

# **Ministering To 'Recovering Christians'**

**Constructive Theology**

**Final Paper**

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## Forward - Four Years Later

I was honored when Joe and Geoff at "Two Bald Pastors" asked for a copy of this paper - my Master's Thesis for my M.Div. degree from Chicago Theological Seminary - making me feel both humbled and frightened. Humbled because it's always nice when someone wants to read something you've written - even more so when you only made passing reference to it during an interview. But frightening because, well, I've changed a lot since I wrote this. That was four years ago. Back then I was looking forward to being a pastor, now I've just completed my exams to officially become a PhD student. Back then I knew pretty clearly what I wanted - now for all my fire I'm pretty much up in the air, though I have a BIT of an idea of where I'm going.

So in order to plug any holes, I sat and read this thing cover-to-cover, which I haven't done since maybe May or June of 2012, and collected my thoughts in order to add a word or two before sharing it with others. In some respects, as will those of you who download this, I prepared this little one-page blurb I was reading this as if for the first time. So it seemed right and salutary to give a foretaste of what was coming, and maybe to make some apologies.

My first apology is that, yes, this is very much a sophomoric work - which kind of explains why I got a B+ on it. The thoughts and theology are predictably sequential and I didn't do a lot of serious thought on how to creatively synthesize my observations of the theologians I chose (Luther, Bonhoeffer, Soelle, Park, and McFague). To be dreadfully honest, too, I think the only things really worth reading in it are the "Context and Commitments" where I stake out my roots and claim the mantle of theologian, the "Methodology" where I mapped out a "how," and the "Ministry" section - the last major section of the paper where I propose some responses. I'd even thought about giving only these three chapters - along with this forward - just to save everyone the time.

But what do I like about it? Firstly, the stories I shared - stories from so many beautiful people wounded by the church in the most horrific ways possible; stories that still make me cry. Getting a chance to review some of my favorite theologians and my first serious thoughts on them (especially Soelle and Bonhoeffer - so alike, so dissimilar, and so complimentary that I think I'd like to teach a class on their convergence one day) is another reason why I like it, too, as that five months of reading and writing really set the tone for much of what I've written since. But most importantly, hell, I have to give some credit to the poor guy who spent hours reading and reading and reading and flailing through the thing that would determine whether or not he graduated. And I have to say, despite its roughness, man - that guy sure gave it his all. So I have to give him props. This shit ain't easy.

So I hope you enjoy. And if you have any comments or questions, feel free to contact me via [fherrera@lstc.edu](mailto:fherrera@lstc.edu) or my blog, [www.loveasrevolution.blogspot.com](http://www.loveasrevolution.blogspot.com), or @PolyglotEvangel.

In the most precious name of Jesus,

Francisco Herrera  
Chicago, Illinois  
5/19/2016

## Context and Commitments

I first heard the term 'Recovering Christian' from a young man I met in January of 2005 during my first weeks in Chicago. 'Jordan' worked at local jewelry store where I would escape the daily frustrations of my job-hunting. Being new to Chicago I was often lonely, and his honest conversation made me feel seen and understood during those early, stressful days. Then one day we got to talking tattoos. I had some, all Christian-based (a 'Jesus Fish' on my chest and Coptic crosses on my wrists and feet), and when he gave me a closer look at his I noticed that his right arm sported an intricately drawn parchment scroll with Hebrew lettering. When I asked him about it, he told me it was an excerpt from Psalm 139 : 7 - 10, and he recited dutifully:

*Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.  
If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.*

But more striking than the tattoo itself was the way he recited the lines for me, his resonant baritone heavy with wonder and pain. Sensing a little lower layer, I asked him why he chose Psalm 139. "Well," he started, "I consider myself a 'Recovering Christian.' I was raised in a very conservative church in the southwest, in New Mexico, and as I got older - well - I just couldn't take it any more. So I have this tattoo as a reminder to myself. I still love God, I still love Jesus - but I don't know what that much means anymore." He then spoke more about his family, his life since leaving home, and the peace he had now. By all appearances, and his own surface testimony, his life was a good one. He had a wonderful girlfriend, a good job, and was in school. But a deep sadness lurked behind his surface contentment, and it was never clearer than

when I started talking about my call to enter seminary and become a pastor - so much so that after our fifth or sixth chat I stopped mentioning it all-together.

It's interesting that Jordan saw his 'condition' as being similar to people in 12-Step programs. 'Recovering Alcoholic' or 'Recovering Addict' is a term that people in Alcoholic's Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous use as a way to describe both their vulnerability as well as their vigilance towards their condition. They are never 'cured' of being an alcoholic or a drug addict, merely in a state of 'recovery' where - regardless of how long they have been sober - the possibility of relapse is acknowledged as constant. It may seem a bit disparaging, to call people who were wounded by the church as 'recovering,' since the wounds of Recovering Christians were virtually never self-inflicted. They hadn't been put into recovery because being in church had made them abusive and self-destructive, but because some church in their past had neglected or abused them. But I have to admit, the term 'recovering' does fit for Christians like Jordan and the others of whom I'll speak in this paper. As with others 'in recovery' this pain is a part of their identity with which they wrestle everyday, and the process of healing church wounding carries just as much raw emotion as the healing of one's alcoholism or addictions - and is likely as painful and potentially toxic.

As the years went on, I met more and more people like Jordan. Most everyone that knew me knew I was in seminary, and when among friends at open-mikes or parties, I'd often be asked share my thoughts on the Bible, the Church, God, and Jesus, and explain why I had chosen the path that I did. And just as often other 'Recovering Christians' would then share their stories with me, the energy and passion of their narratives just barely masking a subterranean grief. They were often appreciative for the chat, though. A few even told me "If you were a pastor I would *so*

go to your church." It was nice to receive such a compliment and I took it as subtle confirmation that I had somehow reached them, and had maybe helped to heal them of some of their pain.

But these interactions came to a head in early 2008 after a series of open-mike performances of chapters from the Gospel of Mark. Some were put off by my enthusiasm, but many were intrigued and even moved. People I'd known for a year or two would unexpectedly come to me in gratitude, share their own stories of being a 'Recovering Christian,' and then thank me for bringing the Gospel to one of their usual 'hangs.' Invariably, I started hearing the "If you were a pastor..." line more and more. And finally one night, one of them looked at me and asked flat out: "So Cisco, why don't you form a church?" That's when it hit me. All those people saying they would come to a church where I pastored was more than just a compliment. It was a call.

As a first step, I thought about forming a prayer group and used my final paper for Scott Haldeman's Ritual Studies class as a way to develop some kind of structure to get us started. While doing research, a colleague recommended that I speak with a man named Ryan Marsh, pastor of The Church of the Beloved, an 'emergent' church outside of Seattle, Washington. I'd originally wanted to pick his brain about how his community formulated ritual, but as he eased into the story of his own church he let slip a glimmer of insight that would eventually become my *idee fixe*:

*Here we were, a bunch of people who had a beef about Church who were trying to form a church – the irony was enormous. But when we started talking it was immediately apparent that we knew much more about what we didn't want than what we did want. And before we could even do that, we had to learn how to carry one another's grief – and start to heal old wounds – before we could move on.*

This was certainly true of my group and his story gave me pause. For as much as they would say they would go to a church that I pastored, I only had a vague idea as to what that

would be. If I were to follow this call then I had to make sure that the theology of this church could respond to their specific pains, to their unique longings, and have the space and the means to heal it. Many of those who would likely become members of this church had been deeply disillusioned and wounded, even terrorized, by previous church communities. And if I wished to be a genuine vehicle for the Holy Spirit, helping to bring Recovering Christians back into communion with God and themselves, I could not risk creating yet another community that would start with grand visions and end in failure and disillusionment. I didn't want to repeat the cycle.

And this is where my story starts to over-lap with theirs. Longing for community has played a major role in my life because I've so rarely had it. I come from a large family, but since I'm the youngest of six (by ten years) in a family irrevocably wrecked by a horrific divorce (my father raped two of my three sisters and was bloodily abusive to my oldest brother) there wasn't much of my family left by the time I was 4. When I started elementary school we - meaning my mother and me, as all of my sibs had left home by then - were also poor and in order to keep the specter of homelessness somewhat at bay we had to live in roach-infested apartments. School was also hard - as I spent most of my years in elementary school bullied and even had to seek counseling when I was 11 to cope with the stress. And though my mom worked a lot money was often scarce. Sometimes she even had to have sex to pay for bills and other necessities. It didn't help that between my mom's work, my mom's lack of money to pay for baby-sitters, and the shattered condition of my family, starting from the age of about seven I spent many, many hours at home alone by myself - my only contact with my family through phone-calls to my mom's work or my sisters when I got too lonely.

But what made this even worse was that what sense of home I *did* have was further disrupted by an abusive boy-friend that my mother kept in our lives from when I was 10 to almost 15. Alcoholic and probably bi-polar, from the age of from the age of 10 to 13 he unsettled and confused my life by vacillating between supporting and guiding my gradual entry into maturity and terrorizing me when my mother wasn't around. My only oasis of nurturing and safety throughout these years came thanks to my oldest sister, with whom I spent weekend and sometimes week-long get-aways - with a precious circle of friends and a happy life completely removed from my 'real' life at home with my mother. But despite giving me a much needed break from the hardships at school and home, those escapes didn't happen all that often and much of the time I was sad and lonely and often lived in fear.

Consequently, from the age of eight I had to learn how to cope with a very difficult life, and ultimately any sense of internal peace or safety I had I largely made for myself. That obligatory independence, in the long-run, did have some positive effects. I became very independent from a young age. From living in fear of the boyfriend's mood swings I learned how to read people well and developed a deep sensitivity to others' feelings. And in large-part to make up for how much they couldn't be around, my mother and oldest sister gave their full support to all of my extra-curricular pursuits: Theatre, Debate and Forensics, Music, and the Boy Scouts - further blessing my personal independence and the validity of my choices in life. It was also in these activities that I first started finding direction and community - eventually culminating in my choice of music as under-graduate metier, and my eventual move to Geneva, Switzerland to study orchestra conducting in September of 1999.

But by this time, the wheels of my life were slowly turning towards entering ministry. My move to Europe - jumping again into the void of total, rootless independence - led to a serious reading of the Bible and renewed interest in faith and a search for community. My prayers were finally answered in October of 2001 when I discovered the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Geneva. Not only were they the eclectic and challenging community I'd craved my whole life (the parishioners came from 47 different countries and spoke 39 different languages), but they abounded in love and patience. Through them I finally experienced not only true community, but true *belonging*. I finally had people with whom I could share my deep pains and anxieties, my hopes, and they in turn shared theirs. I had endless outlets for my energies - outlets that allowed me to explore other talents and other passions. And how they loved me! They embraced *all* of who I was and accepted and loved and challenged me in ways that helped to heal my loneliness and give guidance and insight to help mold the man I was becoming. And even though I haven't worshiped with them for six years, my time with them made in me a deep reservoir of peace and strength that has sustained me through many dark moments since my return to the US. Thanks to them I know how a fully-embracing and vibrant church community can renew and restore the soul, and I am eager to recreate and share that experience for Recovering Christians.

