

Being Christian in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century  
**Beyond Convention: The Christian Life As  
 Participating in God's Passion for Transformation**

Comments on title: "beyond convention" and "God's passion for transformation"

**I. Educating about the Christian Life as *Intentional and Transformational***

\*A **negative prologue**: *being Christian is not primarily about believing a set of statements (teachings, beliefs, doctrines) to be true.* To suppose that it is about beliefs is to imagine that Jesus purpose was to bring a set of "true doctrines" – "Believe these and you'll be saved."

\***Rather, the Christian life moves beyond convention to intention and transformation.**

It is about "*a way*" (the earliest name of the movement, Acts 9.1), *a path of transformation.* Major images for "the way" as transformation in the New Testament

The gospels: *Taking up the cross*: the path of death and resurrection

Paul: *Dying and rising with Christ*

John: *Being born again*

\*Transformation is the purpose of religions (plural): at their best, they are "means of ultimate transformation" (Fredrick Streng)

\*When Christianity is grounded in its biblical base, Christianity is about a twofold transformation - of ourselves and of the world.

\*Paul in Rom. 12.1-2: "Present yourselves as a living sacrifice...Do not be conformed to *this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds*" (Rom. 12.1-2)

**II. Educating about the Transformation of Ourselves.** Christianity is about *personal transformation* in the context of Christian community. Transformation occurs ***through a deeper and deeper centering in God.*** This is what the Great Commandment means.

\*Transformation involves *practices, spiritual practices.* They are *how we pay attention to our relationship with God, center more deeply in God, and allow for the transformational work of the Spirit in our lives.* Like a human relationship, our relationship with God deepens by paying attention to it.

\*The most important Christian practices are worship and prayer. The first is most often communal, the second is often individual.

**1. The purposes of worship, the most important collective practice.**

\*Its purpose: it's *for us.* Worship is directed *to* God, of course. But it's *for us...*

1. Draws us out of ourselves

2. Opens us up

3. Formative – it forms us, in-forms us

4. Subversive. Doxology – the praise of God as the source of all blessings - is subversive (Walter Brueggemann)

**2. The purposes of prayer, the most important individual practice**

\*What prayer meant to me as a child: asking for something

\*What it means to me now: *it is about paying attention to our relationship with God.*

\***Two primary kinds of prayer: verbal and non-verbal**

\*Verbal: talking to God, whether silently or aloud

\*Non-verbal: prayer of internal silence, contemplative prayer

\*Prayer is about reminding ourselves in the dailiness of our lives of the reality and presence of God.

\*Petitionary and intercessory prayer in a non-interventionist context: a natural expression of caring and dependence

### **3. The most important individual ethical practice: compassion.**

\*Its centrality and meaning in the Bible. “Be compassionate as God is compassionate” (Luke 6.36). To be “like a womb”; to feel for others as a mother feels for the children of her womb. Not just a feeling, but a doing: “be compassionate.”

### **III. Educating about the Transformation of the World – about God’s passion for the world.** What does God love? The world – the whole of creation. John 3.16; Genesis 1

\*The social form of compassion is justice (distributive justice) and peace. This is “*God’s dream*” for the world. God’s passion for a transformed world of justice and peace is central to the OT and NT. **The prophets. Jesus: *the kingdom of God*. Paul.**

\*Justice in the Bible is primarily about distributive justice – the fair distribution of God’s earth. Our well-being – that everybody has enough - matters to God.

\*Peace in the Bible includes the ending of war

#### **1. Educating about distributive justice: the justness or injustice of economic systems**

\*The world of the Bible: the ancient domination system – its features:

\*A Bible study of the book of Amos

\*Consciousness-raising about economic justice/injustice today

\*Median income in the United States today: household is \$50K and individual is \$28K. Imagine living on that amount or less – half of people in the U.S. do.

\*The tax cuts of the last ten years have been primarily for the wealthiest 1 % - those with incomes above \$350K a year.

\*See *The Spirit Level* by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett: developed countries with the greatest income inequality (the USA and UK) have the greatest social dysfunction

#### **2. Educating about peace and non-violence for Christians today**

\*The teaching of Jesus and early Christianity for the first 300 years: non-violence

\*The emergence of “just war” theory around 400. Must be a war of self-defense, a last resort, non-combatant immunity, and the “means” used must be proportionate to the “ends” that can be accomplished.

\*Starting a war is prohibited...Pre-emptive war is wrong.

\*The danger of just-war theory: wars are too easily justified...

**\*The Christian life/way- intentional Christianity - is about a relationship with God that transforms us.** About a deepening and transforming centering in God as known in Jesus (“as known in Jesus,” is what makes it Christian, as distinct from other religions)

**Love God – and participate in God’s passion for a better world.**

**\*The meaning of faith within this vision of the Christian life:** Faith is this deepening centering in God, marked by (1) commitment, loyalty, allegiance, faithfulness to God and God’s passion as known in Jesus; and (2) deepening trust in God (trust as the opposite of anxiety). *Faith is about **loving God and trusting in God.***