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# I Believe, Lord Help My Unbelief: The Thin Christology of Austin Adolescents

Brianna Morris-Brock  
*Luther Seminary*

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I Believe, Lord Help My Unbelief:  
The Thin Christology of Austin Adolescents

by

Brianna Morris-Brock

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**Introduction**

## The Unbelievable

"I just find it all so unbelievable," said Susan. She was a new freshman at the University of Texas and had asked if we could get coffee to catch up. Usually the phrase "catch up" is code for "everything in my life is going wrong and I want someone to talk about this all with." The hidden meaning of this phrase held true. I have been in Children, Youth, and Family congregational ministry for twelve years. Seven of those years I have spent working with the youth of Triumphant Love Lutheran Church in Austin, Texas. I have gotten fairly good at reading the subtext of my students' questions or requests. Susan was having a hard time finding a major. She is incredibly smart, and I had yet to see something she couldn't wrap her mind around academically. She had started school for theatre and was considering switching to something else, perhaps something in the sciences or math, but we established that pre-med was probably a bad idea because she hates blood. She did know she was going to continue to double major in the honors program with whatever new direction she headed. Susan and I were discussing where God might call her, where her giftedness and God's work might intersect. As the conversation progressed, she expressed concern that she might choose "wrong." I assured her that while following the call of God is neither easy nor boring, she need not worry about "wrong," because reconciliation had already been made on her behalf by God and that reconciliation brings new life. I told her God can make good out of your 'wrong'; you have been set free to live your life. It was clear from her face before she even said it that THIS was what she found unbelievable. She flat out didn't believe in Jesus as divine. She just didn't understand how it was possible that Jesus gives us hope, grace, and redemption for our everyday lives. A conversation about choosing a college major was the tip of the iceberg on what this lack of belief applied too. I had known Susan for 6 years at this point. I had accompanied her through breakups, health issues, deep depression, identity crisis, identity discovery, and innumerable

questions. Christ was not a part of how her faith and life interacted. She believed God created the world. She expressed a deep belief in a God that calls and equips and believed that a faithful community and God's presence amidst that community matter.... but Jesus just didn't make sense. This was not the first time I had had this conversation with students in my context. Or hit a brick wall in Bible study talking about forgiveness, renewal, redemption, or pretty much anything that has to do with belief in Christ. Why is Jesus Christ as God so difficult to believe in, and what, if any, are the implications for not having a more robust Christology for Austin adolescents?

Susan is a cradle Lutheran whose family was in church regularly. She has been confirmed, attended high school Bible study every week, came on retreats, and even went on every summer trip. On top of all that she in past years she has been one of our best camp leaders for our day camp in the summer. How could someone who consistently interacted with the Christian Lutheran belief system end up with a theology where Jesus as God is unbelievable? I have had several similar conversations with other students, highly engaged students, students that had articulate enough theological language to explain why and how they were unable to find Jesus believable. As I sat in that coffee shop with Susan I felt crestfallen. Throughout the last few years I knew what kind of work and effort had gone into to Susan's accomplishments both grand and small. For me, so much of her story exemplifies that of hope--of a light in the darkness that the darkness did not overcome.

This light in the darkness is the theological necessity of Jesus in our tradition--that we will stumble into the darkness of the world and there we will find the light of God. Douglas John Hall states that, "The faith that emanates from this cross is a faith that enables its disciples to follow the crucified God into the heart of the world's darkness, into the very kingdom of death,

and to look for a light that shines *in* the darkness...<sup>1</sup> On the cross Jesus becomes Christ. In our modern era though we have lost the meaning of this act to its fullness. We let it sit more as a gesture from God for us, instead of a very act of revolution in how we assemble our lives. It's as though we are in the matrix, what happens on the cross as Jesus becomes Christ is the red pill that our society longs for, it sets us free and our former limitations no longer hold us. The reconciliation between God and humanity through Jesus' death is lived out endlessly in our own reconciliations. With ourselves, with our families, with our past, and with our future. These lived moments of light in the dark are brought on by the catalyst of awareness that something must change, and then proclamation of what is holding back that change through confession. After we become aware of what happened for us on the cross, and move through confession and reconciliation we can have nothing but a new way of living. A life where the bounds that we once thought must control our way of being of don't hold us any longer. Neo discovers this after taking the red pill as he is waiting to see The Oracle, a prophetess, while in the waiting room he sees a child bending a spoon with his mind. Neo's confusion is obvious. The child responds to this confusion by saying "do not try to bend the spoon, that is impossible. Only try to realize the truth.... there is no spoon<sup>2</sup>." We are freed and challenged by reconciliation and confession to live a life lead by the truth, that there is no spoon. We now can exist as though the limitations that previously bound us are gone. Through Christ on the cross we have been reconciled with God by God and now can live free. This is the light that emulates from the cross, it is the hope that we can cling to in life as Christians.