And finally, I do this out of a sense of duty - both as one who has experienced the healing power of the Church and as someone pursuing ordination. Recovering Christians are everywhere.

*Everywhere.*

And though there are many in the Church who understand the need to reach out to them I have yet to see anyone really tackling it. Though they may be in 'recovery,' Recovering Christians are still first and foremost Christians and as such the Church is beholden to them for

the pain that it has inflicted upon them. And it is my hope to bring a balm to their souls, bringing back into the light their faith in God and Jesus and exorcising the demons of abuse neglect that shrouded their faith with darkness.

## **Methodology**

Now having a rough definition of Recovering Christians, I next had to find a way to more concretely relate their needs to the format of my constructive. Eventually I realized that since I was using this paper as a theological groundwork for a new church, I chose to focus on Recovering Christians *who have expressed the desire to return to a religious community (maybe or maybe not a Christian one) if they found one that was right for them.* I then re-examined the many stories - ultimately identifying two broad needs which such a church would need to address if it were to be both fully concordant with Recovering Christians' need for community as well as provide an environment that might help to heal their 'church trauma.'

The first basic need I identified is found among Recovering Christians who left the church because they essentially out-grew it. In essence the parting occurred *when the church failed in its response to their personal growth* - the depth of loss of these Recovering Christians being naturally greater the deeper their engagement before the estrangement. Though not specific only to them, their hope/need in returning to a church community is *to feel acceptance and affirmation of the person they were becoming and have become.* This observation first became clear to me one Saturday morning after chatting with a young man - 'Jean' - at a local Starbucks.

"My family is Presbyterian," he started, "but we have roots in Protestantism that go all the way back to the Huguenots." Spirituality had always been very important in his life and in the life of many of his family. But similarly, "because [his] ancestors had been persecuted before," their involvement with Church walked side-by-side with a ever-weary eye towards the abuses of organized religion. He then shared the root story of his personal distrust - a Sunday school lesson

taught by his own godfather. "He told us that God didn't want us to see PG-13 movies. He said that God would be angry at us if we did this, or Jesus would be sad if we did that, and he just gave us all these lists of things not to do. After that, I told my mom: 'I'm not going to Sunday school anymore. That is *not* what God means to me!" And mom readily agreed. He would never again return to that Sunday school, choosing instead to attend worship with his parents. Yet as he grew so did his questions and frustrations and he ultimately stopped attending church all together by his junior year in high-school. But despite all this he still feels a call to worship in community - a call that has increased as his studies in counseling and personal sense of mission continued to deepen.

Many times have I heard this story. For some, it was the way they dressed, for others the questions they asked, still more slow burning feelings of the Church's irrelevance undermined the faith and trust they had in both mentors and their teachings. But for all of these, simple acceptance of who they had become, or at least a willingness to withhold judgment as they changed and grew, might have done wonders not only for their own sense of well-being and self-worth, but also their relationship to church. When going through major change in life, unconditional acceptance and support are precious, and to have such support compromised or withheld in times of personal change is terribly damaging. And it is being able to find such a space again, a space of blessing and embracing of the person-they-have-become, that these particular Recovering Christians hang their hope of returning to church.

Then there's 'Rochelle.'

Passionate in all she does, Rochelle is praised by friends and colleagues and loved profoundly by her husband and daughter. As a woman of deep faith, too, she has a drive, clarity,

and compassion that make her a great 'strength and refuge' for many who know her. She's also an incest survivor, having endured the ages of 12-16 being raped by her step-father. And though she overcame the unimaginable betrayal she experienced at his hands - and the initial anger and denial of her extended family - the betrayal of her church continues to rankle decades later.

"I had loved God, had served the (Roman Catholic) Church and had thought they would protect me." They offered her comfort and support, but her bubble quickly burst when she realized "the only thing they really cared about was that [she] didn't tell anyone." Though her faith in God and Jesus didn't waver ("I prayed so hard those days") she had an inner falling-out with the church. And though she eventually recovered some of her youthful attachment, old wounds were gashed anew when an exposed child-molesting priest presided at her daughter's first communion. From that point on, she resigned herself of ever returning to the faith of her youth, let alone finding a church home. "The lack of understanding of Jesus was too much. The lack of love was just too much. And I just couldn't stand to be a part of something so hypocritical."

Rochelle's story thoroughly illustrates the second major goal for a church that hopes to minister to Recovering Christians. The root of her estrangement from church is *betrayal* and Recovering Christians who share her needs search for *a space to mourn so that they may be healed of their pain*. As with Jean, Rochelle had a deep life of faith that engaged everything - her family, extended family, school, and friends. But because of being either in a time of overwhelming personal pain or out-and-out targeted and excluded by the Church, those who share Rochelle's need carry a deep wound that was inflicted by a community that had once protected them, guided them, nurtured them. And in order for this wound to heal, they must be

given a space where they may drain an abscess of long-festering anger, sadness, and hurt - then and only then, can the wound begin to heal. And until they find a community that will help them pick-up where their previous community failed them, that betrayal and the pain it left behind is not likely to heal - neither fully nor in part.

It is a *very* tall order - developing a ministry to match the specific needs of people like Jean and Rochelle. But I am called to do something, so this paper is my blue-print. In the first weeks of the class Dr. Schneider told us we had to have a clear idea of who we were, on whose behalf we were writing, and what audience we hoped to reach - but my audience is two-fold. I'm writing this constructive in part to raise the issue of ministering to Recovering Christians to the Church at-large in the hopes of focusing the Church's resources and prayers on what I see as a long-neglected part of the church family. But I am also addressing this paper to myself, on behalf of the Recovering Christians I hope to serve. I've never been the kind of person to doubt the 'rightness' of any of the 'calls' I've followed - be they in music, social justice work and militant activism, or the long path to ordination. But *this* call is singular. I'm no longer responsible only to myself, but to these beautiful people to whom I feel called to serve. So my intention is that this paper be both the theoretical-starting point of my future ministry (which may include a church start) and the means by which - along with support from my extended church family - I will make constant sounding and critique of the work that I eventually do.

As for its general make-up, the paper will concentrate on the loci of Sin, Jesus, God, Church, and Ministry while leaning on the firm shoulders of Martin Luther, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dorothee Sölle, Andrew Sung Park, and Sally McFague.

I first chose Luther in part because I'm pursuing ordination in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. But mostly I've chosen Brother Martin because I genuinely like the guy and since he knew a thing or two about abusive church authority and practice - which in turn fueled his passion for the primacy of Grace and the 'priesthood of all believers' - his theology has much which connects to, heals, and empowers those who have been wounded by the Church. Though not a systematician, Bonhöffer's extensive writing on the relationships between the Christian faith and its implications for personal interaction have been a great help in helping me fleshing out clear criteria for how Christians are to relate to one another - and hence how they are to *be* Church. As for Sölle, the eloquent lyricism with which she makes her post-modern critique of topsy-turvy power relations and language in church, as well as her devotion to love and peace in the face of geo-political brinkmanship and global economic exploitation, bring a contemporary immediacy not present in either Luther or Bonhöffer. Finally Andrew Sung Park and Sally McFague round out the bunch with their truly paradigm shifting concepts. Park's insistence that Christian theology must be focused on the 'sinned-against' through the reality of *han*, and Sally McFague's viewing of the created universe as 'the body of God' are both powerful ways to re-orient the whole of Christian theology towards the reality of visceral suffering and bring renewed light on Jesus' mission of providing physical and societal as well as spiritual healing.

And as a final note, the people whose stories I share, for the sake of obscuring more identifiable characteristics of each story, will have their names and certain major details altered.

So, without further ado...

## Sin

For those who have been isolated, excluded, and otherwise traumatized by the church the word 'sin' is a land mine. Whenever talking to Recovering Christians about church, sin and sinfulness is one of the first subjects to arise. "They said I was living a sinful life," said one - a lesbian in her early 20's, "and though I felt better about everything after coming out they just couldn't take it and I felt so much hostility towards me *every time* I came to church I eventually stopped coming." "I was told I was going to hell because I was goth," said another of her time in a private religious school, "well that went over *great* with me - so I basically did everything I could to get expelled, and did. But I'd gotten so used to rebelling so I just got worse and worse and even the alternative education school I wound up in almost expelled me too."

More often than not, 'sin' was the chief instrument of their exclusion from the church - either through regular prodding or blunt force. But despite the myriad *how's* of their exclusion, the result was the same. Being 'sinful' is still a label they wrestle with in any conversation having to do with God, Jesus, and (especially) the Church, and even recognizing the injustice of having been so labeled in the first place doesn't necessarily alleviate their estrangement. Over time many ultimately rejected such stigma and persecution and found joy their new-found freedom and identity. But the label 'sinful' still clings. So to best sensitize my ministry's healing touch to the pain of their isolation from the Christian community, deconstructing and reconstructing 'sin' is a vital and practical first step.

At first glance Martin Luther does not seem like the ideal place to begin deconstructing abusive concepts of sin - but when taking a closer look at his writings on the subject, there is actually much that is thought provoking and potentially empowering for those traumatized by an

abusive church. Luther's *Preface to the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans* is such a work - highlighting, at length, Paul's chastising of those who practice spiritual hypocrisy.<sup>1</sup> So Luther well paraphrased Paul when he pointed to the clergy and said "outwardly you live quite properly in the works of the law and judge those who do not live the same way; you know how to teach everybody. You see the speck in another's eye but do not notice the plank in your own."<sup>2</sup> And even when such clergy *do* obey the laws and works of the church they only do so, Luther asserts, "out of fear of punishment or love of gain... [acted] out of aversion or force."<sup>3</sup> Therefore the authority of hypocritical, abusive clergy is invalid. And it is precisely against this hypocrisy – speaking of the importance of understanding while turning a deaf ear to the hard questions of the young, adjuring a congregation to faithfulness while then turning your back on the cries of those who long for acceptance, and of preaching love while showing hatred to church members whose difference challenges collective assumptions – that Jesus, Paul, and Luther so passionately preached and so rightly condemned.

