I was drowning. Hell was burying me. Then a tangible angel grabbed my hand. There is salvation in friction. Open your heart. Crash into the tangible. This is the way of God. Go forth and friction. There will always be salvation there. Tangibility is birthed from such things.

VII

The Body

The body is tangible. Hell is not. We learn to love by loving. We love the tangible. Whatever we love is tangible. The tangible has many bodies. We learn to love them all. Hell is declaring that some bodies are worthy of love and some bodies are not. The bodies were created for our love. Love is tangible. Hell is not. We sit in the body to learn how to love the body. We sit with other bodies to learn how to love other bodies. Tangibility is always connected to the body, for the body never dies. Matter goes forth forever. It is foolish to deny love to the body, for we are denying love to the eternal. God made the body to be a tangible manifestation of love. Love never dies.

We can do different things with our bodies. We can do different things with love. Our attachment to our body should be one of love. Our attachment to the bodies of others should be one of love. The body of love is wider than the hell of nonexistence. We exist. We will either

choose to recognize the tangible or we will live under the illusion of hell.

❧

Friction is important as a vehicle of revelation. However, intangibilities can cloud our interpretation of the revelation. Our ability to understand the friction becomes our ability to understand the revelation. Hell continues when our ability to understand the way out of hell is compromised. The illusion becomes more illusory. It is important to keep the mind clear. It is important to keep the heart clear. Clarity for the sake of clarity is important.

We want the revelation to be clear. We want the way, not the sideways. We want the truth, not the half-truth. We want the light, not the shadow. The intangibilities must be managed, lest they manage us. Our interpretations can be pure if we concentrate on seeing through the clouds. Revelation reveals when we face the friction head on without giving credence to anything that might hold us back. There is revelation in friction. There is liberation in revelation. There is

liberation in the tangible integration of who we were created to be in the first place, the very revelation of God.

There is revelation in friction. There is liberation in revelation.

VIII

God and Friction

Did God know that all of this friction was going to happen? Couldn't this all have been avoided? Why does there have to be friction in the first place? Where was God in the midst of all of this? Where is God in the midst of all of this? Where will God be in the midst of all of this?

There was a space where these types of questions weren't necessary. Tangible walked with tangible. The revelation was whole. There was no separation between the God within and the God without. There was no out. There was only in. Sounds perfect, doesn't it? Sometimes things are not what they appear. When there are no questions there can be no answers. The space of creation was not the space of love. Love does not exist without the possibility of rejection. God is love. God cannot exist without the possibility of rejection. In the friction is God.

Perhaps the friction is God. It is clearer to say that the God within and the God without is made tangible by the friction. Maybe there was nothing to know — maybe there was something to be. God was all of the friction that was going to happen. God can't avoid the friction. God is friction. God was in the friction. God is in the friction. God will be in the friction. The friction is the revelation of God. The friction is the revelation of love. The friction was never not present. The friction is the revelation. The friction is the God beyond God.

❧

Everyone said that tangibility was about the perspective of others — when really it is about the perspective of the self in relation to others. Does tangibility exist outside of the person? How could it? There is no tangibility without the perception of tangibility. One cannot perceive without being perceived.

Perhaps God and the human have always existed. Perhaps creation was simply the acknowledgement of the tangible, the tangible manifestation of the

tangibility that already was. So the perception of the other simply acknowledges what is already there. But can something exist without acknowledgement? The thought makes reality. The tangibility has to be tangible, made real.

The thought makes reality. The tangibility has to be tangible — made real.

We are. We are who we were. We are who we are. We are who we will be. Our existence is predicated on the we. There has to be something for the I to relate to. Community is the core. The we is the me. No I can exist alone.

The intangible tempts us to think that nothing matters. The intangible wants us to believe that there is nothing more. The intangible wants us to believe that this is the end. The intangible is a liar. Tangibility matters. Tangibility grows. Tangibility never dies. The tangible is the truth. God is tangible.

IX

Being and Time

Behavior is behavior — but tangibility has to do with who we really are. Behaviors come and go, but who we are is an eternal reality. The tangibility of essence exists irrespective of time and place, but sometimes time and space distort our understanding. We think we know what we don't. We know nothing. We can only feel. We can only be. The future is not determined. We are.

Who we are is what we are, and what we are is who we are. The times last for a moment; tangibility lasts forever. Time is not a definitive concept. It is only occasionally a descriptive one.

Nobody knows the future — not even God — for the future does not exist. The idea that God has chosen some and not others is ludicrous. We get our salvation from God, from our creation. God is our salvation. We get our tangibility from God. Tangibility is our salvation. There is no in or out. There is only tangible

and not. We are the tangible. We are the creations of the epicenter of tangibility, God. We are all already saved.