Yet Susan was not making these connections between her own struggles and the darkness that was in her own life. The spoon of her own self-control and need for perfection did

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<sup>1</sup> Douglass John Hall, *The Cross in our Context*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2003, pp. 32

<sup>2</sup> Warner Brothers Pictures, 1999, *The Matrix*, "The Wachowski Brothers", Lana and Lilly Wachowski

exist, and did not bend. She was not seeing that when she was experiencing dark moments personally that there were moments of confession, reconciliation, and new life. There were so many instances when she was so afraid of what would or could happen if she didn't live into what she believed bound her, the way she thought the world worked. Her thin Christology could not grant more awareness of how Christ had made her free in her life, and so Christ cannot offer comfort in these moments. In fact the meaning she made from these times in her life seemed minimal all together. She expected darkness of the world, the manifestations of a brokenness, in her life, but she did not know she could also expect light and hope. It is as though she took the blue pill and although she can say "God is with me in the hard times," she could not articulate how or why that might even matter. Her reality and belief are shaped more by the natural and concrete world she perceives than that of the theological which is boundless. The natural world can be quite cruel and hierarchical. A mountain lion doesn't care if you just got lost. A virus does not ask if it can infect. Weather can destroy your house no matter how good a person you've been. These experiences are reflected in our social spheres as well. Your professor doesn't care that you procrastinated for "a good reason". Your rude to someone usually the relationship is damaged. Sometimes car accidents just happen. In the natural world consequences are harsh, and brought on by our own, potentially poor, judgment as well as by random occurrence. Without taking the red pill, the truth of what God offers through God-self as Christ, we remain bound to the natural world without any awareness of what is possible with God right now in our reality, not just after physical death. When did a generation take the blue pill and choose to stay in captivity? What might be causing this absence of a Jesus as Christ in the theological understanding of the world in young people? How did Christ get left out of a young Christian's belief?

## **Part One**

### **How Might We Have Arrived at a Christianity with no Christ?**

## The Haunting of Buddy Christ & American Evangelism

Our modest congregation sits inside the Northwest Hills of Austin. The median income is over \$120+ a year, the two closest high schools are in the top fifty on the best national schools lists, most folks at our congregation work in the tech industry, and at least half of our congregation has a master's degree or higher. There is an exceptionally high value on education in this little pocket of our city. All of this means that we have a wealthy educated community that values achievement and expertise<sup>3</sup>. We live in the Bible Belt. Most people that claim Christianity in Austin are Southern Baptist, Non-Denominational, or Catholic<sup>4</sup>. Navigating denominational differences in doctrine is a required skill for a mainline protestant in the South. "When did you accept Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior?" can be a daily question. It often leaves our students confused. Either they believe that this must be the way we as Lutherans believe (i.e. should I be asking other people this question?), or they think that maybe they haven't accepted Jesus as this personal Lord. Students know that they go to church with their families, sometimes they even pray before dinner. They think maybe that counts?

One of the most common questions I am asked during confirmation is "what is the difference between Christians and Lutherans?" This is a problem because the undertone of that question is that we have not proclaimed our particular place and call in the Christian tradition of northwest Austin in a way in which our young people are "getting" what it is to be Lutheran<sup>5</sup>. It also has an undertone that our young people are not connecting what we are doing in the community to Christianity as a whole. There certainly is a pervasive cultural assumption that all

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<sup>3</sup> crazy right... I'm sure this context sounds really unfamiliar.

<sup>4</sup> The Association of Religious Data Archives,  
[http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/r/c/48/rcms2010\\_48453\\_county\\_name\\_2010.asp](http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/r/c/48/rcms2010_48453_county_name_2010.asp), 2010

<sup>5</sup> Maybe anywhere? I don't know.

Christianity is a kind of a one-note tune. While intellectually most people seem to be able to acknowledge that denominations have their own verses and harmonies in the complex symphony that is the Christian tradition, emotionally as a culture I'm pretty sure we hold a D sharp for twelve bars. Which means that we have no imagination for harmony, and we've somehow picked the most obnoxious not to stick too. Our ideas for what Christianity is has been deeply shaped by the largest and loudest voices around us. Susan Cain suggests that this is a mark of our larger American value system that says extroverted leadership is strong leadership: we tend to correlate loudness with correctness. This is explored in the chapter "The Myth of Charismatic Leadership." However the US Army's example of the "Bus to Abilene" is particularly poignant. "It's about a family sitting on a porch in Texas on a hot summer day, and somebody says, 'I'm bored. Why don't we go to Abilene?' When they get to Abilene, somebody says, 'You know, I didn't really want to go.' And the next person says, 'I didn't want to go—I thought you wanted to go,' and so on. Whenever you're in an army group and somebody says, 'I think we're all getting on the bus to Abilene here,' that is a red flag. You can stop a conversation with it. It is a very powerful artifact of our culture."<sup>6</sup> This is why what the Pope says still matters to both Christians and atheists and why the evangelical pull in politics is so powerful. Both voices have loud implications over the way the practical pieces of our lives are formed. How we view science, how healthcare is formed, even gender roles. We end up on the bus to Abilene because someone filled the void with a voice. These two particular voices have the ears of most media, and most world leaders. Our religious leadership might be shaped more by the news outlets than our parish pastors and ministers. Young people have a hard time doing the mental backflips to embody a theological identity that varies from the perceived social one. This means that our young people's imagination about who Jesus is and what Jesus means in our lives is

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<sup>6</sup> Susan Cain, *Quiet*, Crown Publishing, New York, 2012



being shaped by people like Glen Beck or Bill Maher. Televangelists like Joel Osteen, or Beth Moore are sought after theologians regardless with compatibility with Lutheran church doctrine. Our perception of what Christianity means, and thus who Jesus as Christ is, is flattened as we get on the bus to Abilene. Our social sphere has more influence over the ways that we conduct our lives and progress into our future than our theological one.

