

Trinity Institute, *The Good News Now – Evolving with the Gospel of Jesus*

Good evening. Thank you, David, for the great presentation, and thank you, Trinity Institute, for inviting me. I want to start by just giving you a little bit of where I'm coming from, how I come to you. First and foremost, I want to share that I come to you as a convinced Trinitarian. And what that means is that it's not so much that I believe in the Trinity as much as I just perceive it everywhere. It's the way I understand all of what we're experiencing to be structured. Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Past, present, future. Object, image, word. Formless, form, and discerning consciousness. And that's one I will stay with for my response.

I also come to you as an Episcopalian, and for me that means what I desire you to take away from that is that I firmly believe that God is touching materiality and form. Not just touching it, but infused in it, and that actually all of form, that which has a shape, has a delineation, being, that actually God's already in it. For Episcopalians we may describe that as sacramentality, and maybe have certain ways in which that is shared or illuminated by the church, but I believe that's actually everywhere. And I'm also coming to you as a Pentecostal, someone who believes in the active presence of the Holy Spirit, someone who believes that God, through the Holy Spirit, is intervening. And I also come to you as someone who practices contemplative spirituality, and as a big part of my ministry, precisely with, mostly, actually, people who are spiritual, but not religious, I'm doing Christian, and broadly speaking, contemplative spirituality, and helping other people to grow in those practices, and have an authentic spiritual encounter.

My thought for this evening, in response to David, is that I want to ask what is the evolutionary next step for religion. Is religion itself an evolutionary process? Not just something that assists culture, but itself an evolutionary process. I would suggest that it is, and, if so, then what is it an evolutionary process of? And this is the theory I'm working with at the moment, and I say that purposefully, because as someone who follows the spirit, it's more like jazz than it is like classical music. When someone asks someone who is aligned with the spirit, what is God's plan, the answer isn't some sort of clear body of things, and delineated experiences, and plans, and structures. For the person who follows the spirit, the answer is the spirit is the plan.

I give to you the idea that religion is the evolutionary process of the spiritual enlightenment of form. Form. Form is in conversation with formlessness. As we would say in the Christian tradition, the Father and the Son. The Father for formlessness. The Son for form. As it says in Colossians, of Christ, Christ is the image of the invisible God. So if form is something like symbol, even the words I'm speaking are form, they're delineated, it's one sound and not another. It's not all

sound. Materiality. The shape of things. Delineation.

On the other side is formlessness, expansion, absoluteness, infinity, without shape. And then in that conversation, of course, is the spirit, discerning consciousness. The capacity to look into form and see the infinity that is represented by the particularity. The ability to look in formlessness, look in infinity, look in shapelessness, and see the possibility of a form, a shape, a delineation that can somehow relate to this, communicated, and when that's perfect, when that relationship is absolute, we say that is the incarnation of that thing. Christ is the incarnation of the image of the Father. Somehow this particular person, particular time in place, with a circumscribed culture, and particularity of experience, a sense of limit, a human being, somehow can be the image, can be seen as the incarnation of something that's limitless and absolute.

The reason why Christ can do this is because of the spirit. He is the anointed one. That's what Christ means in Greek. But anointed by what? By the discerning consciousness who's able to keep him in alignment, keep him able to express fully what he is the symbol of. The reason why I say this and concentrate on form in this moment is because religions use forms, and we heard this ... what David is talking about in phenotype/symotype, those are forms, and you can have lots of different forms that then can create an almost infinite number of permutations. But I say "almost," because there is a limit. It's a form. Forms have the possibility of revealing the formless.

We see this, actually, in some of the things that we describe as holy, and I will give you three examples. The Bible, say a holy place, like a church, or a place that is a pilgrimage place, and then icon. What I mean by "icon" is specifically from the Eastern Orthodox tradition, a painting, which they would not describe it as a painting, but a painting, in which you can look into the painting, and what they will say is you're looking into a window that goes past the painting into a spiritual reality. Holy things. These are things that we choose to say, if you connect with these things, something may happen to you.

For those of you who read the Bible, or know someone reads it regularly, this experience of reading the same text that you've read like a few years ago, and something completely different happening. The same text somehow shining out, something beyond the reality of just the words themselves. Those of us that deal with religion, we deal with forms, and some of those forms we call to be holy, which we're saying are different from other forms, because these are the forms that if you engage them, something will happen. This is a window into something.

So what I would suggest is that what we have been doing, what religion, in general,

has been doing, and we've done this even with Christ, who is a form, we have asked people to look at the form and receive what I would describe at this moment, illumination. The form participates in a divine reality, and you engage the form, and the form shines upon you information, inspiration, et cetera. But it doesn't mean that we are actually participating in what the form, the holy form participates in. We are illuminated by it. When we worship God from a distance, when we worship Christ, and not become Christ, we're actually receiving the illumination, but we're not receiving spiritual enlightenment. And that was the other part of the definition, so I want to define that term.

