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Teaching the Church Forgot:
Jesus' Blueprint for the Best Possible World.
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In the closing years of the first century, a group of messianic Jews began to move away from the greatest inspirer of change the world has known – the prophet/ teacher called Jesus of Nazareth. They gave him a new name – ‘Jesus Christ’ – and they proceeded to distort, cover up and generally domesticate, his dangerous, priceless teaching. Through a process lasting three hundred years Jesus of Nazareth, who opposed the domination of empire, became the imperial Christ. The early church had entered an alliance between a religion based on the divine Jesus Christ, and the Roman state. This mosaic, (on screen) known as the Apse Mosaic, depicts that “marriage” between church and state. The figure on the throne is the Imperial Christ, dressed in the robes of a Roman Emperor. His disciples on either side are dressed as Roman Senators. In the background is the imperial holy city of Jerusalem, rebuilt in the fourth century by the Roman emperor Constantine. Looking on approvingly from above, are representations of the four gospel writers. From that point on, the ethical and spiritual teachings of Jesus of Nazareth have been held in a contradictory, incompatible relationship with the doctrine of the divine Christ.

Since then, you and I and every Christian, have been inheritors of that ‘turning away’ from Jesus of Nazareth, toward Jesus Christ. Because of that, all of us here, and people in groups like us, meeting in or out of churches around the Western world, are looking for change. Increasingly there is acknowledgment of the need to turn back to Jesus of Nazareth. The desire to turn back to the church’s original foundation is spreading, like flood water across a plain. Its momentum is resisted by doctrinal fortresses here and there, but it flows around theological and ecclesiastical obstacles and continues its irresistible way. It flows through the hearts and minds of seekers in or out of the church, into a changing human society. To use another metaphor, this desire for change is growing like grass roots held for so long in darkness, and now pushing up into the light. How big is this potential for change? Let me tell you.

On 31st October, 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. They attacked the practice of selling ‘Indulgences’ for the forgiveness of sin. They argued for the reassignment of papal religious and political power into the hands of pastors and princes. The disruption that followed triggered wars, persecutions and the so-called Counter-Reformation, the Catholic Church’s response to the Protestants. The Protestant Reformation brought about immense change in church, state and society. Yet compared with change taking place in today’s church, I would argue that the Protestant Reformation was a blip on the radar. Despite all its disruptions and reconfiguring of theological and ecclesiastical traditions, the Protestant Reformation left the doctrines of Nicaea, and christological developments thereafter, substantially unchanged.

Today we are witnessing a second Reformation. We are not waiting for it to begin; it’s happening now! On the one hand, this new Reformation is regarded with a mixture of fear, disbelief and scorn. Reactions to it range from trying to ignore it, to attacking it with weapons of ridicule and conservative scholarly disdain. On the other hand it is welcomed, with enthusiasm, excitement and hope. The new possibilities encourage questioning the previously unquestionable; they urge negotiation of the previously non-negotiable. In short, the new possibilities are pointing to the removal of the church’s christological foundations. They are pointing to the liberation of Jesus of Nazareth and his followers from the shackles of christology. Depending on your point of view, this scale of change is SCARY, BLASPHEMOUS, UNTHINKABLE, or – ESSENTIAL!

It **is** scary to contemplate the re-formation of one of the world’s major religions. This is the ultimate ‘stepping out with the sacred’ (to quote Val Webb), and people in the pews are naturally divided in their reactions. But it is happening – as part of a natural evolutionary process. As society changes, the human organism called Christianity must also change, or fail to survive.

Some would regard it as blasphemous in the extreme, even to contemplate the end of Christology. After all, it means lifting away from Jesus the name ‘Christ’. And it means deleting christological understandings of God! Where is God the father without Christ his son? Yet countless Christian clergy and laity in Western society have been looking for this fundamental change for a long time. They have heard church members and fellow clergy express huge frustration with tradition that holds back an appropriate and necessary evolution of their faith.

But rather than create confrontation and division in the pews, church leaders have often chosen to walk softly. They have simply avoided christological

language in leadership of worship – I among them! And in my experience in ministry, nobody misses christological language! Nobody misses the ancient creeds! But on the church's official occasions, like ordinations and inductions, the Christ language remains. It lives on in traditional liturgies, especially the Eucharist, and in traditional hymns.