What's more, though Luther echoed Augustine in his belief in the 'total depravity of humanity' and that sin is inherent in human nature because of the sin of Eve and hence cannot be 'undone' (apart from faith in Jesus), through his reading of Scripture Luther personally counted 'unbelief' as the greatest sin.<sup>4</sup> Hence, understanding sin not as so much anything we *do* but rather

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<sup>1</sup> **Romans 12 : 21-23** – 'You, then, that teach others, will you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You that forbid adultery, do you commit adultery? You that abhor idols, do you rob temples? You that boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?'

<sup>2</sup> Luther, Martin. 'Preface to the Epistle to the Romans' *Luther Works Volume 36: Word and Sacrament*. Fortress Press: Philadelphia. 1959. 389 pp. p. 227.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> **John 16 : 8 – 11** – 'And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.'

*unbelief* can be very liberating for Recovering Christians. It is in fact their continued belief in the promises of God and the Gospel - and their unwillingness to abandon it completely even after having been abused - that makes their plight so poignant. They still clearly believe in God and continue to feel a deep connection to Jesus in spite of their often caustic betrayals at the hands of their former communities. So by speaking of the invalidity of the pronouncements of church leaders and members who "strain out a gnat and swallow a camel," as well as declaring those who still believe as being far from sin – Luther's theology has a great deal of potential to defend Recovering Christians against former charges of 'sinfulness'.

German feminist and liberation theologian Dorothee Sölle also contributes an understanding of sin that can be very beneficial when helping those hobbled by the church. Though Sölle mostly identifies sin with apathy and indifference, her understanding of God also has strong implications for re-interpreting the pastoral response to sin to those excluded from the church. She describes God as "our capacity to love."<sup>5</sup> She also gives an insightful and practical guideline of sorts for what this love is and does. For Sölle there are three "essential elements of love: giving and taking, attentiveness, and pain."<sup>6</sup> Focusing her notions of love on relationality Sölle stresses that love cannot truly be understood, and even less so Christian love, apart from "a relationship between people" - where as love ascribed solely "the virtue of any single person" is somehow "supernatural" and hence unattainable by human beings.<sup>7</sup> Firstly, love expressed by ***giving and taking*** creates a "net" where those who give and those who receive remind one

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<sup>5</sup> Soelle, Dorothee. *Strength of the Weak*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, Kentucky. 1984. 192 pp. p 138. Hereafter *Strength*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p 32.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

another of their mutual indebtedness - I give because my neighbor needs and one day too, my neighbor will give because my neighbor sees that I also need.<sup>8</sup> As the logical consequence of this net of giving, *attentiveness* follows next. From the interaction between giving and taking we "learn... to attend to the reality of another person."<sup>9</sup> And as we sensitize ourselves to accomplishing the needs of others attentiveness "blocks our prejudices, expectations, and preconceived notions" so that we become more receptive to the needs of another and are less likely to see the giver or receiver of those deeds as somehow beholden to us. This attentiveness eventually sponsors and develops relationship between givers and takers, and hence the possibility of *pain*. This should be of no surprise as it is an inevitable consequence of love: "Jesus wept over his city of Jerusalem. Giving and taking reach their limitations. The net of love proves to be riddled with holes."<sup>10</sup> And when these limits are reached, when we fail or miss the mark, pain comes as a natural response to that lack, to that short-coming.

Consequently, since love most fully expresses itself such intimate inter-relationality, and since love is such an important part of her understanding of the purposes and goals of the God and Christian life, then that "which expresses itself as anxiety, detachment, security, or I-ness"<sup>11</sup> is therefore contrary to these purposes of goals and could be understood as sin. And far from believing sin to be rooted in 'original sin', Sölle believed that sin is collective and happens most perniciously in church a consequence of church authorities who speak of God as the "three

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Soelle, Dorothee. *Death by Bread Alone*. Fortress Press; Minneapolis. 1974. 144 pp. p 89.

omnis" - omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent.<sup>12</sup> Such an understanding of God is not only conjoined almost exclusively to top-bottom power relationships, but also creates an deeply *disempowering* balance of power to those who relate to it. This, in turn, creates a church which "insists on... God's omnipotence and human helplessness" and consequently "breaks the relationship between God and humanity." And since forced dependence could well be considered 'not love' - patriarchal and abusive concepts of God and sin are themselves sinful.

Bonhöffer's classic thesis on the nature of church, *Sanctorum Communio*, also ties into this in that his understanding of sin is deeply connected to his notion of genuine Christian community. For Bonhöffer the original blue-print for Christian relationship is 'the primal relationship' of Adam and Eve and God in the Garden of Eden. In this primal state, Bonhöffer asserts human beings lived an "original community of love" - interaction between Humanity and God was a "giving one" and Adam and Eve lived in common "mutual action" as a consequence of their unbroken communion with God.<sup>13</sup> But after the Fall, that communion is broken and mutual concern is replaced by individual concern - as evinced by the blame game between Adam, Eve, and the Serpent in Genesis 3 : 11-13. The "giving" nature of original creation is replaced by one of "demanding."<sup>14</sup> So for Bonhöffer the root of sin is "the will to acknowledge the other only in relation to oneself,"<sup>15</sup> thereby discounting and negating the other for one's own sake. Recovering Christians can relate to this - of being shut out of community because of a church's desire to put

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<sup>12</sup> Soelle, Dorothee. *Talking About God: An Introduction to Theology*. Trinity Press International: Valley Forge, PA. 1997. 224 pp. pp. 186, 188. Hereafter *Talking*.

<sup>13</sup> Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Sanctorum Communio*. p. 81.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

their own notions of righteousness and goodness over and above concern for the parishioners in their midst.

But Bonhöffer then goes further to say how, when applied to community, this same "demanding nature" can turn a church - indeed, *any* "society" - into "an institution for the systematic exploitation of its members."<sup>16</sup> Recovering Christians know this only too well. Many left after having their emotions, their hopes and dreams, regularly and manipulatively criticized and dis-avowed. Their communities put the rigid maintenance of their various social codes, self-serving expectations, their notions of sexuality and society over and above showing love and support for the members of their community - turning their community into a greedy mob which acknowledges and supports its parishioners only in as much as they justify and confirm its own existence. So Bonhöffer's understanding of sin - the refusal to acknowledge the other except in relation to oneself - critiques the church communities that create Recovering Christians by labeling their own practices of exclusion not just as 'sinful' but as an embodiment of pure sin itself.

Sallie McFague's understanding of sin resonates with Bonhöffer's. But - as we will see in future chapters - whereas Bonhöffer focuses primarily on relationships between people, McFague looks at humanity's relationship to the entire created universe, and especially with the disadvantaged. McFague sees sin as being rooted in humanity's unwillingness to acknowledge the "interrelationship and interdependence" of all life.<sup>17</sup> In its stead, humanity sees all things - even other human beings - as a means to its own selfish ends and installs itself as the center and

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *The Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril.* Augsburg Fortress: Minneapolis. 2000. 251 pp p. 183. Here after *Life Abundant.*

purpose of creation as opposed to taking its place in the web of creation.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, humanity goes from a "state of giving" - of serving and living for the well-being of all creation - to a "state of demanding" that commodifies animals, plants, natural resources, and human beings as 'things' to be consumed and used for our own purposes. In essence, sin is when humanity puts itself in the place of God as if we were "lords *over* the planet" as opposed to being "products *of* its processes."<sup>19</sup>

But by far the most useful conception of sin for Recovering Christians is the Korean concept of *han* as elucidated by theologian Andrew Sung Park. Park has spent much of his career working to shift traditional Christian understandings of the classical loci of theology, and sin in particular, specifically from the perspective of the victims - from those who suffer from the sin of others. In his work *Triune Atonement: Christ's Healing for Sinners, Victims, and the Whole Creation* Park defines *han* as "the deep unhealed wound of a victim that festers in her or him... It may be a deep ache, an intense bitterness, or the sense of helplessness, hopelessness, or resignation at the individual and collective levels."<sup>20</sup> Park gives his most explicit explanation of the roots of *han* in his seminal work *The Wounded Heart of God*. He describes *han* as the fruit of "frustrated hope" which leads to "a psychosomatic pain" that produces "sadness, resentment, aggression, and helplessness."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> McFague, Sallie. *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Augsburg Fortress Press: Minneapolis: 1993. pp 292. p. 177. Here after *Body of God*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> Park, Andrew Sung. *Triune Atonement: Christ's Healing for Sinners, Victims, and the Whole Creation*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, Kentucky. 2009. 144pp. p 39. Here after *Triune*

<sup>21</sup> Park, Andrew Sung. *The Wounded Heart of God: the Asian Concept of Han and the Doctrine of Sin*. Abingdon Press: Nashville, Tennessee. 1993. 204 pp. p 15. Here after *Wounded*.

Rooted in the pain of existence, *han* develops when those who are suffering "need to go through grief" but can't because they are 'boxed-in and suffer with no exit' or means to express their grief.<sup>22</sup> This shackling of the wounded's ability to even voice their grief cuts to their very existence - from the Latin roots *ex* 'out' and *sister* 'to stand' - as standing out and staking one's need to grieve is fundamental to grief's healing.<sup>23</sup> It is the very blood of Abel that cries from the ground, reaching the very ears of God and exposing Cain for his brutality<sup>24</sup>. Being in a church community and being unable to speak one's frustration, fears, leads to *han's* development - but exclusion from or abandonment by the church leads to its vicious full-flowering. And though the many wounded Christians I've met were eventually able to escape such destructive environments, their *han* remains - and remains stubbornly.

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>24</sup> **Genesis 4:8-10** – ‘Cain said to his brother Abel, ‘Let us go out to the field.’ And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, ‘Where is your brother Abel?’ He said, ‘I do not know; am I my brother’s keeper?’ And the Lord said, ‘What have you done? Listen; your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground!’

## God

'Andy' works in my apartment building, cleaning up after moving days and apartment remodelings. We've chatted here and there over the last few months, but one afternoon after seeing me on the street he eagerly beckoned me over to talk. He'd heard I was in seminary and had questions. "So tell me," he began, "Do you believe God *always* forgives?" I told him yes, God does - but people are another story. He nearly dropped his cigarette in shock and enthusiasm then shared his story. Turns out not too long ago he'd been making a good living for himself as an electrician. He had a good wife and good daughter and a house and was active in church. But at some point he got into drugs and sex, and was eventually arrested for cocaine possession and soliciting a prostitute - losing his wife, daughter, house, and reputation. Having thoughts of suicide ('It ain't hard to electrocute yourself, you know...') and desperate for help he sought out his church pastor one afternoon before picking up his daughter from school.