I recently had lunch with a parishioner in her late thirties who claimed to have some real baggage with Jesus as “Buddy Christ” from her teenage years. Buddy Christ is most popularized in the movie *Dogma*, where the Catholic Church decides to retire the crucifix, which they perceive as being a bummer, for a more uplifting sigil, which they call Buddy Christ. However ridiculous the joke, it is rooted (like all good comedy) in reality. T.M. Luhrmann studied a set of evangelical congregations called The Vineyard. Here Luhrmann discovered that many people left mainline churches because they were seeking a more personal, passionate, relationship with God. They wanted Jesus as someone to talk about your haircuts with, or go on dates with, or to be able to share your most intimate moments. They want someone who they perceive is as real in their lives like a best friend. Truly Jesus as one of your buddies<sup>7</sup>. This grew out of the 1960’s and the new desire for the radical break from an establishment and the relational drive of the hippy movement<sup>8</sup>. *Dogma*, however, wasn’t released until 1999, and we still sing “What a friend we have in Jesus” on Sunday mornings. Apparently Buddy Christ still haunts us. The juxtaposition in the woman from my congregations experience however is that Buddy Christ judged you, he went to Young Life, and micromanaged all your behavior. He was not your friend. She said that even when she reads scripture Buddy Christ is not the Christ she encounters, however the idea of Buddy Jesus is too embedded in her imagination, and she has

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<sup>7</sup> T.M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back; Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*, Vintage Books, New York, NY, 2012, pp 72-77

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, pp. 12-13

a hard time inviting the Christ from scripture into her lived beliefs. She said, “I blame it on my Baptist High School. I struggle with the idea even today that the [piece of the trinity] I turn to when I want God is not Jesus, because that guy is not comforting and not authoritative<sup>9</sup>.” She is right that an emphasis on the humanity of Jesus in order to picture him as your friend has diminished his work as Christ our savior on the cross in our imaginations. Just like in *Dogma* we have replace the bummer of what happened on the cross with this real pal Jesus. And in doing so he seems to have less authority. This tension she has between Buddy Christ and scriptural Jesus Christ affects her language when she talks about God to her children, and thusly how those children talk about God with their peers. Which could be stemming deeply from how we talk about Christ on a Sunday morning.

Erik Erikson writes that a young person will care more about what their friends’ perceptions or identities are than that of the theology of their church<sup>10</sup>. I’m not trying to argue that a young person doesn’t claim that the theology of their church matters, but it doesn’t often influence their being and acting in the same way that their peer group will. So if their peer group is conservative, and their family is conservative, they might take on the flat identity of their perception of conservative Christianity--even if they belong to a progressive congregation/denomination, even if their family members or friends actually have a much more nuanced personal set of beliefs. A young person might also take on the flat identity of a person

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<sup>9</sup> This conversation grew out of an interview for Dr. Marga’s Feminist Theology Course when my interviewee claimed to have a “weird relationship” with Jesus. She is a member of Triumphant Love Lutheran Church and has three children.

<sup>10</sup> “If the second stage established the necessity of being defined by what one can will freely, then the adolescent now looks for an opportunity to decide with free assent on one of the available or unavoidable avenues of duty and service, and at the same time is mortally afraid of being forced into activities in which he would feel exposed to ridicule or self-doubt. This, too, can lead to a paradox, namely, that he would rather act shamelessly in the eyes of his elders, out of free choice, than be forced into activities which would be shameful in his own eyes or in those of his peers.” Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, Northtan Company, New York, NY, 1968, pp 141

who rejects those previously stated ideals if they decide they are NOT “that kind” of person (i.e. not conservative). The latter can be a problem when the cultural identity being rejected has some very clear language and communication about who Jesus is and what Jesus means. That Jesus died for our sins so that we can go to heaven, but only people who believe “the right way,” or feel bad enough about all the suffering Jesus did, or who behave in a way that God thinks is correct. Our congregation is talking about God in too generic of terms to add any nuance or difference to those statements. God wants this, God does this, as people of God we.... We also talk about what other theologians think about God in generic terms or scripture, and the Bible, and “what the Bible said.” However we don’t use much Jesus-specific language. But Joel Osteen certainly does. We don’t necessarily mention Jesus when we talk about social justice. We talk about grace extending to all as an idea of God’s, and then use Dr. Martin Luther King’s sermons and letters as authority. You definitely don’t need Jesus to talk about behavior modification. Young people could be distancing themselves<sup>11</sup> from this Personal Lord and Savior and therefore diminish Jesus to a supporting role in the Trinity.

Being kind, practicing living our life for God--this is where I hear most of our ELCA folks have scriptural language for Jesus, as a moral example for our lives (that our behavior should always emulate that of Christ). Yet his name does not need to be invoked for these kinds of behaviors to happen. This moral Jesus isn’t theologically unhelpful, this Lutheran idea of “little Christ’s” in the world is a good one: our neighbors are cared for and people are generally more kind to one another; these are all excellent things. However, it only touches on the human part of Christ as an example of how to live as God wants us to, it doesn’t account for the divinity

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<sup>11</sup> I have also observed young people in our context choosing to identify with this Personal Lord and Savior kind of Jesus and therefore reject the ELCA for I think the same reason but in reverse. These two ideas don’t mesh very well. Or at least not when Joel Osteen and Beth Moore have the authority on what is the centerpiece of a Christian faith. I think that the Lutheran doctrine is actually wide enough in belief, but not very wide in communicating that doctrine.

Christ. It reduces Christ's necessity to that of being kind to others because God said so. Feeding the hungry is about doing a good thing because Jesus did it--not because we have been made free and can't go back to a reality where that freedom means nothing for us or others. Our current lived reality has nothing to do with the divinity of Christ. Language like "Christ took my sins so I can go to heaven," is a prevalent answer when you ask a young person in Austin why God showed up as Jesus. Which isn't untrue, but doesn't leave much to the imagination as to what Christ's divinity means for their lives right now. We have left a vacuum. When we as leaders don't explicitly preach or teach from our particular understanding of Christ's divinity and what it means right now, we let other voices take our place, which leaves our parishioners perceptions to be shaped by incongruent perspectives. It means that Buddy Christ still persists.