We understand that many clergy leaders are anxious to avoid division in the church. They are also anxious to avoid the disapproval of ecumenical partners. Because of that, ecumenism imposes a highly effective braking system on the evolution of Christianity. But in the midst of all this, more and more people are prepared and willing and even impatient, to step voluntarily away from the church's christological foundations.

Even so, it's important to remember the many people growing anxious as they watch this process of profound challenge and transition. Some are looking to church 'authorities' to explain why the old foundations are being questioned. They usually find few or no answers to their questions from leadership levels in their church. This also applies to theological colleges, which generally see themselves as defenders of the traditional faith. Rarely do we see ground-breaking theology emerging from the colleges.

So for the anxious onlookers, the evolving church looks like the rug being pulled out from underfoot, or the baby being thrown out with the bathwater. Not only that; they can see the floor and the bath-tub disappearing as well. And we know that even people who identify with the evolving church are asking, "Where are we now?" "Where do we go from here?" "What will an evolving Christianity look like 20, 30, 40 years from now?" We all feel the need to find answers to those questions. I think many of us would sympathise with the bewildered soul who wrote this little verse:

*I wish that my room had a floor.
I don't so much care for a door;
but this crawling around
without touching the ground
is getting to be quite a bore.*

So what **is** left? After removing the decaying christological floorboards, on what foundation can twenty-first century Christianity be built? I believe there is excellent reason for optimism. After the christological flooring is removed, the surest foundation of all will be revealed. This is the church's original foundation: the ethical and spiritual teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. This has always been the bedrock of the church. It always **will be** the bedrock of the church. This is the rock upon which Jesus built his vision for the world. This is the 'Jesus Way', which the church has possessed all along. When it has tried to

put it into action, the world has changed – immeasurably – for the good. When Jesus’ teaching has looked too difficult, the church has turned to its doctrine of personal salvation – the religion of Jesus the divine Christ.

The Jesus Way includes teaching which has two aims. First, to achieve humanity’s full potential. I believe that **that** teaching is encapsulated in the Beatitudes. (I’ll set that out in detail in my Workshop!) Second, the aim of Jesus’ teaching is to bring into being the best possible world. Let me make it clear right here that when I speak of the best possible world, I am not talking about a perfect world – a sort of utopian paradise. Jesus’ teachings are addressed to imperfect human beings living in an imperfect world. The teachings are designed to cope with that – with the reality of life. They are the guide to the best **possible** world, no more. But even so, there has always been a problem with embracing the teaching. Through the centuries, for many who **would** have followed him, the Jesus way has been unthinkable. Responses to calls to follow the teachings have echoed down the ages: “It’s too hard!” “How could a mere mortal do that?” G. K. Chesterton’s famous comment expressed it all: “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried!” The French writer Voltaire observed that it might be a very good thing if Europe decided to try Christianity. He was convinced that in the Christian world there had never been a serious attempt to put into practice the code of ethics set out in the Sermon on the Mount.

Chesterton and Voltaire were right on the money. The **tradition** says the teachings were given by a man who was not only fully human but fully divine. How **could** ordinary human beings follow the guidelines of Christ, the divine Son of God? Yes, we may be able to be kind to our neighbours and look after the poor. But challenging the injustice of the powerful, forgiving the unforgiveable, loving our enemies? Too hard! Thank God there’s another Jesus to believe in – the one called Jesus Christ. **This** Jesus is the assurance of forgiveness for my imperfection, based on belief that ‘Christ died for my sins’.

And make no mistake, ‘Jesus Christ’ was a gift for clergy! This is the Jesus who demands obedience to the church and its leaders. If I confess my sin every week to the priest *in persona Christi*, or in a general prayer of confession, all will be well. If things are not good in my life or the life of others now, there’s no need to do anything about it. There’ll be ‘pie in the sky’ when we die. Just believe in Jesus Christ, Son of God and Saviour, and all will be well. So – who on earth would want to let go of all that?