Talking with his pastor outside the church - 'They wanted me outside' - he tearfully confessed his transgressions and fears, his thoughts of suicide, and begged the pastor for help. 'I needed to know that I was still a good person, that I could start life new, that I would be forgiven,' but word had apparently gotten around the church well ahead of him. The pastor's response made me wince: 'Well, this is what you get for disobeying God. You had blessing and didn't use it for anyone except for yourself. This is your punishment.' Incredulous he swore at the pastor, swore off the church, and drove off - cursing - to pick his daughter up from school. 'The guy did one thing for me though,' he chuckled, 'He got me so mad I forgot to feel sorry for myself!'

I told him how horrible it was that the pastor had said that to him, that I would have sworn at him too, and assured him that he had been forgiven, that he had clearly paid for his mistakes and could rest easy. 'Aw, I'm alright now,' he concluded, 'I know it was crap what he said to me. But man, that *hurt*.' He then thanked me for listening, gave me a perfunctory hug, threw out his cigarette, and went back to work. The pastor may have saved him from suicide, but for Andy but his healing happened more from bitterness and anger as opposed to love. No forgiveness, no acceptance, just judgment and humiliation. It may be better than death. But it still isn't life. And what's worse, there are countless stories just like his.

And for such as these, I ask: Who is the God that will help these lost souls, these people who the church turns away in shame, or casts out in anger? It can't be the angry God, the vengeful God that punishes the children for the sins of the parents 'unto the third and fourth generation.' Let alone a God who puts a premium on obedience and shows only judgment. Neither can it be a God that bodes no questions, no doubt, and silences justice and truth. Rather it is the God who hears the cries of the distressed - who responds with power and might and healing and love to those who have suffered and are still suffering.

It is a God that hears and acknowledges the cries of those who are in misery, who hears and is moved to great lengths to respond to those needs. What's more, Recovering Christians need a God who will indeed be a 'strength and refuge' and 'a very present help in times of trouble' (Psalm 46 : 1). 'Binding up' the wounds of 'the broken-hearted' is one of God's main occupations (Psalm 147 : 3). A God who is 'slow to anger and abiding in steadfast love,' who 'relents from punishment' would not simply abandon one of the flock simply for disagreement, and certainly not for confessed transgression. If Isaiah is to be believed, God would rather 'reason' or 'argue

out' differences than deny and abandon any member of the family - a God that relishes in togetherness rather than in division (Isaiah 1 : 18).

Sally McFague provides just such a concept of God. In her work *The Body of God* McFague posits the view of seeing all of creation as God's body which God then inhabits in the much the same way that a spirit (be it of human beings, animals, or plants) or life-force inhabits any living body. Hence the presence of God is not just in human beings, but in everything around human beings from micro-organisms to galaxies. God is not - to use Sölle's biting metaphor - the hero of an American Cowboy movie; a lone male avenger who comes into town, rids it of evil (always through violent means), wins the heart of the town and the hand of the town beauty, then rides off into the sunset to seek other adventures - achieving freedom for self as well as freedom from responsibility.<sup>25</sup> McFague calls this 'spirit theology' - when we visualize God as the animating spirit of creation. It suggests that 'God is not primarily the orderer and controller of the universe but its source and empowerment, the breath that enlivens and energizes it.'<sup>26</sup> God is truly present in all things and relates to the creation not as an absentee land-lord - who pays periodic and devastating social calls on unsuspecting tenants in order to re-assert domination and control - but in a genuine '*relationship* at the deepest possible level, the level of (physical) life' where God is present and a part in every movement and breath of life on earth.<sup>27</sup>

Consequently God is both radically transcendent and radically immanent. When science delves into and explicates the intricacies of the cells in our bodies, the gentle breathing of new

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<sup>25</sup> *Thinking*. p 188.

<sup>26</sup> *The Body of God*. p 145.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p 146.

born children, even the unimaginable magnitude of a supernova, or the interstellar migration of comets there - all realities that are physical and tangible - there is a kind of vastness and incomprehensibility that mirrors that of God. All of these phenomena are of themselves a bundling of unimaginable complexities and mysteries that in-and-of-themselves are awe-inspiring, are 'reflections of the glory... of God.'<sup>28</sup> But when seen all together, their contemplation quickly echoes the humble awe of Psalm 8: 'When I look at the work of your fingers, the sun and moon which you have set in place, I think what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?' All of creation becomes a window into the divine mystery, all creation becomes holy, all of creation becomes a window into God's transcendence.

And since spirit theology says that God is present in this same infinite variety of created life and matter, God is also totally immanent.

The understanding of God's transcendent presence in all creation 'radicalizes the nearness, the availability, and physicality of divine immanence.'<sup>29</sup> We see the creator *in* creation, and though it may not be a complete view (McFague refers to this limitation as 'God's back-side' in a nod to Exodus 33:23's slightly ribald story - also a favorite of Luther's) it is *a* view none-the-less. For McFague, '[e]verything can be a metaphor for God because no *one* thing *is* God... All bodies are the backside of divine glory.'<sup>30</sup> To contemplate the divine one needn't look much farther than the very things that are in one's environment - books, friends, trees, pets - anything that possesses meaning is a potential vehicle of divine contemplation and perception.

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 132 .

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 133.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 134

McFague's spirit theology can have a special significance for Recovering Christians. If you look at all of creation as being indwelt by God, and that all of creation is intimately connected to God as God's very body, then being accepted by God is a mute point - one can no more be rejected by such a God as a house can reject its foundation, than an acorn can reject its oak, or that all the Earth's life can reject sun or water. When religious leaders belittle, marginalize, or expel members of their community in the name of God, in McFague's understanding, it is like God cutting off God's nose to smite God's own face. It would be nothing less than a rejection and wounding of the very Body of God itself, a diminishing of life, a limitation of possibility, a deliberate attempt to stymie complexity and deny power.

Empowerment, in particular, is another important consequence of spirit theology. Since the divine spirit is constantly 'permeating, suffusing, and energizing the innermost being of each and every entity in creation.'<sup>31</sup> This 'breath of the spirit' then gives a 'direction' to creation - a drive to 'fecundity, richness, and diversity' whiling giving 'all bodies... the energy and power to become themselves.'<sup>32</sup> So McFague's God is less a God of power and might than a God that *empowers*. It is present from Genesis as the God who breathed life into everything - in Exodus as the God that heard the call of the children of Israel and lifted them out of Egypt, brought forth prophets to advocate for justice for the marginalized, who sent Jesus so that all could become children of God.

Sölle's understanding of God and human empowerment makes perfect counterpoint to McFague's. Influenced by the language of German mysticism, where the ideal of mystical unity

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 147

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 148

with God is paramount, Sölle insists that 'there is no room in mystical devotion for the recognition of a higher power,' let alone a 'denial of our own strength'<sup>33</sup>. One-ness with God means a relationship that is not only wholly immanent and transcendent - also concordant with McFague - but also a relationship that is wholly non-hierarchical. Such a God, she continues 'demands no obedience but union... of being at one with what is alive.'<sup>34</sup> And since 'being at one with what is alive' is so crucial this God then strives to 'evoke, embower, liberate, support, build, awaken, listen, nourish, summon, suffer, experience, participate, rejoice, and stand within' - not to stand above and beyond in order to control, judge, shape, confirm and 'rule over mankind.'<sup>35</sup> God's wish is not for our submission, or resignation of our self and our hopes and dreams, let alone our questions and our doubts.

What's more - in this mystical union, within the bosom of a God who is both radically transcendent and radically immanent - we become aware that we share some of God's power and efficacy just as God shares in our lives. When in the arms of this 'real relationship' with God 'an exchange takes place' where we all 'gain a share in the creative, good, non-compelling power' that is God.<sup>36</sup> Sölle mentions this, as well, in order to counter a common misperception that mysticism is hermetic and concerned only with the individual believer. Many of the great German mystics were heavily engaged in the issues of then high-medieval Germany - were tried for heresy, worked as abbots and teachers in monasteries, and traveled throughout their regions

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<sup>33</sup> *The Silent Cry*. p 183.

<sup>34</sup> *Creative Disobedience*. xii.

<sup>35</sup> *The Silent Cry*. p 184.

<sup>36</sup> *Thinking*, p. 185.

to spread their often controversial message. We can even act like God - for even as God clothed Adam and Eve, so we too can clothe the naked. As God has petitioned loudly for the sake of the weak, so can we stand up to tyranny and censorship.<sup>37</sup>

But though Sölle and McFague speak powerfully of God who lives and breathes within us, giving acknowledgement and empowerment to all creation their concepts still leave some questions unanswered. God may be present in all things, and in that may be present to us as individuals, but how do we know how God feels about us? How do we know God truly relates to the pain and alienation that we experience? Once again, Andrew Sung Park beautifully and poetically completes this understanding. Because for him we know that God knows our pain because God suffers too.<sup>38</sup>

In Chapter 7 of *The Wounded Heart of God* he presents a concise survey of different theologians and their answer to the question: Does God suffer? One of his first theologians is Luther, and his insight is spot on. Luther, Park says, believes that humanity is in deep relationship with God despite being separated because our sinful nature and mortality. This relationship, then, gives our actions impact - and our sin and unfaithfulness to God '*insults* and *wounds*' God just as they would wound any human being.<sup>39</sup> Even God's judgment - no small thing for Luther - is not rooted in wrath. Since God's deepest feeling for humanity is love, then God's judgment finds its root there, its expression a result of God's own *han* - or long, unhealed, unredeemed wound - as a consequence of humanity's sinfulness and faithlessness.

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189

<sup>38</sup> *Wounded*, p. 121.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* p. 114.

But Park points primarily at Luther's *Heidelberg Disputation* as the principal expression of God's own wounded-ness. Though originally intended as an extension of both Luther's constant critique of scholastic theology as well as the 'faith vs. works' argument - whether humanity is reconciled through God by faith in Jesus or by 'good works' such as the mass, sacraments, pilgrimages, etc... - it is here the Luther first reveals one of his most crucial concepts - the 'theology of the cross.' For Luther, whenever we try to use reason to comprehend the 'invisible things of God' (God's omnipotence, omnipresence, etc...) we get lost in philosophical speculation and are in danger of missing the point of the Gospels. Instead, we must focus on the 'visible things' of God - the *most* visible of this being the crucifixion. As God's ultimate expression of concern for the well-being and direction of humanity, God chose to come and suffer and die - *sharing* and *participating* in the suffering and pain of human beings, not staying aloof from them. Christ doesn't come in glory and leave in glory - but comes in penury and leaves in violent, murdered disgrace. This is the theology of the cross. "To Luther, the cross is the expression of divine injury" and through it "ends all speculation about the divine character."<sup>40</sup> After the crucifixion, any wonder as to whether or not God suffers or is capable of suffering or is willing to suffer on humanity's account are thoroughly laid to rest.

