
Living Eccentrically: Faith Beyond a Consumer Spirituality

Winston Dwarka Graham Persaud

New American Pathways for Refugee Resettlement, Atlanta, Georgia

My parents, May and Winston Persaud, raised my brother and me in a home in which faith was a, if not the, central disposition toward reality. But this faith was never understood to be rooted in the self, nor was its gaze solipsistically bent inward. It was, in short, eccentrically grounded and oriented to Jesus Christ. In light of this truth more embodied by my parents than pedantically and abstractly taught, I want to take this opportunity to reflect upon the meaning of faith in a consumer culture.

In practices of proclaiming the gospel in and through the community called into being by God to testify to this gospel, God's "yes" takes form as a challenge to a consumer spirituality uneasy with repentance.¹ In communities gripped by a consumerist mindset, God's yes to human beings is no longer simultaneously God's "no" to all that stands in opposition to God's will, which is simply the flourishing of human creatures. Although the promotion of a *de facto* consumer spirituality in many Christian communities is in part a genuine reaction to the manner in which talk of "sin" and "repentance" has been used to control and hurt other people, it easily ends up dovetailing with a desire not to offend potential "consumers" of the commodity of "grace" that is exchanged in the marketplace of religion. The grace to which these communities seek to witness thereby becomes a contemporary version of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls "cheap grace."² Of course, the risk of cheap grace and other distortions of the gospel message is inevitable when a Christian community that is *simul justus et peccator* seeks to respond to the Gospel faithfully. However, this does not mean that the particular challenges a consumer culture poses to faithful witness to the gospel should not be addressed.

1. This has been a major critique of so-called "seeker-friendly churches," many of whom work out of a mega-church model that purposely seeks to appeal to populations, especially within the United States, deeply formed by suburban, consumer culture. At the same time, to be fair, these churches seek to faithfully inculturate the Gospel in a particular host culture, breaking down the barriers between secular and sacred through the incorporation of various suburban elements into their witness. The problem is not with this inculturation *per se*, but on how, at least with some of those suburban practices and mentalities, heavily shaped by consumer culture, the identity of the one to whom the community seeks to witness is distorted. Inculturation becomes assimilation, losing its *metanoic* edge.

2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

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Without repenting of the ways in which possessive individualism (and the power of sin that builds upon it) distorts our lives, God's "yes" to the human being as received through the transmission of the gospel (i.e., God's commitment to calling each person into her particular vocation in spite of sin) can be understood as God also saying "yes" to the sin that impedes our flourishing. In this consumerist line of thinking, God not only affirms God's commitment to us despite our distorted desires which lead our wills to live crosswise to who we truly are "in Christ," God essentially says that those distorted desires are no problem *as they are*. To trust this "God" is to trust a God who does not care how we live, and who is therefore indifferent as to whether or not we follow God's will for our flourishing. Faith becomes other than trust in a God who adopts us as God's children despite our sin; it becomes faith in a God who affirms, or is indifferent to, our sinful state as sinners—resulting in a state that is the *opposite* of our flourishing.

The God who is the object of such faith does less than the God whose gracious “yes” is simultaneously a “no” that in faith also involves repentance. God no longer is consistent with who God is, the one whose life is a loving relationship and who will even go to the cross, overcoming sin and all that alienates human beings from God out of an unbreakable commitment to human flourishing that is communion with God. And there is no space for conversion to God’s will as part of the ongoing life of faith, one marked by trust and obedient orientation of one’s whole existence to God.

This consumer God is, however, attractive precisely because such a God undergirds the selves we already *possess*, shaped in the contemporary age by practices that discipline us toward leading possessive individualist lives.³ In globalizing capitalist practices, *the possessive power over my body and my world is what it means to be a flourishing human being*. Human language and imagery of God is sanded down to conform to some of the problematic aspects of the world postmodern societies seek to build. Thus, to repent not only dispossesses us of who we seek to be outside of God’s will, it dispossesses us of a disciplined notion of the self and the source of our identities that is at the heart of the modern and now postmodern capitalist project. It becomes the death of a powerful, but often unrecognized vision of secular human flourishing consisting of the heroization of the acquisitive self’s journey of self-ownership, pursuit of narrow self-interest, and self-determination. In light of historical disciplinary forces, in our case those belonging to the dominant practices of a globalizing capitalism, unbelief manifests itself in a solipsistic closing in on oneself, a possessive attitude toward the self, as one’s own “thing” to do with as one sees fit. I have argued that within globalizing capitalism, this takes the form of powerful pressures toward possessive individualism.