### **The Absence of Proclamation**

It seems prevalent across the religious landscape that when one has a notion of a "higher power" this power is also the creator of the universe. We hit God-as-Creator stories pretty hard in children's ministry, and this is a common theological thread across religious traditions. We also consistently use God-as-Father language for our youngest Christians, probably because parental love is a really excellent parallel to use with children about God's benevolent love for all his children<sup>12</sup>. God is benevolent and cares for all as his own children. This is a comforting thought, and for most children in my context one that is free from

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<sup>12</sup> I mean really the parent child language is pretty hard to get away from. The direct parallel to creator-created theologically is so simple it's no wonder we seem to always wind back to it during children's ministry.

complication<sup>13</sup>. There is also a lot of God-as-Spirit language. I have a sneaking suspicion that young people in our congregation picked up all the Spirit language from camp. We sing about the Spirit a lot at camp. We talk about call, we talk about the power of the Spirit in community, we talk about all the stories of dreams, and empowerment, of being sent to do things you don't want to do, and God being present through all of that. I have emphasized community and relationship with the youth I work with and when I noticed a pervasive loneliness in our young people, I used more spirit language intentionally thinking that it might help young people understand how God made us for relationship with each other. In doing so I may have helped thin down their Christology.

If God the parent is an ideal parallel developmentally for children, God the Spirit is an ideal parallel for teens. This facet of God is all about discernment, about being felt when you're with your friends, about feeling moved to care for others, and about being gifted in something for the sake of God's work in the world. These beliefs offer a sense of comfort and presence; they do not necessarily transform your way of life. God as Jesus does not fit neatly into a developmental phase as a parallel because he is the lens through which we see all things throughout our entire lives. Confession, reconciliation, and freedom happen at each and every developmental stage in our lives. Whether we need to confess that we lied about being out of bed after bedtime because we were scared of the monster in our closet, or we lied about being out after curfew because we were scared that our friends wouldn't talk to us anymore if we didn't go to that party. Both of those scenarios offer an opportunity for parents to embrace their children hold them close and offer reconciliation by saying that monsters (whether in closets, or

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<sup>13</sup> Although it's not unheard of in our congregation to have abusive families or divorce or even death, for the most part children at least have one parent or grandparent who is quite caring in their life.

rejections from friends) can't keep them from being loved. They are forgiven, they are loved, and now they can live free of the fear.

In *Almost Christian*, Kenda Creasy Dean <sup>14</sup> writes that young people are often a barometer for what is happening in the larger culture. We can then safely assume that a minimization of Christ and an emphasis on the Spirit is not just something happening with our youth in Austin, but is probably happening with the adults in our community as well. Which means that it is likely that these could also be the beliefs of these young people's parents. Do parents have no language or understanding of Jesus' part in the Trinity through a Lutheran lens? If they do have a more egalitarian Trinitarian belief are they not sharing this with their children? After almost four years at Luther, I can say that everyone seems to agree that the answer to that question is "no," parents seem to feel unequipped to talk to their children about faith. Or perhaps in the busyness and practicality of the day it just never comes up.

I recently began to wonder how much the church actually talks about Jesus with adults, and how much are we actually helping parents do this necessary job of talking about their belief in Christ with their children. If we say that parents are the number one faith former in a child's life then we as church leaders are not providing ample space for the adults in the congregation to delve into their own beliefs so they might have a vocabulary to share their faith with their children as they grow up. The problem with this seeming gap in communication, education, and inclusion of Christ in young peoples' theology is that as their lives become more complicated and "life-y,"<sup>15</sup> the piece of our Lutheran faith that says this life-y-ness is in fact the place where

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<sup>14</sup> "In fact, the faith teenagers develop during adolescence serves as a kind of barometer of the religious inclinations of the culture that surrounds them." Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 2010, pp. 9

<sup>15</sup> life-y: slang that I made up referencing the experience of the bubble of adolescence, particularly for those in privileged families and areas, popping and the brokenness of the world seeping in every so rapidly.

God is closest, and the place where promises are fulfilled is completely minimized. The difficult times can be made new into something unburdened by the confines of doing something “wrong”, or the intimidation of change. Simple theology and complicated lives don’t mix. You can feel betrayed by your benevolent parent God who was supposed to love you so much that bad things were not supposed to happen. You can feel frustrated and dismissive of the Spirit who called you to a future that has things like parents’ divorce, substance abuse, failing classes, breakups, sexual assault and abuse, and death of loved ones. The red pill of our theology, the piece that says those things are not the truth of your life or identity, might have to be offered by parents to their children. Parents might have to be the people in their children’s life that says “yes, bending a spoon is impossible.... but there is no spoon.” A theology without God as Jesus is a theology without grace. It feeds into a life of attempting perfection in order to have value and thus avoid all the darkness listed above. A life of trying to bend spoons.

Dan Segal says that a teen is hyper-rational. They minimize negative outcomes and emphasizes positive ones. It’s not that they aren’t considering the risk or the consequences to decisions, they just give more weight to the positive outcomes. They do this by taking in information in literal and concrete terms, which means they miss larger context and picture<sup>16</sup>. Anyone who has ever tried to argue with a teenager about anything knows this. So when a young person has jettisoned the piece of our Trinitarian belief that accounts for the brokenness of the world (which moves us through that brokenness) through God’s reconciliation as Jesus then God and the rational world seem at odds with one another. And when young people begin to make meaning out of their experiences in a broken world using their hyper-rational brains they will place higher value on literal and concrete evidence from the rational world to make meaning. They could emphasize the positive of the hope of Jesus as Christ (reconciliation and

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<sup>16</sup> Dan Seigal, *Brainstorm, The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain*, Penguin, New York, NY, 2013, pp.96

freedom) if their Christology was more robust and Jesus was more than just an example, or a buddy. Since he is not it is very difficult to put abstract ideas about God inside of that world without the connector piece of God as Jesus.