Spiritual enlightenment means that the form completely participates in the formless reality of which it is the image of. Without resistance, with complete clarity, you can look at the icon and you will see the truth of the spiritual scene or the saint, and the saint, if enlightened, is sending the light of God right through to you, that that is the experience of enlightenment, that you're actually within the circle, the *perichoresis*, the moving back and forth, the dance of the Trinity. Not the form, outside, looking in, but the space between the form and formlessness, the space between Christ and the Father. That is spiritual enlightenment.

It says in 1 John 3:2, "We are children of God now, but what we are has not yet been revealed, but when He," as in Christ, "is revealed, we know this, that we shall be as he is." Somehow the being like Christ is somehow connected to -- revelatory of -- our own understanding of Christ, that we can't completely perceive what is the divinity of Christ, what is the divinity of the form that was the image of the invisible God, without ourselves participating in the same process, the same anointing that Christ participated in.

So the question then is: Well, what does religion do, what can it do to move from a place where we offer, and even in this conference we say, the good news, as if the good news itself, the form, the story, which is like the text, that the story actually was the same as participating in God. This evolutionary step is difficult, because we've gotten used to becoming masters of the forms. And I say this particularly of Episcopalians, because we do a really good job of that. And it's part of what my attraction was to this church. But the problem that we face now is that spiritual illumination doesn't give you the power of Christ. It lets you see, but it doesn't let you actually participate.

Now I'm going to say something that is interesting to read and is controversial, but I think will actually illuminate something here. In the Gospel of John, Chapter 14, it says that Jesus says of himself, "I am the way, the truth, and life. No one comes to the Father except through me." If we hear this another way, if we hear it in its Trinitarian sense, it is form saying you cannot reach formlessness except through

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form, and this I can tell you right now is true, and I see this all the time with people who have no form to work with. They have spirituality, but they have no form. Religion is to spirituality what language is to thinking. We all thought as babies, and at some point we develop language, mostly to communicate with other people, and let them know what we wanted, right, but then at some point we turned that capacity of language onto ourselves, and we met ourselves. We talk to ourselves all the time. Maybe not out loud, but we reflect. That's part of who we are. We reflect on ourselves, with language. We even dream in language.

But there is a point of experience that's beyond language that when we hit that, and we cannot say anything about what we're experiencing, we know it's profound, and it's not the kind of profundity that's prior to language, where basically we were ignorant of how to put what we felt into assemble. It's after we went through form, and then we ran into something that was truly profound that we had nothing to say. It is only the person who has gone into the depths of religion, into the forms, but then has moved past them, that we're able to see the truth of the fullness of God, and the forms that were representing God in the world, what they do. As 1 John says, we have not seen our true selves, and when Christ is revealed we will see ourselves. We have to move through the form, the gate of Christ, into the relationship with the Father, with formlessness in the spirit.

So this is my question to you now: If we're a group organism, what kinds of processes are available as a clergy person or as church as a whole, in our relationship with the body of people, of how they engage our forms? What is our relationship to the forms themselves? Do we believe that if we hand someone a story or the Bible, that's the same thing as actually giving them access to God? Because that's what we need. Medium term species survival is at stake, and we need to participate in God so that we can turn around and reengage the forms that we have with the power of God.

I'll leave you with this last thought. If we must enter the gate and move past the form, what we discover when we have an encounter with the scripture, or with a building, or with an icon, is a discovery that what's true of the Book, what's true of the icon, what's true of the church – that you can go to any particular place and have a different experience each time you come, that we are a form, that the ultimate form of religion that is to be caught up into the spiritual enlightenment is ourselves.

Our deployment of the holy forms that we have in this next step of religion I suggest is actually the possibility of teaching the possibility that what you see is true of the Book can be true of you. The Book is illuminated, because it participates in God, and you can be illuminated to the point that people, when they run into you, it is as if they are running into an icon, it is as if they are running into the Bible, that you've been permeated, drenched, infused, inflamed, inflamed with the divine fire, with the

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Holy Spirit, the fire that burns, but does not consume. And when religion itself – the process of deploying our liturgies, traditions, the ways we gather people – when those processes actually become themselves enlightened, which requires us as the ones who are deploying them, both the people and the clergy, to move into ourselves, into this experience, to move past the gate of Christ and go towards the Father, and then turn around and see what Christ really was, who's also beckoning us to be as he is. And what is he, the anointed one, one who's staring into the face of the spirit, as it says in 2 Corinthians 3, the ones who engage the spirit, who are in her light, change from glory to glory.

So God is a process, because no one more than the Father and the Son have been participating in that gaze, and we are being invited into that. Then, maybe then, if we do so, we will discover that we ourselves are the very forms of religion that we seek to deploy, and then maybe then those of us in the world, who are looking for something that feels authentic, feels actually transformative, something that promises our transformation, rather than simply our illumination, will be, in fact, attractive. This is my response.