Next, Park presents ample scriptural testimony as to God's capacity for pain. We know that God suffers in our lives because Scripture testifies again and again of how 'a victim's suffering breaks [God's] heart.'<sup>41</sup> We hear of it in Isaiah where God 'gasp[s] and pant[s]' like a woman in labor (Isaiah 42:12). God feels the pain of infidelity as someone abandoned by their

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* p. 116.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

spouse (Jeremiah 3:20). God is 'a worried parent who is not well when God's children are not well' (the Prodigal Son).<sup>42</sup> Park is spot on when he says that 'the biblical God is never one of aseity or self-complacency.'<sup>43</sup> So when we speak of God's 'feeling our pain' we aren't being sentimental or childish - but speaking a truth testified in page after page of the Bible.

But most importantly, we know God is present in our personal suffering because of Jesus. Since God is present in Jesus, then God was present in Jesus' suffering - and not just in the three-hour span of the cross. Jesus' entire life was suffering. He grew up poor, a carpenter's son, who spent the first hours of his life in the miserable poverty of a food-trough. His life was always under some kind of assault or pursuit - whether it was Herod who massacred scores of innocent boys trying to kill him, the daily grind of life as a skilled laborer, the stigma of the apparent illegitimacy of his birth, the constant assault of corrupt religious authority and their seemingly endless restrictions and prohibitions, and the wide opposition he experienced at the hand of religious leaders, political leaders, and even his own family. The cross may have been *the* event of his life, but it was a fitting climax to what had been decades of life lived in the deep shadow of *han*.<sup>44</sup>

And God was with him for every second of it.

'Jesus' death was the example of an innocent victim's suffering in which God was *fully* present' and because this happened to Jesus we know that God truly can relate to our suffering as

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

well, and understands the evil that makes the cross happen.<sup>45</sup> 'The cross is the place where humans understand God experiences human suffering and the place where humans understand God's agony.'<sup>46</sup> More than just a symbol of God's love for us, God's willingness to sacrifice God's self for us, it is the place where God, Jesus, and humanity meet and begin to heal the wounds that hobble them all. It is a kind of soteriological triangulation that addresses the deepest wounds of all parties. And most radically, in the reality of the cross not only do we receive healing, but we also see vividly that God, too, needs healing - that '*God needs salvation*'. And since 'God is too ardent to be apathetic to human suffering' it is only natural that God eventually scream 'enough' and insist that God's 'divine han' be healed. And this is part of the mystery and awe of the crucifixion event.<sup>47</sup>

This understanding is powerfully healing to those who have experienced suffering at the hands of the church. Merely being told that 'God loves you' or 'God accepts you' or even 'God feels your pain' is not enough. But to be told that God suffers, that God grunts and sweats, and that God wants healing as much as you carries much more meaning. It even provides a kind of empowerment to those who are wounded for they know that not only does God share their wounding but that as they grow and heal through their pain, they too *can heal God!* For much as God wants you healed for yourself, so God wants the divine self healed for God's sake. The 'shameful vulnerability of God on the cross' proves it.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

## Christology

As Christians, understanding our relationship to Jesus of Nazareth - to his life, his death, and his resurrection - is one of our first serious tasks as we refashion our lives in light of the Gospel. But this task presents special problems for Recovering Christians. Despite being isolated by churches in their past, many Recovering Christians continue see God as loving, kind, and forgiving. However, talking about Jesus can be painful, even angering, as many felt that Church leaders would use Jesus' suffering support their claims that 'suffering is good' or as a means to trivialize their own suffering. This was especially pernicious for those whose deepest pain - because of sexuality, because of unanswered questions, because of not being 'holy' enough - grew from their church's neglect or casting them out. Consequently, for a Christology to connect more intimately to the healing needs of Recovering Christians Jesus' I feel that his centrality needs to be less about matters of eternal life and salvation and more about the reality of *unjust* pain and suffering, God's unfailing and unconditional love for and covenant with humanity, and reconciliation of one's self and one's pain with that love. In other words, it must relate to people who have actually *experienced* societal and ecclesial exclusion and wounding as Jesus did and see Jesus as more of a fellow-traveler than a savior.

Someone like 'Steve,' for instance.

Steve is a twenty-something recent college graduate who, though biologically female, identifies as male. Coming out was hard: 'So he had to keep his sexuality under wraps even though most everyone knew he was gay - including his 'somewhat denial-laden' parents. He eventually moved to Chicago to attend a local Roman Catholic University - allowing him a level of freedom that he'd never known while living at home or in his old community - and not longer

after the move Steve began to experiment with identifying as male. But the 'truce' he had with his parents ruptured. His father, who had recently begun seminary study, had flat-out rejected him, and Steve's mother – though still warm – wasn't fully accepting. This was only compounded one morning when his dorm room was randomly searched. Though the university was ok with his sexuality, when a search team found men's deodorant and clothing in what was supposed to be a 'female' dorm they assumed that he'd had a male friend sleeping over and he received an eviction notice. 'I was furious' he said 'And here I was at a Roman Catholic college where they were supposed to be open to God and to the stranger and this happened to me - that and *everyone* knew I was trans, so I didn't get the big deal.'

Furious, he immediately took the eviction letter, went into the office of the Dean of Student Life, slammed the letter on his desk, and demanded ('I might have been a bit stand-offish' he admitted) that he read it. When he finished and looked up Steve then shouted 'What the FUCK does THAT have to do with anything?' and stormed out. One week later not only was he evicted from the dorms, but also expelled from the school for having 'threatened a staff or faculty member.' His expulsion was complete - from his family and from the university environment that - at first - had provided him with an environment to begin exploring himself. 'I eventually overcame everything, got into a different school, worked on my own stuff. But it was hard.'

Jesus himself knew a thing or two about outcasts and the marginalized. He spoke words of wisdom and healing to a woman prey to gossip and slander (Samaritan woman, John 4 : 5-42), cast a legion of demons from a man confined to dwell in *the* spiritual and corporal cesspool of a community (Geresene demoniac, Mark 5 : 1-20), saved a woman 'caught in adultery' from hypocritical execution (John 8 : 3 - 11), praised and affirmed a man envied and reviled for his ill-

gotten wealth and mocked for being short (Zaccheus, Luke 19 : 1 - 10), returned sight to a man others tried to silence and ignore (blind Bartimeus, Mark 10 : 46 - 52), redeemed from exile ten men banished for leprosy (Luke 17 : 12 - 20), and even healed for-then-and-forever a woman spiritually exiled and monetarily impoverished because of endless menstruation (Mark 5 : 25 – 34). Jesus did not fear contact and interaction with any cast-away, exile, or subject of communal scorn. But rather he consistently brought healing that rectified the physical root of their distress as well as revealed to them their own power through faith. This flew hard in the face of conventional wisdom and then-contemporary practices of ‘othering’.

What's more, Jesus himself knew much of being cast out. His own family didn't understand his mission and tried to restrain him as ‘crazy’ (Mark 3 : 21). His disciples often misunderstood his teachings (Matthew 16 : 6 – 8) and saw his influence only as a way to get ahead (Matthew 20 : 21) or to destroy opposition (Luke 9 : 51 – 56). Though he brought unquestioned good to the community, his teachings were met with derision (Mark 6 : 1 – 6) and violence (Luke 4 : 28 – 30), and he had to deal with near constant harassment and intrigue from religious authorities (Matthew 12 : 9 – 10, Mark 12 : 13 – 17, Luke 22: 1 - 3). And what's more, even his closest followers turned against him – one betraying him (Luke 22 : 3 – 6) and another, his protégé, denying him (Mark 14 : 29 – 31, Matthew 26 : 33 – 35, Luke 22 : 33 – 34, John 13 : 36 – 38). So not only did he make his career among the marginalized and oppressed, but he himself was marginalized and oppressed and denied and betrayed and supremely vulnerable.

Those wounded by the Church know being betrayed and denied. They are often betrayed by church authorities – people whose love has turned into exclusion – and denied membership and fellowship, let alone humanity, by family and friends. Sometimes, their own friends, family,

and community are forced to deny not only their relationship with them, but even their very existence.

Sadly, though, as much as I love Martin Luther, more-often-than-not I find myself disagreeing with his understanding of Christology. First of all, for Luther, Jesus is truly '*the way, the truth, and the light*' and he views any and all other religions - the Islam of the 'murderous Turk' as well as 'The Jews and their Lies' - as evil, and his being active in the 16th Century cannot be used as an excuse hurtful 'othering' language. Additionally, his insistence on the 'fear of hell' as a potent jolt for conversion is exactly the kind of thinking from which so many wounded Christians have fled and are still in pain. Even his understanding of Grace and Works-Righteousness doesn't add up. For though I agree that Grace of God through Jesus Christ is a gift 'freely given', if we have to accept Jesus' life, crucifixion, and death as a step towards receiving that Grace, then the gift has conditions and hence is *not* freely-given. In fact, it would become yet another permutation of the world's ubiquitous *quid pro quo* - an even more pernicious kind of works-righteousness as it claims most vociferously to be its opposite.

Consequently, I think that if a specifically Lutheran understanding of Christ is going to have any serious traction with Recovering Christians, Bonhoeffer provides a more sympathetic foundation. For both Luther and Bonhoeffer 'Christ is the center of human existence, history, and nature.'<sup>49</sup> But whereas Luther frequently presents Jesus in terms of power relationships - Christ as King and Judge, Christ the Sacrificial Victim, etc... - Bonhoeffer tends to speak of Jesus more in terms of his 'embodiment of God's covenant' and the seal of God's eternal dedication to and

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<sup>49</sup> Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Who is Christ for Us?* p. 60.

love of humanity.<sup>50</sup> Where as before Christ, humanity wished to 'offer sacrifices and [perform] works' in place of offering 'themselves' in service to God, Christ offered himself to do away with such potentially distracting, oppressive, and self-justifying works. And though Bonhoeffer still ascribes to satisfaction theories of atonement (Jesus' crucifixion makes restitution for our failings and for all creation to God on our behalf) his focus is less on humanity's guilt more on how God's love - embodied in Jesus - simultaneously frees us from the burden of sin and returns us to communion with God.<sup>51</sup> Recovering Christians are more likely to relate to this kind of imagery, as the stress is not only on Jesus' crucifixion, but rather as the sure and certain guarantee that God loves them, that the grace towards them is assured, and that God would rather suffer in human form than let them feel as if they were abandoned.