### **Perfection and Hierarchy**

This thin Christology could also be deeply influenced by the perfection-driven subculture of the highly competitive Austin elite. Teenagers no longer live in a world where they have to be good at math or good at sports. They now have to be in the top ten percent, AND good at sports, AND volunteer teaching reading to troubled kindergartners, AND play an instrument so well that they get all the solos, AND be devastatingly good looking (or at least very well put together). It is no wonder that Adderall addiction is on the rise, and in the 2016-2017 school year, one of our congregation's neighborhood high schools has had three suicides<sup>17</sup>. Our young people live in a world where perfection is expected. It is not just parental pressure that puts students in a mindset of achievement and stress,<sup>18</sup> often it is peer/internal pressure or pressure from the schools themselves. Schools get financial incentives for things like attendance, AP test scores, PSAT scores, and college application percentages<sup>19</sup>. It is in their favor to motivate students to excel academically, which means that peer competition has grown quite a lot in a rather short period of time. While it seems easy from an adult perspective to say "you can relax a little and still have a future," teens realize they still have to compete with the girl next to them who somehow ran a marathon for charity and then scored a five on her AP calculus exam the

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.kvue.com/news/local/leander-isd-parents-concerned-after-recent-teen-suicides/427417307>, accessed April 18, 2017

<sup>18</sup> I don't want to say that many of my students don't have requirements from parents: As and Bs are often expected.

<sup>19</sup> In a context where federal funds are rejected and state funds are constantly cut, those boosts for things like attendance and PSAT scores mean a lot for the health of the school districts and the schools themselves.



next morning. It turns out that girl ALSO wants to be an engineer and is applying to all the same schools. Young people are attempting to just survive in this very competitive environment often at the sake of their thriving.

One young person in our congregation, Cecily, came to me extremely anxious about her calculus class. She was getting help from a friend from youth group, she had a tutor, and was spending an obnoxious amount of hours working through her calculus homework and preparing for the tests. One afternoon I spoke to her mother asking about how all Cecily's calculus studying was going. Her mother rolled her eyes and said "I don't know why she's even taking calculus, she doesn't like it, she doesn't need it, and she's not good at it! I've been trying to get her to drop it for weeks!" Cecily was staying in calculus because it's what other kids of her academic rank were taking. The pressure was internal to succeed based on a drive to compete and a perception about where Cecily's identity came from (which she perceived as stemming from her academic peer group). Her own mother could not get her to see that she did not need to let this class effect so much of her time and energy. Cecily felt so strongly that she had to keep up with her peers. To the point where she had sacrificed her self-worth in order to try to keep up with a class that she hated. Calculus could set her free to have options in the future and maintain a present identity in something that gives her social power...peer approval. By not living into her actual giftedness, however, Cecily is diminishing her own personal humanity to maintain a status quo. She is living in the matrix, but the matrix cannot tell you who you are.

When we as Lutherans offer youth a theology that states that their effort doesn't earn them more magic Jesus points than other people...this is incompatible with every pattern in their daily lives. These kids live in an environment where perfection does matter, and they get ahead by being able to compete and maintain this über perfection. However as Lutherans we might argue that to become more perfect pushes them further and further from their humanity. They become very disconnected from their own emotional states, and therefore less likely to

communicate that they might have any desire for anything different than the state they are in currently. To confess that they might not want to be perfect would shatter the illusion, and then they would lose on everything that they had put effort towards earning. It is a zero-sum game, and it has affected our cultural imagination for how God operates.

This could be why some of the theologies that have an “in” and an “out” are so popular, in supports and maintains the ways that we see that the world works. God looks a lot like the machine. As though God’s love is a finite resource that we must prove ourselves worthy of in order to receive it before others do. This is the story of the rich young ruler<sup>20</sup>. This young man says “I follow all the rules and do all you ask, what else must I do to inherit eternal life?” This wonderful question from a framework of competition and hierarchy. Yet Jesus sends the young man away disappointed because he asks him to live like he has a new life by shedding the old one, one where what he earns and does doesn’t matter more than what others do. Jesus hold out his hands and offers the red and blue pill. Invites him to live free of shackles. To no longer be a slave to competition, and prestige. The young ruler knows that all that he has worked for, that brings him economic and sociological success, Jesus is asking him to leave behind. This is a huge risk. By even presenting the option to be free Jesus is shining a light in a darkness that is different than “bad things happening”. Here the darkness is an attachment to equating the way God works to the way the world works. This assumption has blinded him to what Jesus is really offering here. Even though the young ruler obviously feels a disconnect and seeks change by asking the question, he will not follow Christ through this darkness of his own hubris towards a freer way of being. The risk is too high. Being kind and good is one thing, following all the rules to the letter is how you are successful in the world, but actually living in a new framework where the young ruler can actually live as though he has been liberated is intolerable. When the

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<sup>20</sup> Mark 10:17-22

divinity of Christ has been reduced to moral platitudes and an example to follow, then our youth as rich young rulers will always walk away simply unable to see Christ for who he is and why what he offers right now is true freedom. They have not heard their parents tell stories of their liberated lives, or offer reconciliation. They have not heard a confession that brings forth reconciliation claimed as the work of Jesus. And so following a man into a new way of being that puts all the structures that you understand at risk is lunacy. Their futures are dependent on those structures. The only thing that makes that lunacy hopeful is if that man actually is God, and they have actually seen adults take the red pill. The ability to hear God in Christ beckoning us towards freedom is dependent upon our imagination for the divine made flesh. Otherwise the old structures must stand.