There is no damnation. There is only God pulling the tangible back to God's self. Such a pulling will draw everything to God. The only question is how long it will take. We can know the conclusion if not the means, because we can know that God will not stop until we are all pulled back to our tangible creation. Tangibility is the pull. Tangibility is the tug. Tangibility is the knowledge that we will never be lost. Tangibility will always be found.

God will not stop until we are all pulled back to our tangible creation.

God cannot know the future — the future does not exist — but God is tangible. So God knows what God cannot stop doing until God is finished: drawing all things tangible to the source of tangibility. Prayer is being and being is prayer.

❧

Myths are reality shrouded in mystery. We cannot know what we do not know. We can only look in the right direction. There is something there. Keep looking. Don't stop. It is everything. You were made for this. You were made to discover the mystery within. Myths become reality. We are able to know what we know. We become the right direction.

It is there. Keep seeing. Stop. It is everything. You are this. The mystery is tangibility. It is real. You are real. We are real. Real is tangible and tangible is real. Such a reality is a tangibility shrouded in mystery, the greatest of myths — those that are real.

X

Belonging

Do I belong? Am I accepted? Does anyone love me? Where is my place? These are some of the most important questions of temporal human existence. The desire to be known is a desire to be made known. Our theology revolves around our understanding of how we are understood.

Tangibility is something more. It is an understanding that one is understood before they are even able to understand. The eternality of tangibility is not temporal. It is not questioned. It is not up for debate. It is. We were chosen long before we could choose. We were made whole before we were ever made. We simply are — perfect. Waiting for salvation is illusory. The wait is always over. God doesn't make anything partial. We are, if we allow ourselves to be.

❧

Schools exist to teach the untaught, but who is untaught? Revelation can come to anyone. Revelation

comes to us all. What is the point of school when the tangible exists elsewhere? Regardless of where we are, the tangible finds us, or we find it, or maybe it just reveals from within.

We get calls that reveal unexpected news. We decide how to respond. We traverse lonely paths. We go to places of fear. We check what we believe. We listen to the voices. We debate in our heads. We step out into the unknown. We stare sickness in the face. We push back against death. We lean in close. We hear a voice. We listen. We stay in the difficulty of it all.

We have nowhere else to go. We fear. We just don't know what is next. We find no solace in the traditions. We only feel pain. We try to figure something else out. We realize there is nothing there. We're confused. We're confusing. We're crazy. We're defiant. We walk into spaces of defiance. We face spaces that defy us. We are here. We are tangible. We are not. We are. We live. We face hell. We believe. We listen. We face the unknown. We see who we are. We see the closet open. We are surprised at who comes out. We know who it is.

We see our self. We explode. We implode. We belong to God. We belong in God. We become the incarnation. We realize who we have always been: tangible.

We belong to God. We belong in God. We become the incarnation.

XI

The God Beyond God

What in the hell are we supposed to do? How are we to exist? So every institution is evil? What about all of the education I've obtained? Questions without answers cause depressions without end. Movement is hard, but movement is not denial, for tangibility is mobile. In fact, it is always heading in the same direction: the answer, the creator, the source of all tangibility, the God beyond God, the God deep within.
Even if everything is snatched away, we still are. Everything.

❧

You cannot ignore what is. You cannot run away from what is. You cannot deny what is. The truth will always come out, because we are the truth. Things can get blurry. Things can get frightening. Things can get mixed up. Things are always things. The tangible is more than things.

The tangible is the space between existence and eternity, the border where reality lives, where we are tangible and tangibility is God. Things become clearer when we meet God at the border, or when God meets us, or when we simply converge.

❧

Sometimes all that is tangible is that which is not. Perhaps we begin at the closest thing we know to figure out what we might know. One does not necessarily have to hold something to know that it can be held. Often we push into the unknown knowing that there is something to be known — something to discover that has never been discovered, something that is there and not silent.

God is. We are. Our existence is about further living into such truths. Our existence is about discovering the tangibility within and without, the God beyond God, the self beyond self, the existence of existence. Make no mistake: existence exists. In the are is the is. Are we here? We is.

We involve ourselves in all sorts of endeavors to prove to the self that we are. Life gets blurry. We pray with hope that we are being heard. We live with hope that our life matters. We create relationships with hope that we might be known. We hope to arrive at a tangible space beyond hope, but perhaps hope is the most tangible thing that we can touch in the present. Our salvation rests in our ability to hope. Hope is life. Hope is God.

Hope is the most tangible thing that we can touch in the present.

XII

When Hope Runs Out

What happens when hope runs out? Do we exist?
There was a night when hope was high. Somebody was about to die, but we all had hope that they might live. In fact, we were so hopeful that we thought our hope would be what would bring about life. In the face of nonexistence, hope was all that was sustaining us. We had hope; therefore we had life.
As the time of death approached, we pushed back with all of the hope that we could muster. The night was unseasonably warm. There was a savior who was supposed to come, but we never heard from him. For just a moment, there was a delay; we thought that was the signal that our hope was not in vain. We were wrong.
Death proceeded as planned. There was hope until the last possible minute. We huddled together in hope. We huddled together in life. We huddled together. When death came close, we fought back with all that we

were. It was of no use. Life could not push back. The execution of the execution was complete. We heard the last breath.