Sally McFague is really where I begin to develop an understanding of Christ that speaks to victims of abuse and reviling. In her view of creation as being 'The Body of God' she takes an ecological approach to creation. She sees as abusive and 'utilitarian' any view of creation where usefulness is the sole guideline for 'goodness.'<sup>52</sup> Even the relatively benign view that all things are 'holy' in that they somehow express God's nature is flawed since they are only perceived as 'holy' in relationship to the 'Wholly Other.' Hence, for McFague, to truly perceive and interact with creation in a way that is ecologically sound we must not look at matter as valuable for its 'holy potential... [but rather see] ordinary existence itself as holy' in-and-of-itself, period.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Christ the Center*. p 49.

<sup>51</sup> Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *The Cost of Discipleship*. p 264.

<sup>52</sup> *Body of God* 183

<sup>53</sup> *Body of God* 184

creation is not holy because it merely reflects the divine but rather because ‘God loves the entire creation and finds it valuable.’<sup>54</sup> Jesus then fits into this matrix of holiness in that his mission is to encompass 'all of creation in a particular salvific direction, toward the liberation, healing, and fulfillment of all bodies.’<sup>55</sup>

For McFague, ‘Christianity is par excellence the religion of incarnation and, in one sense, is about nothing but embodiment’<sup>56</sup> - is directed towards and finds its meaning in bringing healing to ‘oppressed, vulnerable, suffering bodies... who are in pain due to the indifference or greed of the more powerful.’<sup>57</sup> To accomplish this, Jesus' life on Earth and crucifixion makes God's transcendence available to us 'only immanently, only through the mundane, the physical, the bodily' in which God becomes simultaneously radically transcendent and radically immanent and hence present in all creation.’<sup>58</sup> And though some might consider this pantheistic, it was an opinion even Luther shared - saying in a letter to Zwingli that Christ is ever close at hand in the bread and wine of communion because he is just as present in 'the cabbage and soup' at Zwingli's table.<sup>59</sup> Similarly since God and the creation are one, and Jesus is the presence of God in the nitty gritty of life, turning creation towards the salvation of the weak and marginalized, then what we feel in pain is also felt by God and Christ. And since the crucifixion then freed the spirit of Jesus of Nazareth 'to be in all bodies' he can accompany people while they are liberated and healed -

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<sup>54</sup> *Body of God* 172

<sup>55</sup> *Body of God* 160

<sup>56</sup> *Body of God* 163

<sup>57</sup> *Body of God* 164

<sup>58</sup> *Body of God* 161

<sup>59</sup> (ae 37:68)

through liberation - as well as when they are not - through suffering. And just as defeat and despair could not stop the Resurrection, so too is this healing presence of Christ still present even when liberation and healing do not occur.<sup>60</sup>

Sölle's Christology again finds compliment in McFague in its emphasis on Christ's intimacy and dedication to humanity, though she sees this less as a function of the incarnation as on Christ's love. For Sölle It could only be love that would make Jesus, or anyone else for that matter, 'prefer[ ] hell to heaven as long as other people are still condemned to be in hell'.<sup>61</sup> Love - and specifically love that shows itself through 'giving and taking, attentiveness, and pain' - is key to Sölle's understanding of God as much as her Christology.<sup>62</sup> Sölle's Christ is no 'Greek god, a figure who can do anything, and who has a return ticket to heaven.'<sup>63</sup> Such a Christ has no genuine concern for humanity and falls victim to the perversion of "the three omni's" - omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience - that speak of a God that is ultimately far-removed and as indifferent to our sufferings as a the Maverick hero in an American Western. As with McFague, Sölle's Christ expresses the beauty of God as a 'fellow sufferer' as opposed to 'one who imposes suffering'.<sup>64</sup> But Sölle adds the extra touch by saying that this Jesus, the 'fellow sufferer' is more accessible because he revealed something that her understanding of God couldn't: 'love without privilege, love which empties itself and takes upon itself the form of a servant.'<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> *Body of God* 169.

<sup>61</sup> *Choosing Life* 97.

<sup>62</sup> *Strength*, p. 32.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

Some might see this as naive, or even weak. But for those wounded by the church, where the understanding of Jesus was more righteous judge (heavy on the judge) than radical savior, focusing on the power of Jesus' love may well help to undo some of the damage. Sölle's own work, *The Strength of the Weak*, addresses this very issue - the idea that strength must only exist in rhetoric that invokes power and authority and actions that establish security and stability. She understands that some might want greater security than love offers, because 'having no rest, [people desperate for spiritual surety] want rest.'<sup>66</sup> But since Gospel says, 'all you need is love' then 'nothing else is asked... nothing else counts.'<sup>67</sup> And if one doubts just how powerful love is, one need only remember the Resurrection. Jesus might have had 'only love', but his love conquered Death. And once those of us who live in community are 'relieved of this yearning [for security]' we will then be free to 'demonstrate concretely what love means' in the world, with both those who love us and those who hate us.<sup>68</sup> It may not provide security, and the comfort may seem limited, but to those living in the surety and the power of love (and in particular, for Sölle, the German Mystics of the late Medieval period) it is the only way worth pursuing.

But again, as with my chapter on Sin, it is Park who gives the deepest insights into presenting an understanding of Christology that directly addresses the unhealed wounds, the *han*, of the sinned against. His work *Triune Atonement* spends a great deal of time speaking of Jesus' life and role in-depth, and his insights on Jesus' works of healing have profound resonance for those abused by the church. For Park, the cross is not so much a symbol of redemptive suffering

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<sup>66</sup> *Strength*, p. 137.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

but rather one of 'anti-retribution theology... for the restoration of victims' dignity.'<sup>69</sup> Retribution theology (God will punish you for your sins, your only way of being saved is through Jesus, Jesus is a righteous judge who will condemn the wicked in the last days, etc...) figures powerfully in the story of many wounded Christians - like my old friend Alex who was told by his own father/pastor that his decision to stop coming to church would 'put [him] out of the safety of Grace forever,' numerous friends who quipped upon entering church with me 'Well, we'll see if I burn up,' and untold women in untold churches who have been told that divorcing their abusive husbands would condemn them to a life as an adulteress as well as sure damnation for their and their children's souls.

Park counters that despite these disturbingly popular perceptions, the Bible abounds with anti-retribution theology (Job being the greatest example) which makes clear that even though 'guiltless victims' and 'non-sinner[s] may suffer' they do so not because of their own fault, but because of 'the tragic aspects of life.'<sup>70</sup> Jesus, then, comes to 'restore the dignity of those who underwent shame and condemnation' by being with them and lifting them up in the midst of their own 'suffering, shame, and vulnerability.'<sup>71</sup> He even undergoes his own unjust arrest and execution - he, God's chosen one - proving once and for all that 'the victims of violence are not all sinners or the cursed.'<sup>72</sup> Jesus came not to shed his blood to atone for our sins, or to substitute for humanity's rightful place in damnation, but because 'he aspired to transform the world of

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<sup>69</sup> *Triune*, p. 69.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Atonement*, p. 70.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

injustice and violence through his life of truth, justice, and love,' and therefore 'laid down his life for the cause unto death.'<sup>73</sup> For Park, Jesus is the focal point of a soteriological triangulation. God creates the Earth and all its living things, but is then wounded by the actions of a humanity who continually desecrates, abuses, and destroys God's creation. Humanity too, pained by its distance from God then turns to idolatry, putting itself and its things as the center of creation - this then leads humanity to prey not only on the infinite variety of God's creation, but even upon itself. Jesus, then, steps in between these two sides and, pinioned between the two during the crucifixion then uses his very life and body as a means to re-establish connection between the two - to remind both God and humanity of their mutual suffering and to unite them by making each aware of the others' suffering and *han*.

For Park, 'healing and deliverance are inseparable' and it is a testament to the efficacy of Jesus' ministry that the many people whom he healed were not only redeemed physically, but societally as well.<sup>74</sup> Widows were re-united with their once-dead sons, saving them from a life of destitution and/or prostitution; Zacchias, despite his short stature, could hold his head high among his detractors because Jesus recognized him before the crowds; and a woman caught in adultery was saved from humiliating death by the one man in Jerusalem willing to stand up to religious totalitarianism. Jesus healed victims by restoring their human dignity and divine rights in part because he recognized that many 'sinners' were really sinned-against and 'he encouraged the downtrodden to free themselves from the drains of oppression, exploitation, and domination

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

and helped them to transcend their hatred, bitterness, and unforgiving hearts toward their oppressors.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

## Church

It is a somewhat ironic experience, writing this chapter. I have listened to hours and hours of stories of loss, betrayal, dashed hope, where the church acted as eager agent in the complication of so many lives - judging, wounding, and shunning with almost bureaucratic regularity and predictability. And yet, those isolated by the church still have “some inkling of the mystery which makes the church alive” which seems to draw them back - as Sölle suggests - an awareness that 'the church really has other values and tasks' besides the ones which lead to their expulsion.<sup>76</sup> And it makes sense. As many an antidote is made from the very venom it seeks to neutralize, so revisiting a place of wounding is often a necessary step towards healing. So then the question is, knowing their desire to return to the Church - be it for reasons of ‘coming home’ or preparing a 'final good-bye' – how does a church respond to Recovering Christian’s distinct needs? How does a church tap into their hopes, their priorities and goals? How can a church mold itself with tender precision to the sadness and anger of those it hopes to heal?

How does it help people like my friend, Adeleida?

Adeleida grew up bouncing between the twin poles of Chicago and San Juan, Puerto Rico. Her immediate and extended families were all deeply religious with 'iron-clad' connections to the church. As she got older, and her involvement with her church communities deepened, she had to endure a constant siege of fundamentalist practices and restrictions: "I couldn't have stuffed animals because they were idolatrous. They told me that keeping a journal was evil because [imitating her camp counselor] 'Time that you spend writing to yourself and only to yourself is time you're taking away from praising God, and that's the only thing that will protect

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<sup>76</sup> *Thinking.*, p 136.

you from Satan.' As a child I was loved and cared for, but as I got older it seemed all they cared about was obedience." A constant stream of invective against homosexuality only deepened this insecurity, as she felt attraction to and had sexual experiences with girls at a very young age.

But the 'last straw' came when she received a full-ride to a very prestigious liberal arts college. Whereas she and her family could barely contain their joy, Adeleida's church community didn't share the sentiment. "But how could you leave your church?" she began, using the same camp-counselor voice she'd used before, "Your relationship with God and with Jesus must be more important than anything else. How could you abandon that, how can you even think about leaving your community?" - God, it was *awful*. I still go back to church when I'm in town, but though I love them, I'm done." Her first years in college, too, were difficult. She had many questions about herself, about her past, her sexuality, all leavened in with the usual doubts and anxieties of college years - but she had no one to turn to.