## Part Two

### Crafting a Liberated Imagination in the Modern Age

#### Social Frameworks and Meaning Making

In the book *The Secular Age*, Charles Taylor writes about something called “the nova effect”. He argues that in our current social frameworks individuals are caught in the pressure between belief and unbelief. This cross pressure pushed up against an individual will explode out in an infinite number of possibilities he calls “third ways.” The intolerability of what Christ asks, or the rejection of Buddy Christ, both of which lead to an emphasized belief in the Holy Spirit are “third ways” of believing/thinking that are observable in this Austin context. Our kids are navigating the pressures between belief and unbelievability. These cross pressures are pushing against their polished states of being<sup>21</sup> (the veneer of control over one’s life and individuality Taylor calls “état policé<sup>22</sup>). One of the culturally larger “third ways” that has cropped up is the Spiritual but not Religious. According to Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead the tension lies in how religion ask individuals to conform their inner self to meet the demands of God as a way of finding spiritual freedom versus finding direction and affirmation in their own inner sense of spirituality (through practices such as yoga, meditation, etc.).<sup>23</sup> This could explain the easy embrace of the Holy Spirit as young Christians seek to maintain their identity, as they have a hard time accepting Christ’s work as plausible. Jesus asks us to conform to standards that sit far outside our social norms, standards that only make sense in a future of God’s making. This

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<sup>21</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Secular Age*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2007, pp. 299-310

<sup>22</sup> which means policed state of being, not the government term “police state.”

<sup>23</sup> Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution; why religion is giving way to spirituality*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, MA, 2005, pp 60-75

takes constant practice and re-enforcement through regular interaction with church leadership and a congregation/community of faith because the standards of life “outside the matrix” are so foreign to the pull of the natural world. When left to our own devices we build golden calves from our precious belongings when our pastor has been gone on a retreat a little longer than we thought she would<sup>24</sup>. Golden calves that look like flattened religious moralism, or strong debates over paint color in a Sunday school room. The individual believer is caught between the everyday of the world (social norms and human nature) and the promise that God might make/have made reality different.

The language we use to talk about the Holy Spirit easily syncs with modern self-driving spirituality. The Spirit is something you feel, and deepens an awareness of the world around you and yourself; it sustains us. It allows our inner self to still dictate much of how we operate in the world. The Holy Spirit maintains the idea of self-control. An individual still largely has complete control over one’s self, but can seek guidance from God, and can feel comfort from God in difficult times. It’s not unexpected to hear someone explain how they feel the Holy Spirit present with them when they go to yoga class.

Why does it matter if Jesus is out and the Spirit is in? If young people are making meaning out of their lives using scripture and inviting the eternal God into the process does it really matter that Christ isn’t a part of their belief? Yes it does. It is concerning to me that we may have actually moved into a time where our social imagination can’t find a need to for confession, reconciliation, thusly moving into an awareness of freedom. It should not be surprising that our social sphere cannot find a need for these things when our news cycles have become more and more dominated by extremism. Even our TV shows are usually depicting great battles of conflicting ideology and political power struggles (Game of Thrones), or living

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<sup>24</sup> Exodus 32:1-14

amongst a population that mindlessly wants to kill you but could look like a family member (Walking Dead), our world being infected by some darker gooey poisoned version of itself where only children might stand a chance to change anything (Stranger Things). Our cultural imagination is so filled anxiety, that we need a reconciling Jesus. We need the light that emanates from the cross and that all this darkness does not overcome.

We perceive only what we perceive, and our understanding for who Jesus is and what Christ does looks something like ships off the coast of North America in the 15th century. There is an unhelpful myth that Native Americans needed the wisest in their communities to tell them what Columbus' ships looked like off the coast of America. The myth, while created from an oppressive perspective, states that the Native Americans could perceive a presence but couldn't actually see the ships because they had never seen anything like them before. While this myth is completely ridiculous it does present an interesting analogy. *Is Christ so far outside of our perception of the world that we can sense something there, but can't quite grasp what it is? We can't even tell we have a need for a divine Jesus, and yet we long for him.* Kierkegaard said something to the effect of woe to the despairer that has no idea of their own despair, for it still affects their soul<sup>25</sup>. Our état policé, as Taylor claims, has left limited resources with which one can be vulnerable even with oneself to even see Christ in front of us. I argue that vulnerability and a policed state of being are mutually exclusive. Jesus as our bridge between our human experience and the kingdom of God is not lived out in our framework of belief. In a state being that is neither believing nor unbelieving the part of the Trinity that exists in this both/and state is

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<sup>25</sup> "That is the condition of despair. However much it eludes the despairer, however much (as must be especially the case with the kind of despair which is ignorance of being in despair) the despairer has succeeded in altogether losing his self, and in such a way that the loss is not in the least way noticeable, eternity will nevertheless make it evident that his condition is that of despair, and will nail him to his self so that the torment will still be that he cannot be rid of his self, and it will be evident that his success was an illusion. "

Søren Kierkegaard & Alastair Hannay. *The Sickness Unto Death*, Penguin, 1963, pp. 52

absent. Leaving young people to craft meaning with a somewhat theologically ambivalent God, both far away as the deistic creator of the universe and right close by as the Spirit to guide us through life. Yet like the ships off the coast or Neo in the matrix they can sense that there is more. I think there is a desire for God to be more, particularly when life becomes “life-y.”