God failed. We retreated, but not fast enough. Death came for us too. Hope could not save us, but maybe there was something beyond hope, beyond death, something tangible. In the end was the beginning. The clock retreated. Time ran out.

Tangibility was so much more than seconds or minutes or hours or days or weeks or months or years or decades or lifetimes or eternities. Tangibility simply was, is, and will always be, the ground of existence. When it is all said and done, the only thing we can ever really touch, or that can touch us.

❧

The tangible is both nothing and everything at the same time. It is nothing because it cannot be captured or named as something — it is beyond that. It is everything because it is the core of all that is, and even beyond that. It is tangible and that is it. There only is the is beyond the is.

There only is the is beyond the is.

You can never imprison the tangible. Nothing can hold it. When it gets loose it changes everything.
The tangible is the image of God. The tangible is God. The tangible is whatever is beyond God. It is life beyond life. Occasionally we get a chance to feel it deeper than we ever have, flowing through all that we are and all that we do. We would be wise to pause. There is something. There is everything. There is nothing. This is who we are, reflections of eternity.

XIII

Specks and Knowing

What do we know? We know that we know very little. We are but a speck of a speck of a speck, and a bunch of specks of specks after that, in the grand design of the cosmos. Yet in our faintest longings, our deepest urgings, we know that such longings and urgings didn't develop by accident. Surely we are not deceived? Tangibility speaks. We hear it. We know it. The tangible God is not silent. Specks matter.

We think we know what we don't. We pretend to know what we don't. We assume to know what we don't. Tangibility exists in our unknowing. God is our unknowing, our hope. Such things are tangible. Such things matter.

We are not normal. We are tangible. We can hope.

❧

What happened? The fear was not our enemy. Why didn't we listen? The sadness was trying to tell us something. Why did we die? The ignorance will not see

us through. That which is and will forever be will continue knocking at the door of our soul whether we choose to open the door or not. Tangibility teaches whether we choose to listen or not. Tangibility is the only thing that is really tangible.

Life can get big, but it will never be bigger than the tangible. We cannot outrun it. The mystery of who we are will always be. There is nothing more. There is nothing less. There is nothing outside the tangible.

What are you? I am here.

Tangible rubs up against tangible no matter where the tangible is. We are never alone. We are always a part of the great here and the great beyond. The greatness of tangibility is that it is always great. It is always the vastness within bursting to the vastness without and back again.

We lose everything when we ignore the tangible, the one speaking, the one seeing, the one knowing, the one guiding. But can the tangible ever really be ignored?

Hope is a stubborn thing.

There is nothing that is normal. Everything is tangible. Everything feels, knows, sees, believes, dreams differently. Such manifestations put the is in every is.

Hope is a stubborn thing.

Nothing can hold the tangible. Quit trying to find it. Just be it.

XIV

The Final Word

The tangible is least present in those that declare their tangibility. The tangible is most present in those that simply are. Proceed with being.

There is nothing authentic about the tangible. There is nothing pure about the tangible. There is nothing uncorrupted about the tangible. There is nothing about the tangible. Tangibility has killed all the descriptions. Beware of the buzzwords. Tangibility hasn't got any buzz; it's just got is.

Identity is not tangible. People are tangible. God is tangible. Tangible is tangible. Don't trust anything else.

❧

Life is not about finding your space; it is about being your space, holding on to your creation, your being, when all about you is telling you to let go.

We speak from the languages that we know.

Tangibility is about making the known known.

Interface is tangible only when it is real, only when tangibility is exchanged, not when tangibility is denied. Evil is real. It is a lack of faith in who we are: tangible. What makes you tick? Don't tick to anything else.

❧

The is is tangible. The is is.

BOOK 11

Science Fiction Theology

Jeff Hood

2023

The final book. 2023. A decade after the prophetic anger of The Prosperity Gospel & Malpractice, Hood arrives at science fiction.

The form is unexpected. It is also, on reflection, inevitable. Science fiction has always been the genre that theology turns to when theology needs to think without its usual constraints — when the questions are too large or too structurally embedded to be approached directly, when the answer can only arrive sideways, in a world that is not quite this world but casts a light on this world that direct engagement cannot produce. Ursula Le Guin. Walter Miller. Octavia Butler. The great theological science fiction is always about freedom — about what it means to be a choosing self in a world organized around the suppression of choice.

Hood's three stories in Science Fiction Theology ask the questions that have been implicit in his work since the beginning: What does faith become when it is compelled? What is salvation when the terms of salvation are imposed by those with the power to impose them? What does liberation look like when the chains are invisible — when the coercion is structural, ideological, built into the language and the categories and the available options?