A critic might respond here that even if it is indeed problematic to preach a gospel that ends up offering cheap grace, my insistence on repentance introduces a notion of economic exchange into human beings’ relationship with God—and that this is just the kind of relationality that is colonizing more and more areas of life through global capitalist practices. To this I would respond with a forceful “no.” Both repentance and faith are gifts of the Spirit. Or, perhaps better put, faith is a gift of the Spirit that involves repentance. To trust in God’s “yes,” a “yes” that is also a “no” in spite of sin, is to receive forgiveness, and this necessarily involves repentance. This “necessarily” is not about God needing repentance as payment for the gift of God’s grace. Rather, “to receive forgiveness for a sin is impossible without knowing that sin for which one is being forgiven; and to know something one has done as a sin is to reject it as incompatible with one’s identity

3. Alternatively, one could refer to this God as the god of therapy. Not that therapy is bad; far from it. What is problematic is the notion of a God who is instrumental to our self-defined need for healthy adjustment to the expectations of our social contexts. For a Christian theological response to contemporary popular spirituality and the therapeutic culture see, L. Gregory Jones, “A Thirst for God or Consumer Spirituality? Cultivating Disciplined Practices of Being Engaged by God,” *Modern Theology* 13 (1997): 3–28.

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as a child of God by repenting of it.”⁴ To be forgiven *necessarily* involves “knowing the sin for which one is forgiven, which, in turn, *necessarily* involves rejecting it as one’s identity as a child of God by repenting of it.”⁵ This is simply part of what it means to receive the *gift* of faith.

Failure to proclaim the good news as an “in spite of sin,” and failure to recognize that God’s “yes” is also God’s “no” to all that opposes God’s will—all the forces that conspired against the one in whom that will is known, Jesus, and which culminate in his crucifixion—is to lose forgiveness, and thus to lose the ability to reject and repent of that for which one is being forgiven. In turn, it is also a failure to identify Jesus as the Christ since he is the one whose life, death, and resurrection is God’s “yes” and God’s “no” in spite of human sinfulness.

The risk of failing to identify Jesus as the Christ can be seen in the emphasis in a consumer culture on faith-in-and-of-itself, often conceived in terms of a positive emotional state, rather than on the one to whom faith is directed, the one in whom we have faith and from whom we receive faith. Properly speaking, faith is defined by its object. As N.T. Wright puts it:

The word ‘faith’ functions like the word ‘view’ in the sentence ‘Do you have a view from your room?’: it is

4. Ian McFarland, *In Adam’s Fall: A Meditation on the Christian Doctrine of Original Sin* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 196.

5. McFarland, *In Adam’s Fall*, 196.

defined in relation to its object. The ‘view’ from the room is not something you possess. It consists precisely in being able to see the distant scene. The ‘faith’ in Paul’s sense is not valued for a ‘quality’ it possesses in itself. It is defined entirely by, and in terms of, its object. It is what it is because it looks away from itself, and looks towards, and leans all its weight upon, the single act of the one God in the Messiah.⁶

Focus on faith in-and-of-itself, as a manifestation of a solipsism in consumer religion leads Christian communities to shift their focus away from the one with which they have to do, and in whom and from whom they receive their very identity as *church*. While the ability to identify Jesus as the Christ, to identify his hypostasis as the *Logos*, is a gift of grace, and, furthermore, while the identity of the Christ is not reducible to an account of his acts (since “the Gospels close with a—double!—recognition that all such accounts of his identity are inherently incomplete”), what Jesus says and does are still “marks of his status” for his disciples.⁷ For the church, to fail to more than superficially identify Jesus as the one who was killed because of our sinful rejection, to fail to sit with that cosmic fact, and instead to focus on the act of faith, as if that act were itself the object of faith is to fail to encounter the one who calls us to repentance so that we might flourish.

An inattention to the object of faith in place of faith-in-and-for-itself easily leads to a focus on faith as private, something associated with inner feelings or discrete experiences of emotional ecstasy. This results when there is a failure to identify Jesus as one who lived out his identity *publicly*, his will turned toward the Father in his embodied, active life. Of course, the language of “inner” is not intrinsically problematic, nor need discrete experiences of emotional ecstasy or positive feelings that accompany faith be disparaged. But when the object of faith is reduced to these experiences rather than seen as a full-bodied trust in what God has done in Jesus—the one whose faith was lived out in full obedience to the Father and who is the risen Christ living in ongoing relationship to the community—*then* the Christian community’s understanding of faith becomes distorted.