This is why the rich young ruler comes to ask the question “what must I do...” The sense that there should be more has driven them to ask the question, however they have no way of imagining the context in which the answer is given. The eventual frustration our young people feel that God is so far away and cannot be understood in the physical realm. Maybe this is why young people are leaving the church. They long for a less ambivalent God, and yet they cannot see him in Jesus. Yet in Jesus God is not ambivalent, God is embodied. God sits, stands, breathes, walks, and dies. He teaches and talks and travels and listens. Most importantly Jesus wakes us up from a false reality. A reality where money, power, education, race, or gender are all things that can save you from ever experiencing any of the darkness our culture has anxiety about (such as environmental demise, political and religious extremism, and distrust of neighbors and families as played out in our television shows).

### **You can Take My Moralism, but You Can Never Take My Freedom**

Young people<sup>26</sup> are searching for things that will set them free. They think good grades, Adderall, parties, the right friends, and the right college will set them free to have control over their own lives. They think that if they have excellent morals like Jesus in the Bible they will be free, because that will make them good<sup>27</sup>, and good people get good things. Yet none of these

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<sup>26</sup> All people?

<sup>27</sup> They forget/don't know that we were declared good when we our creator made humans. Genesis 1

things set us free, they merely bind us into upkeep that piles on and inauthentic lives. Good grades mean you keep performing because now your identity is bound to the grades you earn. Embracing the opinions of your loved ones as your own means that you can never disagree and are bound to being a flattened stereotype. If moral platitudes are what make you good, then you can never ever be fully human because you can't have any other feelings than compassion, kindness, and willingness to "do the right thing". The problem of a "third way" of believing where Jesus is minimized and the Spirit is emphasized is that Spirit does not grant us freedom it can only enhance our freedom. It sustains the life that we are currently living, whether we are aware that this life is free or not. Moltmann says, "Man's history in its relation to the history of Christ begins with the forgiveness of sins and his being freed for new life. There can be no other beginning for the un-righteous and the unfree and the hopeless. But the beginning does not lead immediately to the end. Liberation leads to liberated life."<sup>28</sup> The Holy Spirit did not become incarnate and fully enter into our human suffering. The Holy Spirit did not die, it is eternal. God did not conquer death and reconcile the relationship between man and Godself through the Holy Spirit. Our freedom does not begin with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit might call you towards a deeper understanding of what Jesus did. You might always find yourself drawn towards the foot of the cross, but Jesus is the one that offers the red pill. Once you have entered into awareness of this liberated life the Spirit might help you from returning to the old ways of being, or keep bringing you back to moments of reconciliation. But the Holy Spirit does not free your mind.

Freedom for humanity begins on the cross. Only through an embodied God that enters into a broken world of pain can we ever be set free to exist amidst the pain because only an embodied God can actually take us by the hand and lead us through the darkness into the light,

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<sup>28</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis MN, 1977, pp. 36



not just around it. Christ himself knew this when he prayed for God to take this cup away from him<sup>29</sup>, and then on the cross proclaimed his forsakenness<sup>30</sup>. Liberation leads to a liberated life. This however is not easy. Think of the Ethiopian Eunuch. As he sat in his chariot reading the story of Jesus, Phillip shows up and asks if he understands what he is reading. But it wasn't just any story of Jesus that the Eunuch was reading, it was Isaiah 53:7-8 which reads, *"He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. Yet who of his generation protested? For he was cut off from the land of the living."* The Eunuch was reading his own story, his own life, his own suffering that was also the suffering of Jesus. The Eunuch's reality was that of being a child set apart, of being considered less than a man, but also in a position of power serving the queen so that he could not complain. He had just returned from Jerusalem where he went to worship in the temple, yet he was not allowed in. Phillip asks if he understands what he is reading. The Eunuch replies "no, how can I?" He is unaware. After Phillip tells the story of Jesus and proclaims how through Jesus' death on the cross reconciliation has been made, and we are now free. The Eunuch is now aware, he can see that his own personal story and the story of Jesus as Christ are intermingled. So he asks what is to stop him from being baptized, because he is still operating in the old frameworks of limitations. Phillip responds "nothing", and so the Eunuch is baptized. He has taken the red pill. The spoon of his reality; his gender identity, his ethnicity, his history, and his future are set free. There is no spoon. Those things that once limited him Jesus took with him on the cross. The Eunuch's life could never be the same, liberation leads to a liberated life.<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> Luke 22:42, Matthew 26:42

<sup>30</sup> Matthew 27:46

<sup>31</sup> Acts 8:24-40

This is the “cost” that I think Bonhoeffer spoke of in the *Cost of Discipleship*. That moving forward after you realize that you have been liberated costs your entire way of previously living and thinking. Hall says, “it is not all sweetness and light of Sunday morning ritual, confirmation at age twelve, pretty weddings, solemn funerals, the pageantry of state occasions. It is a quest for and a witness to truth in the midst of societies that lie....<sup>3233</sup>” With Christ we can live as liberated people whom nothing can bind, and therefore we can move through the pain of change into the newness we’ve been promised. The “through” part is crucial because it accounts for our experiences. It’s what we see happen on the cross when folks ask “if you’re God why don’t you just get down?” God moves through our death to get to new life.