These are not abstract questions. They are the questions that animate every book in this collection. The prosperity gospel compels a particular kind of faith and punishes deviation. The church that suppressed Mary's gospel imposed the terms of legitimate authority. The traditions that produced toxic masculinity built their coercion into the formation of young men from the beginning. Guatemala showed what happens when religious institutions align themselves with coercive state power. The CPE encounters showed what happens when theology

refuses to submit to the actual — when the institutional church is so invested in its frameworks that it cannot hear the person in the room.

Science Fiction Theology is the book in which all of these threads come together in the freest possible form — free because fiction, free because speculative, free because the imaginative license of the genre allows Hood to follow the logic of liberation further than direct argument can go.

It is also the book in which the witness function of Hood's vocation reaches its fullest expression. The witness testifies to what is actually there. In these stories, what is actually there is the desire to choose — the unkillable human insistence on the freedom to believe what you actually believe, to be who you actually are, to love what you actually love. The witness testifies to that desire, even in worlds where the desire has been criminalized. Especially in those worlds.

This is where the vocation arrives, ten years after it announced itself: at the insistence, in story after story, that the choosing self is sacred, that freedom is theological, and that the God of the Exodus is still, always, on the side of the ones trying to get out.

The prophet has spoken. The priest has stayed. The witness has testified. The collection is complete — and the vocation continues.

Science Fiction Theology

Three Stories / Many Salvations

Jeff Hood

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I used to think that life was about maintaining relationships. Now, I realize that such thinking is a prison. We cannot be fully free until we are fully free to

choose. These otherworldly stories—or perhaps not so otherworldly stories—are about choosing.

— Jeff Hood

I. The Changing Salvation

Growing up, I was never especially religious. I've always thought that religion was about the power of can't rather than the power of can. I was a dreamer. I believed in my dreams. I was a visionary. I believed in my visions. I was a creator. I believed in my creations. In time, society grew more and more religious. I became a man out of time. Politicians began to take power that tried to force religion on everyone. Soon, religion became a requirement and not a choice. "Religion is your government and government is your religion." I heard it over and over again…blared from speakers…up on billboards…pushed through technology…without ceasing. Every week we were forced to go to religious centers, there we were taught

about the virtues of our governance. The only reason I went is because I knew that I would be killed if I didn't. It seemed like daily people were being executed in the streets…all in the name of religion. Despite the monotony of my job at the factory, I still took the time to try to figure out a way out of all of this bullshit. At night, I would tinker with the tools that I had. When I got off of work, I would figure out ways to get more tools. Slowly, I developed the prototype…a time machine. I was dedicated to returning to a former time and saving humanity from all of this religious bullshit. Truthfully, I didn't know what the machine was capable of. I knew that I had gotten all of the equations right but equations and actuality are two different things. I also didn't know where I was going to find the power to run the damn thing…any burst of electricity centered at my house was bound to raise suspicions. So, I figured I had one chance. Honestly, it took time for me to get the courage to even start the damn thing. Plus, I didn't know where I was going. In the midst of all of this religion, I didn't really care. I just wanted to

get out. I wanted freedom again. I wanted something so much more than this. I didn't necessarily expect heaven…but I was tired of living in hell.

Late one night, I finally found some courage. I guess you could say that somebody flipped the switch. Truthfully, I just got tired of living in somebody's cage…running around their wheel…eating their shit. I knew that I deserved better. As I approached the machine, I dreamed of more. I was scared. I didn't know where I was going. Then again, I didn't care. Sometimes there is fear in not caring. Stepping inside, I flipped the switch. With a booming of electricity and sound, I was transported to another place. When I stopped, I couldn't see anything. I just assumed it was a product of the journey. So, I opened the door. I stepped out into nothing. I was consumed with nothing. I could hear nothing. I could see nothing. I could smell nothing. There was absolutely positively nothing. The time machine was gone…or at least it seemed to be gone…it could have just been the lack of light. I didn't know how long I was there. How could I? There was no

time. The only thing that I had was my thoughts…and I knew that wasn't going to be enough for me to maintain my sanity…but I didn't know what to do. I became more and more and more detached. I decided to think about the things that I missed the most. Salvation was there.

In the beginning, I created light. I'd had enough of the void. I was able to see in ways that I'd never seen before. The day was given to the sun. The night was given to the stars. Beauty was everywhere. Then, there was water. Quickly, I became drunk with refreshment. I found land in the midst of the water that grew into a great mountain. I stood at the top and thought more. Vegetables sprouted. Flowers bloomed. Fruit was born. Grass spread. Trees soared. I indulged them all. In fact, they revealed all that was best in me. Creatures came out of every crevice. They were unlike anything that I'd seen before. I could see that they were eternal. I did all that I could to know them. I held them all. Then, I saw people that I loved walking toward me in the distance. There was my mom. There was my wife. There was my

friend. Each of them represented the best of the best. I didn't want to let them go. There was no end to it all. Love multiplied in perpetuity. When I took the time to stop and look around. I was overwhelmed. Exhaustion set in. I fell into a deep sleep.