Faith involves an ongoing life lived in trust, which, in the terms of this study, involves being dispossessed and repenting of our possessive individualistic orientations, as we encounter in Word and Sacrament God’s unyielding commitment to our particular calling in Christ’s body that is our flourishing. The life of faith, of course, involves *experience*, all experience in fact; but its object, its focus, cannot be reduced to special *experiences*. Trust in God is directed to God’s gracious forgiveness and acceptance in Jesus Christ, and

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this is an orientation that is to pervade all of one’s life, in all the realms that we inhabit and in all times of life, including in the economic and political: it is not reducible to “inner” feelings of the heart elicited by the “presence” of Jesus.

Faith as an inner experience of the heart also dovetails with a reduction of the Spirit to interior experiences. While, as David Kelsey reminds us, “the Spirit is regularly characterized both as persons’ environing context always already there and enveloping them, and as intimately interior to them, the images of intimate interiority have had,” he goes on to state, “perhaps, the most powerful impact on the language of popular piety and on the more formal language of liturgy.”⁸ This does not mean, of course, that the language of interiority is inherently problematic. In fact, the metaphor of “inner” or “inside” often serves as a means to highlight the thoroughgoing and transformative work of the Spirit, which reaches to the *deepest* dimensions of the human person in aligning her will in Christ with that of the Father. As Oliver O’Donovan puts it, “human willing and working are made possible by the divine work ‘within,’ which brings the free human agency to expression.”⁹

It is when the language of inwardness becomes absorbed into modern subjectivism that it becomes problematic. It can then lead to the belief that the Spirit is not about public, bodily transformation, but works merely on some purportedly “inner belief” or a “disembodied soul” rather than the dispositions, affections, and desires of the embodied identities of human persons, embedded in mutual dependency and vulnerability.¹⁰ Alternatively, the Spirit

6. N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 952.

7. Ian McFarland, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 104. Also see McFarland, *The Divine Image: Envisioning the Invisible God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005). For a classic statement regarding Jesus’ identity as his enacted life see Hans Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

8. David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 444.

9. Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 106.

10. Kathryn Tanner points out how the emphasis on the Spirit’s work as operating “upon the interior depths of human persons, apart from the operation of their own faculties” is also a strategy to “ensure

“becomes an unexamined blanket-word to cover a whole range of rich but too-fleeting experiences which may or may not be real (that is true),” rather than transforming publicly lived, embodied life that is not restricted to special experiences but includes the quotidian.¹¹

Such a truncated picture of the Spirit combined with a focus on faith-in-and-of-itself, isolated from the Jesus who calls a person, time and again, can lead the individual to barricade herself against the unexpected, and thereby to ignore the newness of life that is lived out in repentance, that takes the form of ongoing listening and discernment of the object of faith, and in an obedience that shapes all aspects of bodily desire as one lives in the world with others. Without an ongoing life of hearing the gospel, the good news that calls us to repentance and renewed life in the Spirit, “Jesus” becomes the name of a static “presence” who satisfies one’s desires, a projection that affirms one’s projects as they are, or endorses pride in faith or piety. “Jesus,” in short, becomes a possession owned by the self.

In sum, I have sought in this reflection to introduce an account of faith defined by repentance that interrupts a consumer spirituality that is bereft of repentance, and in which God is made a “possession” due to a human desire for legitimation or authorization of the self’s untransformed needs and the heroization of the acquisitive self’s journey of self-ownership, pursuit of narrow self-interest, and self-determination. By contrast, repentance and faith are elicited as a gift of the Spirit in response to God’s “yes,” rather than being deployed by the individual to “buy” God’s favor in a *quid pro quo* exchange. Finally, I have emphasized the intentionality of faith (i.e., its being directed towards an object who is none other than Christ) in order to interrupt consumer spirituality’s focus on faith as an occasional inner emotional experience.

It was this understanding of faith that has marked my parents’ witness as long as I can remember. For this I am grateful, both to them and ultimately to the God in whom they have lived their lives in trust.

moral probity and infallible certainty of religious insight.” See Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 274.

11. David Tracy, as cited in Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000), 116. Williams himself goes on to write, “if the role of Spirit is communication, in a narrowly ‘linear’ sense, whether by ecstatic vision or noetic purity, an impoverished and abstract concept of the actual texture of Christian life and experience is likely to result.”

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