We know who! The millions brought up in the churches who now see all of that for what it is – a religion for infants, presided over by a tyrannical father and his long-suffering son. If I do the right thing, Jesus’ heavenly father will reward me

with heaven. If I slip up, his divine son will plead for mercy for me on the basis that he died for my sin. That kind of religion is based on the primitive morality associated with little children – the system of reward for good behaviour and punishment for bad behaviour. It also features a divine whipping boy, rescuing me from punishment by taking it on himself. Where all of this is the basis of a religion, it disempowers that religion’s adherents. The teachings of Jesus Christ the divine Son of God are so difficult that we need his death on the cross to redeem us from our inherent sinfulness – from our failure to follow him. This is a religion with a built-in guarantee of failure. Need we say it also entails an intervening, judgmental God, totally unacceptable to twenty-first century followers of Jesus.

I have said that this second Reformation is scary and for many, unthinkable. For the upholders of traditional Christianity, it is also blasphemous. We can imagine the sincere objections: “How dare you even think of changing Christian tradition about Jesus?” “Christ was sent into the world by God to die on the cross, to redeem humanity from its sin.” That – I must say – illustrates one of the pitfalls in calling Jesus ‘Christ’. It equates Jesus and Christ to the point where putting aside the Christ myth seems to mean throwing out Jesus of Nazareth, as well. Yet we hear all the time, the interchanging of the two names ‘Jesus’ and ‘Christ’. For instance: “Christ walked down the road to Capernaum”; “Jesus is the second person of the Trinity”; “Christ taught in parables”; “Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus”. And so on

Here’s an illustration of this from the Methodist writer of christological hymns, Charles Wesley. There are 58 Charles Wesley hymns in AHB, the Australian Hymn Book. This one interchanges the words Christ and Jesus. It also adds more than a touch of a militant Christianity:

*Soldiers of **Christ**, arise,
and put your armour on,
strong in the strength which God supplies
through **his eternal Son**;
strong in the Lord of Hosts,
and in his mighty power,
who in the strength of **Jesus** trusts
is more than conqueror.*

Confusion is heaped on top of confusion, when the word ‘Christ’ is used interchangeably with words for God – with the name ‘Jesus’ thrown in for good measure. Here is one of the most well-known Christmas carols in the Christian repertoire – also written by Charles Wesley. Have a look at verse 2 of ‘Hark, the herald angels sing’:

*Christ, by highest heaven adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord,
late in time behold him come,
offspring of a virgin's womb!
veiled in flesh the **Godhead** see;
hail the **incarnate Deity!**
pleased as Man with man to dwell,
Jesus, our Immanuel.
Hark! the herald angels sing
Glory to the newborn **King.***

But most confusing of all are the two terms: “**the gospel of Christ**” and “**the gospel of Jesus**”. What are they? Do they mean the same thing? People take it for granted that you know what they mean when they speak of ‘the gospel of Christ’ or ‘the gospel of Jesus’. Gospel means ‘Good News’. So, what good news? Which news are you talking about? Is it Jesus’ vision of the best possible world, or the risen Christ’s victory over death? Confusion and contradiction about the divine identity and death of Christ and the teaching of Jesus, has been sown in Christian hearts and minds for almost two millennia. And even the best thinkers contribute to this confusion. In the 19th century Leo Tolstoy wrote about the doubts of rich, educated classes in European Christian society. “Once they saw the incompatibility of the Church doctrine with the teaching of **Christ**, they found it impossible to continue to believe the Church teaching.” Yes, spot on, but surely he meant to say, ‘**the teaching of Jesus!**’

To change a religion for followers of Jesus to one which encourages faith in the God of Jesus, this second Reformation must first remove ‘the Christ’ – the idea of a Jesus who is divine as well as human. That will also remove the religious ‘cop out’. It will wipe out the excuse that it is too hard to follow Jesus because he is the divine Son of God. It will open the door – fully, to the Jesus Way. It will reveal Jesus of Nazareth’s teachings as humanly possible. It will reveal them as given by a God-inspired human being, for the guidance of other human beings. His followers will see clearly that his teachings are for imperfect human beings, living in an imperfect world on Planet Earth.