Dorothee Sölle would describe the problem between the church that alienated Adeleida, as opposed to one that would welcome her, as an illustration of "humanitarian forms of religion" as opposed to "authoritarian forms of religion."<sup>77</sup> Though differences between the two abound, the chief characteristic is their relationship to power. Authoritarian forms - such as the church of Adeleida's younger days - are rooted in dependency on and obedience to a hierarchical, controlling God and that God's leaders. By contrast humanitarian forms turn away from this, valuing "mutuality and interdependence."<sup>78</sup> Authoritarian forms "support, advocate, and defend

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<sup>77</sup> Sölle, Dorothee. *Creative Disobedience* xii.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

the status quo” and need adherents who value stability over change and awareness.<sup>79</sup> But humanitarian communities see “self-realization [as] the chief virtue and resistance to growth [as] the cardinal sin.”<sup>80</sup>

Ideally every church should already resemble Sölle's description - acknowledge their individual value, seek to empower, and create and support a healthy balance of shared responsibility between the church leadership and the parishioners. But in order to welcome Recovering Christians back into the church there needs to be an even sharper emphasis placed on their 'humanitarian' qualities, to show that though a church had failed them in the past, this church – your church – will not do so again. It must give genuine pledge, a *covenant* if you will, of it's dedication to a particular Recovering Christian as well as their willingness to be held accountable to this pledge. It is incumbent upon a church to say more than “we’re different.” As their first step to building trust between themselves and Recovering Christians, a church must declare *why* they are different.

Bonhöffer’s *Sanctorum Communio* has good ideas for this 'covenant.' Bonhöffer begins the work by putting a somewhat modern spin on the Christian maxims of 'Love your neighbor as yourself' (Mark 10:21), 'The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve...' (Luke 22:21), 'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another' (John 13:35), 'He that would be the greatest among you, let him become the servant of all' (Mark 9:35) etc... by equating them with the concept of the 'I-Thou relationship' - the understanding that genuine

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

relationship is only possible when individuals fully recognize and respect the full being of each other and live with attentiveness to each other's distinct needs.<sup>81</sup>

However, despite a church community's inherent collective focus it must never forget that "uniqueness and separateness of persons" is never disavowed or disrespected.<sup>82</sup> Authentic relationships are only possible between *distinct* people with distinct identities and distinct needs. Relationships which don't recognize individual distinctness or needs are not genuine relationships, merely of each it is because the will of one is either dominated or parroted by the other. Any collective body - be it a church, a family, a political party, etc.... – "which might abolish the multiplicity of persons is contrary to God."<sup>83</sup> This isn't to say that there shouldn't be conflict or struggle. Bonhöffer admits that "even in the community of love the tension between wills is not abolished."<sup>84</sup> But even in the midst of disagreement, it is important that the presence of individual and distinct wills will never be seen as a threat to a church – rather as confirmation that the church is alive and healthy. Recovering Christians need to know this. For many, difference or dissension lead to being either over-looked, ignored, or stigmatized. So it is important the a church which hopes to welcome them give extra-explicit tidings that, indeed, the very same things that lead to their exclusion from one community will be welcomed as an important expression of their new community's health. Quite the change.

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<sup>81</sup> Though somewhat contemporaneous, Bonhoeffer's understanding of the *I-Thou* relationship is unrelated to that of Martin Buber, and most scholars agree that he was probably unaware of Buber's writings.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p 40.

Luther's vision of the 'priesthood of all believers' is another good addition to a special covenant with Recovering Christians. First broached in his *Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, Luther presents the priesthood of all believers as a response to the three concepts - or 'three walls,' as he calls them - by which the Roman Catholic Church hoped to withstand and avoid criticism: 1) Clerical authority was greater than all secular authority; 2) Reliable interpretation of Scripture and its impact on day-to-day life comes only from the Pope; and finally, 3) Only the Pope can call a council in order to discuss anything to do with reform or change<sup>85</sup>. *Ergo* Church authority is above all authority and any criticism of it that does not come from a pope or council is invalid.

His response is as radical as it is up-lifting.

In response to this he wrote, since "we all have one baptism, one Gospel, one faith all are Christians alike; for baptism, gospel, and faith alone make us spiritual and Christian people."<sup>86</sup> And since "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans) the need for salvation through Christ makes us equal. He then uses Scripture to support the idea that, indeed, we are just as equally all priests in God's regard - quoting both Revelation 5:9-10 ("You have made us to be priests and kings by blood") and 1 Peter 2:9 ("You are a royal priesthood and a priestly realm"). Therefore, "there is no true, basic difference between layman and priest, prince and bishop, between religious or secular" except for their professions and callings in life.<sup>87</sup> But Luther does not consider this variety of professions and occupations a question of ranking,

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<sup>85</sup> Luther, Martin. 'Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation' from *Luther: Works Volume 44*. p. 125.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

hierarchy, or 'status,' rather of the different ways by which Christians may serve one another for the sake of maintaining the functioning harmony of the body of Christ.<sup>88</sup> Consequently, churches need to be able to show that, despite being labeled and rejected by previous communities, in the new community Recovering Christians will be seen as priests, as kings and queens, and that their input will be sought-out, welcomed, and valued in disagreement and agreement.

McFague would probably add that a church that reaches out *specifically* to Recovering Christians is putting into practice Christianity's most distinctive characteristic - the call to shape one's being and doing to "side with the vulnerable and the outcast."<sup>89</sup> Taking a cue from biology, McFague speaks of evolution as cultural as well as biological. As society increases in complexity, and increases in awareness of this complexity, the idea of 'survival of the fittest' is gradually countered by "the principal of solidarity."<sup>90</sup> Consequently, "when society becomes conscious (as a sign of being more 'evolved'), it acts to benefit the whole, not just those who are fit for survival."<sup>91</sup> This is doubly so for the church. As the "critical social body" which models and demonstrates the new vision of this solidarity, the church then achieves one of its highest ideals when it strives to heal and empower "those who are in pain due to the indifference or greed of the more powerful."<sup>92</sup> And McFague makes it clear that this applies to not only the victims of global capitalism, or war, or starving children, but also to "whoever the oppressed turn out to be

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>89</sup> McFague, Sallie. *The Body of God*. p. 171.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

at a particular time" and - I would add - place.<sup>93</sup> Recovering Christians certainly fit into this category, and any church that consciously reaches out to them is taking upon a very noble and difficult task - the healing of the Church's victims and castaways.

These steps, however, have one major limit. They are focused mostly on the relationship of the new church to the Recovering Christian that said church hopes to heal. And as a covenant it can provide an effective point of departure for developing trust, understanding, and accountability between Recovering Christian and the 'new' church. However, though this covenant may put a Recovering Christian at ease, and demonstrate to them their value and respect in the eyes of the community, it does not directly address their church trauma, their wound, their *han*. And if a church truly wishes to become their home and refuge, the healing of their church wounds must needs be the top priority.

Andrew Sung Park, again, provides the most thorough insight into the distinct mission and purpose of such a church - the healing of the pain of Recovering Christians. to unravel the "frozen energy" of their *han* for the sake of "building up a new community."<sup>94</sup> In *The Wounded Heart of God's* final chapter - "The Resolution of Han" - he gives a detailed outline of the process by which we can bring this about, and it consists of four simple, but powerfully practical steps: ***awakening, understanding, envisagement, and enactment.***<sup>95</sup>

The first step is ***awakening*** - both to one's own *han* as well as its causes. Since Recovering Christians' church-trauma is on "the personal level of *han*" ("generally derived from

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>94</sup> Park, Andrew Sung. *The Wounded Heart of God*. p. 137-138.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

family relations, personal traumas, and job related issues") it is easier to address.<sup>96\*</sup> Park speaks true when he says that individuals who have experienced - and are experiencing - this kind of deep suffering "often don't want to acknowledge it for the pain and humiliation it brings."<sup>97</sup> However, among Recovering Christians this is not exactly the case. Of the possibly hundreds I've spoken to - and certainly the handful I've mentioned in this paper - most Recovering Christians are aware of their *han* and can clearly articulate its causes. What they are missing is a community where is pain can *ex sistere* - stand out, be given the simple room to breathe and be. A church that is willing to provide such space and accompaniment will have eager and willing cooperation from the Recovering Christian seeking resolution for their *han*. And even though the full extent of their pain - how it might affect their day-to-day decisions, their health, etc... - may still be somewhat "invisible and unrecognizable" many are well along Park's first step.<sup>98</sup> Consequently, when this awareness is paired with a Recovering Christian's active desire to re-enter Christian community and a congregation's willingness to take part in such a healing the prospects for the "dissolution" of their *han* are quite good.

The next step is ***understanding***. The purpose of this step is then to find creative and constructive ways to identify one's individual *han* and to go about bringing it into the open. Just as pain that is shared is pain no more, "[h]an that is understood is *han* no more."<sup>99</sup> This *kenosis* - or emptying of self - of one's *han* and the wounded, damaged self then allows for one's "true self

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<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* - \* This in contrast to "collective *han*" which is related more systemic and societal problems - such as income inequality, war, poverty, government corruption and abuse of power, etc..

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

to come into its place," whereby one may then clearly perceive one's self and the possibilities of life free from *han*.<sup>100</sup> Park then identifies three necessary levels of understanding needed to be sure the healing sticks - *rational, intuitive, and incarnational*.

**Rational understanding** makes *han* resolvable. But it isn't so much "[the] analytic ability to grasp the meaning of *han*, but a more synthetic capacity to comprehend the whole spectrum of *han*-producing situations."<sup>101</sup> By using our "faculty to analyze and integrate [what we observe] at the level of the intellect"<sup>102</sup> it is then possible to disentangle the over-lapping situations and conditions that make *han* difficult to solve.<sup>103</sup> **Intuitive understanding** then deals with the unconscious level of *han* "where the majority of our *han* is submerged."<sup>104</sup> Tapping into this "submerged" *han* then puts flesh, blood, and emotion onto the skeleton of rational understanding. Doing so allows the wounded to open "the gage to the world of the unconscious and its chaotic dynamic" - releasing *han*'s "frozen energy" apprehending its depth and impact.<sup>105</sup> When this happens *passive emotion* (inadequate or confused ideas tied to "external things" that "become the source of human bondage and misery") is transformed into *active emotion* - feelings and drives tied to "the desire to be oneself and to help others" which are "the source of human perfection and happiness."<sup>106</sup> This active emotion then produces an "unqualified acceptance" that

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<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* 142.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.* 143.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

"affectionately cares for the unconscious side of *han*."<sup>107</sup> This also allows victims to more fully "understand the why of their oppressors" and begin to develop a "rational [and intuitive] grasp of the offender's deed."<sup>108</sup> In so doing, they not only resolve their own *han* by probing the sources of their oppressor's *han*, but they are also then better able to better understand and connect to the *han* of others - making them more sympathetic. It can even help them to understand how they might even be oppressors themselves.