I have a student named Maddie who is standing at the edge of her darkness. Living in the constant fear of what could be if she made a change. She is incredibly smart, a natural leader, and outspoken; her most notable feature is her compassion. She is the president of her Physics Club, but she is failing physics. She hates the physics even though she’s taken it for several years, and she doesn’t have a lot of time to devote to learning something she’s already so behind in. When the topic of dropping physics comes up (because at this point she doesn’t need the credit) she simply says, “I can’t do that, then I couldn’t be club president.” When I ask “why are you president of a club for a math that you hate, and also you’re failing?”<sup>34</sup> She replies, “Because I like being president, I like the people, and where else would I use these gifts for leadership?” Like a rich young ruler Maddie is stuck in an old frame work. Give up all that’s holding you back Maddie, and come and follow Christ. Maddie cannot avoid the changes that need to be made. They need to be made because she is living in the reality where bending the

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<sup>32</sup> Douglass John Hall, *The Cross in our Context*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2003, pp. 33

<sup>34</sup> This failing grade affects her GPA, which affects her potential future power. There is a lot of existential crisis surrounding the Latin club right now.

spoon is impossible. But there is no spoon, you only have to realize this truth. Her Christology is too thin to support a new way of thinking. Without Christ in her theological understanding of who God is, she will never have awareness of her own freedom and will continue to live a life bound to what the physical reality says offers freedom such as power and respect (which is, of course, always lies).

## **Conclusion**

### **Imagining a Liberated Future**

How can we move through this darkness of addiction to control and perfection, or of clinging more deeply to our perceptions about our identity more than to the crucified and resurrected Christ? How can we communally move into a new life where Jesus' divinity is a part of our young people's Christology as opposed to just his morality? Proclaiming what we have been set free from, what no longer binds us, matters. Being able to confess that we act as though our world is not liberated matters. Preaching and teaching Christ's divinity matters. Not just about his good deeds, or his life, but we also have to proclaim OUR freedom through Christ, we have to talk about the divinity of Christ made flesh, and how the reconciliation that happened on the cross echoes through every act of reconciliation we experience in our life. We have to help our congregations (and thusly our parents and young people) have an imagination about what God is doing and has done in their lives right now instead of just waiting until physical death to be brought close to God in heaven. We have to paint a picture of the liberated life, and then provide a place for young parishioners to live that life with community and accountability. Teaching parents how to express their own liberated lives to their children and how that is the work of God made flesh is vital. But this means re-framing many of our stories from tales of morality to tales of freedom. When we tell the story of the paralytic who was made to walk again

we need to be able to ask our young people to proclaim what paralyzes them, instead of asking them how they have healed the world.

Adolescents go through a stage called “pruning.” Essentially between birth through early childhood, children take in all sorts of information and building neurological pathways for information to be stored, shared, and used. This is why it’s so easy for children to learn languages simply by hearing someone speaking that language to them. However, when they reach adolescence anything that hasn’t been used in a while gets cut, which is why even if they spoke fluent Spanish as a child if they hadn’t heard the language in some time, they don’t remember it anymore<sup>35</sup>. It’s like the great Mari Kondo spring-cleaning of our brain. If we haven’t used it in a few years.... it’s getting thrown out. If our young people haven’t heard, proclaimed, asked, wondered about the incarnation of God in a few years, then guess who gets cut? The pathways that were once present to help them actually spot Christ in their lives are just no longer present. Then as our young people have to make meaning in their lives amidst cross pressure of the natural world and belief in God. The Holy Spirit does not necessarily challenge that framework; the Holy Spirit can be used to support that framework. Yet if we as Christians believe that the natural framework of our world is not the only one that exists, and that God does not break into our lives by keeping everything the same (reconciliation means change)... then we might have to say that frequently so that Christ is not pruned out of our young people’s minds from lack of use.

So let me bring us back to Susan. Susan is living a bound life. While I can tell her that she has been set free by the work of Jesus as Christ on the cross all day long. Susan is not living in that awareness. She is acting as though power, knowledge, and achieved goodness is what sets her free. Even though it is not. Susan is feeling the frustration and tension in her

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<sup>35</sup> Dan Seigal, *Brainstorm, The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain*, Penguin, New York, NY, 2013, pp. 111-115

reality longing for something more. Yet she is not capable of understanding why, and any attempt to draw attention to the need for change, or the hope that is waiting for her in the midst of that change is unintelligible because Susan's imagination for God's presence in the midst of the darkness of the world is nonexistent. Perhaps this happened during pruning. Perhaps this is because of her rejection of someone else understanding of Jesus. Or perhaps this is because her world is so infused and dependent on effort and success. Regardless of her reason why, she proclaims that there is no place in her Christology for a divine Jesus. So she's right, it is completely unbelievable. And in doing so she metaphorically swallows the blue pill. As I sit and watch her express her anxiety about her future about the possibilities of career, or her call, or that she might do it all wrong I find myself praying, "she believes, Lord help her unbelief." In the Gospel of Mark a father with a sick son seeks Jesus out for healing, because nothing else has worked. Yet even in the meeting of Christ, and the healing of his son this father proclaims his unbelief<sup>36</sup>. This I think is the starting point for Susan, Maddie, Cecily, and maybe all of us. When all other options have been exhausted, when our own effort and control have inevitably failed us, she will wonder if what is said about Jesus being both man and God could be true. Could he really set us free and offer us grace? Someone will point her in the direction, perhaps a sermon, a mentor, a friend, and she will find Christ fully human and fully divine. He will ask her how long this has been going on, and she will respond "since my childhood," and Christ will respond "You have already been made free, live as though all things are possible now," and there with amidst her own healing she will proclaim for herself "I believe, Lord help my unbelief."

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<sup>36</sup> Mark 9:14-24