The second Reformation is essential. The myth of the divine Christ is incompatible with a religion shaped around the teaching and spirituality of Jesus. Removing the Christ myth will be the greatest catalyst for positive change since Jesus first made public his vision for the world. For example, it will be good news for the **Jewish** people. It will remove the potential for further anti-Jewish or antisemitic rhetoric, based on Jesus Christ the Son of God, killed by the Jews. Here is just one illustration of the harm which arose from Christian antisemitism. This is John Chrysostom (on screen), the fourth

century archbishop of Constantinople. He is regarded by the church as a saint. He was a renowned preacher. But his sermons included eight homilies against the Jews. Here's a small portion of one of them, where he describes the synagogue **and** the Jews themselves:

The synagogue is a criminal assembly of Jews, a place of meeting for the assassins of Christ, a house worse than a drinking shop, a den of thieves, a house of ill fame, a dwelling of iniquity, the refuge of devils, a gulf and abyss of perdition. Whatever name even more horrible could be found, will never be worse than the synagogue deserves. I would say the same things about their souls.

This is the first written record of Christian antisemitism – where all Jews are regarded as evil – simply because they are Jews. It's not surprising that Chrysostom's congregations went out from the churches to burn down synagogues, sometimes with Jews still inside them. Tragically, for centuries Chrysostom's sermons were taught to new priests.

I cannot emphasise enough the horrendous harm the church has inflicted on the Jewish people through its belief that Jesus was the divine Christ. Through two millennia the name 'Christ' has filled Jewish hearts with horror. And along with the symbol of the cross, it still sends cold shivers down Jewish spines. In Europe up until the 19th century, Christian 'tradition' at Easter included leaving the Good Friday service and finding Jews to assault or murder. Christian doctrine had left church members in no doubt that Christ was the divine Son of God. They believed that the Jews murdered Christ, which meant they murdered God. So the Jewish people have been persecuted, tortured, disinherited, dehumanised, and murdered by pious followers of Christ. And all of that underlined the Holocaust, or Shoah, as Jews call it.

The Christ myth also ensured that Christianity became a religion of fear. Through their belief in Christ, crucified for the sin of the world, countless Christians have died in fear of hell. They have tried to be good, to win a Christ ticket to heaven when they died. For nearly two thousand years, Christians have lived in terror of what might lie beyond the grave. Their religion of fear gave them no comfort when they needed it most. It side-lined Jesus' teaching about a God of love. It placed the potential for tyrannical power into the hands of church authorities. Through that doctrine of '*in persona Christi*', the clergy were claimed to have the power to forgive sin. Because of it, priests have been thought to hold the power of admission to heaven or to hell.

In this paper I have said that the doctrine of the divine Christ has robbed people of the confidence to commit to Jesus' teachings. Let me remind you of a few of those core teachings that the church forgot. First of all, let's be clear about something very important – when the church **has** remembered Jesus' teachings,

when it has focussed its gaze on **them** – it has been a powerhouse for positive change in the world. It has fed the hungry, freed the slaves, included the marginalised, worked for peace, shown compassion for the helpless and suffering, affirmed the equality of all people, and supported non-violent resistance to domination. All of this is included in following the Way of Jesus. But all the way through Christian history the teachings have been watered down by the compromises and contradictions of Christology. When people tell you that Progressives ‘water down the gospel’, don’t believe them! **This** is what watering down the gospel looks like!

In following Jesus, the church has: fed and clothed the poor.

In the name of Christ, the church has: blessed the exploitation of poor nations in the cause of empire.

In following Jesus, the church has: freed the slaves from ‘ownership’ by other people.

In the name of Christ, the church has: justified slavery on the basis that biblical texts are the literal Word of God.

The former slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass wrote about the unholy juxtaposition of the slave trade and what passed for Christianity in America. He said this: *I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Jesus. I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity. The man who wields the blood-clotted cowskin during the week fills the pulpit on Sunday, and claims to be a minister of the meek and lowly Jesus. The slave auctioneer’s bell and the church-going bell chime in with each other, and the bitter cries of the heart-broken slave are drowned in the religious shouts of his pious master. The slave prison and the church stand near each other. The clanking of fetters and the rattling of chains in the prison, and the pious psalm and solemn prayer in the church, may be heard at the same time. The dealer gives his blood-stained gold to support the pulpit, and the pulpit, in return, covers his infernal business with the garb of Christianity.*

In following Jesus, the church: regards children as natural citizens of the kingdom of heaven on earth, and has protected, nurtured, educated and encouraged them.

In the name of Christ, the church has: regarded christologically-framed institutions and their functionaries as more worthy of protection than the bodies and innocence of children.

In following Jesus, the church has: affirmed the equality of women and men, including by ordaining women to holy orders.