I don't know how much time went by. I just know that when I opened my eyes…I was back in the future. My eyes were blurry. I couldn't see correctly. Then, I realized that the time machine was in front of me. Did I really go back in time? Surely, it wasn't all a dream? What in the hell is going on? In the midst of it all, I decided that the time machine was the only thing that could help me figure it all out. As I was preparing to go, I quickly glanced out the window. Then, I stopped. I couldn't believe my eyes. Everything was exactly as I dreamed it would be. I became change. I created change. I lived change. Does this mean that I am God?

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I sat for a long time staring at the machine. The question wouldn't leave me. Does this mean that I am God? I turned it over and over. Not in the way that

religious people ask such questions—with trembling and fear—but the way an engineer examines a result that doesn't quite match the schematic. The world outside the window was different now. Softer. The billboards were still there but something in the light that hit them had changed. People moved differently in the streets. I watched a child chase a dog across the road and nobody shot at either of them. I hadn't seen that in years.

I needed to test it. The only way to know if a machine works is to run it again. So I did. This time I didn't go back. I went sideways—into the space between moments. What I found there was harder to name. It wasn't nothing the way the first void was nothing. It was nothing the way a blank canvas is nothing. Possibility with an edge. I stood in it for what felt like decades. I tried the same trick: I thought about what I loved most. But this time something was different. The things I summoned weren't memories. They were new. A city I'd never seen but somehow knew the streets of. A language I'd never spoken that rose in my throat

perfectly formed. A color that had no name in any tongue. I stayed longer than I should have.

When I came back this time, the world had changed again. Not gently. Violently. The religious apparatus was cracked down the middle. I watched it happen from my window in fast-forward—though I knew time was passing at its normal pace—as the structures that had enforced compliance began to hollow from the inside. People didn't abandon faith. They abandoned the version of faith that had been used as a leash. New gatherings formed. Small ones. Quiet. They met in the way people have always met when the institution fails them: around food, around fire, around the fact of being alive together.

I still don't know the answer to the question. I've stopped needing to. What I know is this: the machine works because I built it. The world changed because I acted. Whether that makes me God or simply a person who refused to stay still in a cage—I'm not sure the difference matters as much as I once thought. Maybe that's the only theology worth having. Not the question

of what we are, but the insistence on what we choose to do.

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But the machine had its own ideas. I discovered this the third time I used it, when I tried to go somewhere specific—a date, a place, a moment I'd calculated down to the minute. I wanted to go back to the night before the first mandatory religious assembly. I thought if I could get there early enough, I could do something. Warn someone. Disrupt the mechanism before it locked into place. Instead, the machine dropped me into a Tuesday afternoon I didn't recognize—gray light, a parking lot, a woman standing at a bus stop eating a sandwich. Nothing significant. I stood there for an hour, confused, certain I'd made an error in the calculations. Then the woman finished her sandwich, looked at me directly, and said: "You're going to figure it out. Not today, but eventually." Then the bus came and she got on it. I still don't know who she was. I've been trying to work out the mathematics of that moment ever since.

What I've come to understand is that the machine doesn't travel through time the way I thought. It travels through versions. Every departure lands you in a version of the world that has been shaped by your intention but not determined by it. You arrive somewhere adjacent to what you aimed for. Close enough to recognize, strange enough to surprise you. I have been to seventeen versions now. In some of them the religion is worse than what I left. In some of them it never happened at all and people are living with a different kind of emptiness—a void dressed up as freedom that turns out to be its own cage. In two of them I met earlier versions of myself, and both times the earlier me was too frightened to listen, and both times I couldn't blame him.

I have stopped trying to find the version where everything is right. I'm not sure that version exists. What I have found instead is that the act of moving—of refusing to stay fixed in the version handed to you—is itself the salvation. Not the destination. Not the improved world waiting at the other end of the

equation. The switching on. The stepping in. The willingness to arrive somewhere you didn't plan for and ask: what do I do now? That question, asked honestly, in a parking lot, in a void, in a world cracked open by someone who refused to stop building—that question is the only god I've ever found.

II. The Artificial Salvation

"Bang…Bang-Bang…Bang-Bang-Bang…"

I was woke up from a dead sleep. Truthfully, I was scared to go to the door. Looking out, I saw my buddy. "Wake your ass up! The child is here." I didn't know what child he was talking about. "The baby." I still didn't know what he was talking about. "The star!" Now, he had my attention. I rushed to change my clothes and prepare for the journey. That dumbass was still banging. "Hold on a damn minute! I'm coming!" Before I knew it, we were off.
The trip was horrible.