In the name of Christ, the church has: treated women as naturally inferior and subject to men, because ‘God is male’ and ‘Christ’ chose 12 men(!)

In following Jesus, the church has: revealed the loving God who welcomes the repentant with open arms.

In the name of Christ: the church preaches a God who demands baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ for sinners, or damnation in the fires of hell.

In following Jesus, the church has: supported non-violent resistance to unjust laws.

In the name of Christ, the church was: silent about racism and the ill-treatment of non-whites in India and the United States.

Yet we know that what looked like one of those impossible teachings – the one about ‘turning the other cheek’ – has been shown to be within the capacity of ordinary human beings. Ironically, it was a Hindu – Mohandas Gandhi, who saw the truth of Jesus’ teaching about non-violence and put it into action. He not only read, but followed, the Sermon on the Mount. However, when he went to a church in Calcutta to learn more about Christianity, he was stopped at the door by an usher. He was told he was not welcome, because it was for ‘high caste’ Indians and ‘whites’ only. He was neither. Gandhi later declared, “I’d **be** a Christian if it were not for the Christians!”

In the United States, Dr Martin Luther King Jnr became Gandhi’s pupil before he put Jesus’ teaching about non-violent resistance into practice, in the civil rights movement. It is now fifty years since Dr King gave his ‘I have a dream’ speech in Washington. But let me read to you how he described non-violent resistance in 1957: *To our most bitter opponents we say: We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws, because non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. Throw us in jail, and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory.*

Two of the greatest social revolutions of the twentieth century were accomplished without weapons and non-violently. When the church forgot this teaching, it marched off to exploit the weak through violence and build its empires – in the name of Christ!

In following Jesus, the church: speaks and acts publicly against the use of war to resolve conflict.

In the name of Christ, the church: has blessed soldiers going out to conquer and destroy.

There's no clearer illustration of this than the regimental 'colours' installed in colonial times in the churches and cathedrals of Europe.

Most of you would know that Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire after Constantine had a vision of a blazing cross in the sky, with the words *In Hoc Signo Vincet* (in this sign, conquer!). He had his soldiers paint crosses on their shields and they won the battle of Milvian Bridge. That victory led to him taking power as emperor, and conquering in the name of Christ. Christian armies have used Constantine's motto ever since. This is the colour of a regiment of the Irish Brigade – a cross with those words *In Hoc Signo Vincet*. But Christian army chaplains around the world also have a cross on their badges, with the words "In this sign, conquer"! Military chaplains who have this insignia on their uniforms include Royal Army Chaplains in the UK, and the Defence Forces Chaplaincy in Canberra! This is the Australian Army Forces Chaplaincy badge. It has a Maltese cross with those words!

New Testament scholar the late Walter Wink identified the full consequences of the church's acquiescence to norms of Empire and Just War theory. This is what he said:

The price the church paid was embracing violence as the means of preserving empire. But the removal of non-violence from the gospel blasted the keystone from the arch and Christianity collapsed into a religion of personal salvation in an afterlife jealously guarded by a wrathful and terrifying God – the whole system carefully managed by an elite corps of priests with direct backing from the secular rulers now regarded as the elect agents of God's working in history.

The teachings the church forgot – the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount about justice, compassion, inclusiveness, non-violence and forgiveness and so on, were not given to the world by Christ! They are the vision of the God-soaked human being – the disturbing, visionary teacher of the Law, called Jesus of Nazareth. Added together, his teachings illustrate the ultimate ethic for life. We call it love. And that's why so many of us want to say that Love is God. In that there lies an unlimited height and depth of spirituality for an evolving Christianity.

I'll finish on this note. We can only be grateful that along with the religion **about** Jesus Christ, the timeless teaching **from** Jesus of Nazareth has also been preserved. We can only be grateful that when it **has been** remembered, it has shed light and hope and love in the world. But it's time to put aside the

confusion. It's time to stop tinkering around the edges. It's time to put aside Christian allegiance to the religion about Christ and his tyrannical father. It's time to consign it to the museums of history as a religion of the past. It's time to turn away from a depiction of both Jesus and God that confuses, terrifies, disempowers, and divides Christians from the rest of humanity. It's time to turn fully to the God of love, revealed through the teachings of Jesus.

And the good news is – it's happening! The second Reformation is well and truly underway!

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