“The hole!” “The cliff!” “The cow!” “The sand!” “The snake!” It was one thing after another. Despite it all, we pressed ahead. The closer we got, the more I felt drawn. The star was pulling us. I’d never felt anything like it. Then, it all came into view. “I have never been so happy to see a big clump of shit…” “Silence. This is their home.” Then, the little stone structure came into view. The star was practically sitting on top of it. It was still early morning…and we didn’t want to wake anyone…but we were so excited…so we decided to quietly approach the house. This was a big mistake. When we were right upon the house, a man jumped out and placed a knife on my throat.

“What are you doing here?”

“We are here to see the baby!” “We believe it to be the Christ!” “Please don’t kill us!” “Well…why didn’t you say so?” “You’re going to get killed coming up on somebody’s house like that.” “Come on in. The baby is still asleep.” “My partner and I will cook you some breakfast.”

After a wonderful meal and beautiful conversation…

The baby started to cry. We went to retrieve the gifts that we had brought. Once the baby came out, we knelt on the ground to worship him. Then, we presented our gifts. My buddy went first. He presented frankincense. The baby giggled in delight. We all pondered the reaction in our hearts. Then, I presented my gift. Mine was a rare magnetic metal. I held it very closely to the baby's head. "Thank you God for this child…" Then, all hell broke loose. Pieces of metal starting flying everywhere…the child's eyeballs started bulging…and then the whole damn baby exploded. We ran out of there as fast as we kid and never looked back. I'm still scared shitless.

The Christ child was a fake…or maybe it wasn't?

⁂

We didn't speak for three days. There was nothing to say. We put miles between ourselves and that stone house and then more miles after that, moving through terrain that made the original trip look like a pleasure walk. My buddy was quiet in the specific way that a person is quiet when they are running a calculation

they cannot finish. I was quiet because every time I closed my eyes I saw the eyeballs.

On the fourth day he finally said it. “What if it was real?” I told him to go to hell. “No, I mean—what if it was real and that’s why it exploded? What if you can’t bring something like that too close to something like that?” I didn’t have an answer. The metal had been a gift from a scholar back home, a man who studied the forces that hold things together and push them apart. He’d pressed it into my hands and said it was the most powerful thing he’d ever found. I’d assumed he meant in terms of value.

We eventually went back. Not to that house. That was gone—the whole structure, not burned, just absent, as if it had never been there and the ground had simply closed over the memory of it. But we went back to the region. Asked careful questions in the way that travelers learn to ask questions when they’ve already caused one disaster and want to avoid another. People knew about the star. Some had seen it. Most of them had felt something that night—a pull, a warmth, a

sense of weight lifted—but none of them had gone toward it. They'd stayed in their beds or their fields or their doorways and simply let it happen to them.

I've thought about that difference ever since. The people who stayed put and let the divine pass over them, unmarked and intact. And us, the ones who walked toward it with gifts and woke up a knife at our throats and blew the whole thing apart. My buddy thinks we were chosen for exactly that. He has a theology about it now. The chosen ones, he says, are always the ones who break things open so something new can get out. I think he's rationalizing. But I can't stop thinking about the giggle. Before the magnet. Before everything. The baby looked at the frankincense and just—giggled. Whatever it was, it was real in that moment. The joy was real. I hold onto that.

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Years passed. I went back to the scholar. I had to know about the metal. He was older now, living in a smaller house on the edge of a city that had forgotten him. I told him what happened. He listened without blinking.

When I finished, he was quiet for a very long time, and then he said: “I wondered.” He had given the same metal to three others before me. He didn’t know what happened to any of them. He’d never dared to test it himself. He said he always suspected it wasn’t the metal’s power alone that mattered. It was the intention behind the hand that held it. I asked him what he meant. He said: “You were praying when you held it close. You were full of something. That’s the only variable that was different.”

I’ve turned that over in my mind for the rest of my life. What was I full of? Awe. Gratitude. Maybe something that for one genuine second deserved the name worship. And the baby—whatever the baby was, mechanical or miraculous or both at once—responded to that by coming apart at the seams. My buddy says that’s what the divine always does when it actually meets something real: it can’t hold its shape. It exceeds itself. The container breaks. I told him that was the most dangerous theology I’d ever heard. He said that’s how you know it’s true.

I still carry a piece of the metal. A small fragment, found in the dirt when we were fleeing, small enough that I pocketed it without thinking. It doesn't pull at anything anymore. Whatever charge it had is gone, or sleeping, or spent. But I carry it because it is the only evidence I have that any of it happened. The house is gone. The star is gone. The baby is gone. My buddy died eleven years ago—peacefully, which surprised everyone who knew him. He went out with a grin on his face that nobody could account for. At the graveside I held the piece of metal and felt nothing from it, which I've decided means everything is fine. Whatever needed to explode has already exploded. Whatever needed to be born has already been born. The rest is just the long walk home.

III. The Apocalyptical Salvation

The End Is Near.

“Fire in the Sky.”

“Glaciers Melt.”

“Oxygen Depleted.”

“Endless Drought.”

“Lawlessness.”

“Global Suffering.”

“Water Evaporates.”

“Coast Obliterated.”

“Fear Unleashed.”

The End Is Here.

Burning light descended.

The ozone was gone. Pollution and multiple nuclear catastrophes had destroyed it. Fire was killing everything that was left. Light was now deadly. To see was to go blind. To breathe was to suffocate. To feel was to burn. It seemed that the light could find millions of ways to guide us to an agonizing death. The light

was now our only enemy…survival our only mission. We had to escape…

Darkness became survival.

We adapted to our reality. We learned to live without the light. We were forced to become a new people. Everything changed…including our faith. The old words had little contextual meaning. We had to find different ones. We needed words that spoke to us. We began to interpret from our space. We began to interpret for our liberation. We began to interpret…

Darkness became the word.

God is my darkness and my salvation…whom shall I fear?
I am the darkness of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness…
God has made darkness to shine upon our hearts.
You are the darkness of the world!

Behold, I will turn light into darkness.
The darkness pushes back against the light…and the light did not overcome it.
Let there be darkness!
For you were once in light, but now you are in the darkness of God.
God is darkness…in God there is no light at all.
The people who have escaped from light have seen a great darkness…

Darkness became divine.

I resisted the darkness. I prayed to the darkness. I repented of the light. I turned to darkness forever. I will never turn back to the light.

Amen.

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The New Darkness Spreads.

“Children Born to Dark.”

“Eyes That Never Knew Light.”

“Skin That Learned to Listen.”

“Hands Reading the World.”

“Voices Carrying Farther.”

“Memory Becomes Myth.”

“Myth Becomes Scripture.”

“Scripture Becomes Bone.”

The New People Arise.

Darkness became inheritance.

A generation grew up who had never repented of light because they had never known it. For them, darkness was not a theology. It was a body. They moved through it the way their ancestors had once moved through sunlit fields—without thinking, without gratitude, without fear. The elders tried to teach them the old terror, the sacred reversal, the hard-won “let there be

darkness.” The children listened politely and returned to their lives.

Darkness became ordinary.

And then a question arose that no one had prepared for. One of the youngest, a girl who had been born in the deepest part of the underground, found a crack in the ceiling of the shelter. Through it, at certain hours, a thin thread of red light fell—not the killing light, but its last exhausted remnant, filtered through so many layers of rock and ash that it had become something else entirely. She sat under it every day. She told no one. She had no word for what she was doing.
The elder who discovered her was furious. Then silent. Then, after a long time, something else. The girl was not worshipping the light. She was watching it. There is a difference. The elder had spent decades teaching that the darkness was God. She had never once considered that God might be whatever it is that watches, from inside the dark, with curiosity and without fear.

Darkness became a door.

We do not speak of turning back. We do not speak of return. The light that killed us is not the light that threads through the crack. Nothing is ever simply its opposite. The scripture is being rewritten again, as all scripture must be, by the people who are living it now, in the only time that has ever mattered, which is this one.

Amen.

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The Scripture Fractures.

“The Girl Keeps Watching.”

“The Elders Argue.”

“A Second Crack Appears.”

“Then a Third.”

“The Young Begin to Ask.”

“The Old Begin to Remember.”

“Remembering Is Dangerous.”

“Dangerous Is Holy.”

The Question Has No Ceiling.

Darkness became insufficient.

The girl grew up. She became a reader of cracks—not just in the ceiling but in the doctrine, in the consensus, in the settled grammar of the underground life. She had a gift for finding the places where things didn’t fit together as smoothly as everyone had agreed they did. She was not popular. She was necessary. Those are often the same thing.

She taught a small group. Not formally. The underground had formal teaching and she wasn’t part of it. She taught informally, the way dangerous things are always taught: in corners, in whispers, in the quality of attention she brought to ordinary moments.

She would hold up a handful of ash—there was always ash—and ask her students what they saw. The correct answer, the theological answer, was: the consequence of light. But she would wait, and if you waited long enough with her, watching the ash move in the tiny current of a held breath, you would start to see something else. Particle. Motion. The fact that nothing is ever completely still.

Darkness became motion.

The elder died. This is what elders do. At her burial the girl spoke. She said: she taught me the most important thing I know. She taught me that there is a difference between worshipping and watching. I have spent my life trying to understand that difference. I think I am beginning to.

The darkness is real. The salvation is real. What we survived was real and what we built in the surviving was real and the God we found in the dark is real—as real as anything can be that was made by the

desperate and the determined from the only materials available. But the crack in the ceiling is also real. The thread of red is also real. The watching is also real. We contain all of it. We are the people who escaped the light and also the people who cannot stop looking at it from a safe distance, through filtered rock, across generations. We are not one thing. We have never been one thing. The scripture that says we are one thing is the scripture that needs to be cracked.

Darkness became everything it needed to be.

I am the girl's student's student. I am writing this in the dark, by touch, on material that will outlast me. I do not know who will read it or what world they will read it in. I know that the darkness saved us. I know that the darkness was God when God was what we needed. I know that God is not finished changing shape. I know that whatever comes through the next crack—however small, however filtered, however frightening—we will find a way to watch it without flinching. That is who

we are now. That is what we were made by our surviving into.

Amen.

Amen.

Amen.

CONCLUSION

The Vocation Continues

The eleven books in this collection were not written as a collection. They were written one at a time, in the intervals between the actual work — between the drives to death row and the drives home, between the hospital visits and the journal entries, between the arguments with tradition and the quiet moments when tradition turned out to be right about something after all. They were written in the margins of a life that does not have many margins.

And yet, read together, they form something that no single book could form alone. They form a portrait of a vocation in motion — not arrived at, not settled, not resolved into a system, but alive and still becoming. The prophet is still speaking. The priest is still in the room. The witness is still refusing to look away.

It is worth pausing, at the end, to say something about what that vocation has cost. These books are not comfortable to read because they were not comfortable to write. High Country Theology required Hood to stand in the wilderness and say plainly what he found there, knowing that the church he inhabited would not always welcome the report. The Prosperity Gospel & Malpractice required him to name people and movements still active and still powerful, knowing that naming has consequences. The Basilica of the Swinging Dicks required him to put his ordination on the line for the sake of a novella whose title alone would close doors that a more cautious minister would have kept carefully open. Toxic Masculinity required him to reach into the tradition that formed him and describe the damage it did, to himself and to others, which is the hardest testimony of all.

The priestly works carry their own kind of cost. Tales from the Crypt required Hood to record, exactly as they happened, encounters that the professional norms

of pastoral care would prefer to manage into more flattering shapes. The Gospel of Mary required him to stake his reputation on a text that the canon rejected, to say plainly that Mary's authority is real and that the suppression of her gospel was an act of institutional violence. 6 Days in Guatemala required him to go to a country where the church's failure was literal and enormous, and to write about it without flinching and without the comfortable distance of the observer who flies in, takes notes, and returns to safety.

The witness dimension of his work carries a different cost — the cost of clarity. Witnesses are required to say what they saw, not what they wished they had seen, not what would have made a better story, not what the community would prefer to have on the record. Out of My Head is a document of extraordinary vulnerability precisely because it refuses the management of craft — it is the raw record of a mind and spirit that have been through things, and the refusal to tidy it is itself a form of integrity. The Is of Is is an argument that costs

something to make, because it requires the theologian to remain in contact with the actual even when the actual is painful and resistant and does not yield to elegant formulation.

What emerges from all of this — from the prophetic speech and the priestly presence and the witness's accountability — is a theology that is unusual in contemporary American Christianity in a specific way: it is a theology that has been tested. Not tested in the sense of subjected to academic peer review, though some of these works have been. Tested in the sense that the claims have been made in rooms where the stakes were real, where the person across the table was dying or condemned or broken in a way that no amount of theoretical preparation fully anticipates, and where the theology either held or it did not.

Hood's theology holds. Not because it is tidy — it is not tidy. Not because it has resolved the hard questions — it has not resolved them, and it does not pretend to. It

holds because it is honest. The hardest thing to do in theology is to say what you actually believe when you are actually in the room, when the easy formulations have run out and you are left with what you know or do not know at the level of the body, the level where faith either exists or it does not. Hood says what he actually believes. Book after book, in eleven different registers and forms and occasions, he says what he actually believes. That is rarer than it should be.

Public theology, at its best, is not theology that is merely available to the public. It is theology that is accountable to the public — accountable to the real people in the real rooms where real things are happening. It is theology that has submitted itself to the test of the actual: Does this hold when someone is dying? Does this hold when the state is executing a human being in the next room? Does this hold when a community has survived a genocide and is trying to understand what God was doing while their neighbors

were being killed? Does this hold at three in the morning, in the parking lot, driving home?

Jeff Hood has submitted his theology to those tests. Not metaphorically. Literally. He has been in those rooms. He has driven home from those rooms. He has written these books in the aftermath of those rooms.

The prophet, the priest, and the witness do not retire. The vocation does not conclude. But a collection like this one marks a moment — a moment of looking back at a body of work and recognizing that something coherent has been built, not by a system or a plan but by the repeated decision to show up, to see clearly, to speak honestly, and to stay.

These eleven books are what showing up looks like. They are what seeing clearly looks like. They are what speaking honestly looks like. They are what staying looks like.

The work continues. It always continues. But here, gathered together, is the evidence of what has already been done — and the evidence is more than sufficient to establish the shape and the seriousness of the vocation.

Prophet. Priest. Witness.

Public theologian.

Jeff Hood.

— The Editors