And finally, this "unqualified acceptance" leads to the last stage of understanding - **incarnational understanding**. The Latin root the *compassion* says it all - *suffering with*. Individuals who achieve this live their day-to-day existence in "total commitment to the resolution of other's *han*."<sup>109</sup> As God, through Christ, redeemed humanity by taking on flesh and being afflicted by the full and terrifying spectrum of human experience, so must we also become full participants in one another's pain if we wish to redeem those around us. "When *han* is embraced by the observer with compassion,' Park asserts, 'it begins to open up and to be dissolved."<sup>110</sup> The total depth of *han* "does not fully disclose itself to us when it is scrutinized by the observer" except when that observer "participates in [that] reality with compassion" - where upon *han* "opens itself up and shows its nature."<sup>111</sup> He also makes another brilliant observation when he says that this kind of "suffering with" is crucial to the miracles and mighty deeds of the Gospels. Jesus "never *performed* miracles," rather by undergoing the suffering and misery of

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<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.* 145.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.* 142.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.* 147.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

others in incarnational understanding he made them aware of and released *their own powers of self-healing* time and time again.<sup>112</sup> This both explains some of the magic behind Jesus' iconic line "your faith has made you well" as well as also provide scriptural affirmation and hope to those who feel their fears and struggles to be insurmountable. The power to heal is *truly* within them.

The next two steps, then, come somewhat together - *envisionment* and *enactment*. Envisionment is nothing less than when the individual - freed of their *han* and the distorting effect it has played in their lives - begins to dream. In working out this envisionment Park goes big - laying out plans for new ways of doing everything, from alternative economic models that emphasize mutuality instead of competition,<sup>113</sup> a new "global church community,"<sup>114</sup> church-centered banks,<sup>115</sup> and even ways to revamp democratic institutions like political systems, mass-media, family, and the church.<sup>116\*</sup> From the outside, it may just seem like naive dreaming - but this is not-at-all the case. It is the natural result of a once disempowered human being suddenly knowing in the deepest part of their being that they indeed *have* power. This empowerment then fuses with an even deeper awareness of the infinity of possibilities for continued growth and life, and, infused with the hopeful energy and drive, feels that their dreams are very well possible. It

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<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 161-167. \* Park's main suggestion for democratic envisionment (or re-envisionment) for the church is tied to Luther's 'priesthood of all believers.' "The Christian church is one of the most nondemocratic institutions in the world. It's hierarchical separation between clergy and laity underlies other type of social hierarchy... [I]n general the doctrine of the priesthood of believers enunciated by the epistle of Peter (1 Peter 2:4) and defended by Martin Luther has never fully been implemented in the Christian church." And this hierarchal struggle not only constrains the imagination and power of the laity, but it impedes the very "advancement of the full reign of God." (166)

is hope *empowered*.<sup>117</sup> And for Recovering Christians, regaining the ability to positively re-envision their their selves and their futures is a sure sign that they are alive again, dreaming again, and have the energy and the hope to turn these visions of wholeness and abundance into reality.

The final stage - *engagement* - is then the actualization of this empowered hope. And though this may take many forms, it is most fully consummated in the "the dismantling the *han*-causing elements of the world."<sup>118</sup> Once healed of *han* the way one goes about dismantling causes of *han* must not itself create more *han*. Consequently, this last step towards the resolution of *han* is "compassionate confrontation."<sup>119</sup> It is essentially confrontation with understanding; a confrontation where former victims - liberated from their own *han* - are capable of seeing and having sympathy for the *han* of their offenders and how they might then turn and help offenders confront and dissolve it. This is a truly difficult task, since "oppressors hardly come to repentance by themselves."<sup>120</sup> But once healed, victims are no longer "locked in a room where the door has no knob" and their presence and their words can be the way that an offender may then be shown the truth of their selfish deeds and be guided to a way out. There is no guarantee that it will work, that the offender will 'see the light' - neither should one who has freed themselves from their *han* feel obliged or *be* obliged to do this. But it is worth considering, even if the offender doesn't see the wrong in their ways the healed victim can take comfort and solace in having done what they could to try to further expand their circle of healing to include some

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<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

one who was once their enemy and tormenter. And what better way is there to 'love thy enemy' than to at least try to heal them, too?

## Ministry

So what?

That's the question that comes to me now.

So what? So what if you switch talk of God from being a righteous judge to being the life-force that imbues and animates all creation? How is that supposed to make Andy feel that God truly had forgiven him his mistakes? How is understanding Jesus as being outcast and sinned against going to help Steve reconcile with his family, or make Rochelle and Jean free from the abuse and neglect of previous pastors? How does this change the game for these people?

The answer comes down to *one* preposition.

I hear a lot of talk about *for me* in Church - *pro me* being a major theme among both mystics and Reformers. Jesus died *for me*, God has done so much *for me*, the Church does so much *for me*. In its positive sense, this kind of talk can be the refreshing and heart-warming fruit of gratitude and thankfulness, and the rhetoric is just as popular as it is strong. But I can't help but be troubled by one thing: it's potential to lean towards *conditionality*. Jesus died for me, therefore... *or* God has done so much for me, so... There is always the potential for an ellipsis of recompense or obliged response that is disquieting. This takes on extra significance with Recovering Christians. What makes their stories so troubling is not just their having been wounded by the church, but the fact that earlier in their lives they'd found great comfort, solace, and meaning in that self-same same church which had wounded them. When something in or around them changed, lo and behold, the gratuitousness of that comfort, solace, and meaning turned out to be an illusion, a ruse. Their communion had conditions. Grace was no longer a

given. Now they *owed* something. And so those conditions, once concealed, are then drawn out and used as club - extracting payment/compliance through spiritual intimidation or violence.

This isn't to say that standards for acceptance in a community are wrong *per se*. Membership in any community invariably must have some kind of criteria in order to steward and maintain its well-being. What's wrong is when the 'criteria' for Christian community is distilled to 'don't be gay' or 'don't change or question' or 'don't ever sin.' But for abusive religious leaders and abusive churches, that is precisely the case. In each story presented, the Recovering Christian had arrived at a crucial cross-roads - going to school, coming-out, growing-up, etc... - and instead of receiving their usual sure and faithful support, they were informed of the unknown or obscured conditions for their membership. And though not necessarily the fault of *for me*, the simple idea provides easy grip for spiritual abuse.

But watch what happens when you get rid of *for me* and substitute ***with me***.

Jesus dies *with me*. The church is *with me*. God has done so much *with me*.

The first apparent difference is the increase of intimacy. God, Jesus and the Church share in triumphs and travails alike *with me*. At once bold and comforting, *with me* proclaims the surety of the presence of God, Jesus, and the Church in one's life as well testifying to the closeness of that presence. The other difference is immediacy. When you say that Jesus died *for me*, God is there *for me*, or that the Church does so much *for me* there is an inherent distance between God/Jesus/Church and the person who made the statement - a distance that can be exploited by religious leaders wanting to corral 'rebellious' parishioners with the threat of exclusion and/or damnation. But when someone does something *with me* it is something that they are doing *now* - they are close at hand and ready to act. The presence, progress, and force of

Triune God and the Church are tireless and on-going and are just as active *now* as they were *then* and this persistence is yet further testimony of their constancy and loyalty.

Hence, the purpose of this theology is to turn the notions of God, Jesus, and - especially - the Church from being *for* Recovering Christians to being *with* them. God is *with* them, Jesus suffers *with* them, and the Church is and will always work *with* them just as true and sure as sun and rain. Their sin was not in the clothing they wore, or in being gay or being born with the wrong sex, or having sinned - the operative sin is being bullied with the *evil lie* that God, Jesus, and the Church is not *with* them because of x-y-and-z; that God, Jesus, and the Church could not, would not, nor would ever be *with* them unless they did x-y-and-z or changed x-y-and-z.

God is the life present in the whole of creation and just as God delights in the infinite varieties and expressions of life, so God wills and takes delight in the 'fearfully and wonderfully made' selves of Recovering Christians *with* them, and feels the concomitant pain that comes from its violation, that comes - as Sölle so passionately proclaims - from love. Jesus understands and relates to the abandonment, the pain, the fear and the rage of Christians both because of the *han* that *he* suffered but also because he is *with* Recovering Christians in their own lives as they are suffering now, weeping now, pleading and crying to God. And the Church, if it is to truly be the church, must go to such as these - men and women who have had pieces of their very being ripped-away and stolen by abusive pastors and their communities - and show them that, in fact, their loss can be healed and reversed, and that the Church will bear the pain and burden of this healing *with* them. Without a '*with*' God is at best distant, Jesus merely sympathetic, and the Church ambivalent.

So how is the church to do this - how is the church to walk with Recovering Christians as they heal from their pain? I propose reaching out to Recovering Christians with a spiritual practice rooted in Park's four steps for the Resolution of Han (*awakening, understanding, envisagement, enactment*) and further heightened by directing these four steps through the very powerful scriptural language of the Psalms. If a church is to be truly relevant to the needs of Recovering Christians and provide more than just blanket sympathy and understanding to their needs, such an intimate engagement is necessary. 'Finding a new church' home only grazes the surface of their need. They need to see that church is truly *with them* as they continue to search and heal, and that - in fact - the church is willing to take a dynamic role in that healing.

Most of the theologians quoted in this paper think highly of the Psalms. When he became a professor at the University of Wittenburg, Luther lectured extensively on the Psalms and would refer to their efficacy in prayer his whole life. Sölle considers the Psalms to be "one of the most important foods" and that their regular reading and engagement fights "spiritual anorexia."<sup>121</sup> Bonhöffer's epochal *Life Together* sets much stock in praying the Psalter. His reasoning is simple, but compelling. Bonhoeffer calls the Psalms "the great school of prayer"<sup>122</sup>. Using a very high Christology, he insists that since Christ is now with God, the 'new humanity of Christ' (believing Christians) takes part in his very essence by praying the Psalms of God and hence raising a "vicarious prayer of Christ for his Church."<sup>123</sup> Hence "those who pray the psalms

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<sup>121</sup> Luise Schottrof and Dorothee Sölle. 'Grounding Heaven in Earth: An Ecofeminist Approach to the Bible.' from Lectures from the Pollok lecture series held in the Atlantic School of Theology on 18-21 October 1999. Halifax. Quoted in *Endangering Hunger for God: Johann Baptist Metz and Dorothee Sölle at the Interface of Biblical Hermeneutic and Christian Spirituality*. Julia D. Prinz. LIT Verlag: Münster, 2007. p. 39.

<sup>122</sup> Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together*. p. 47.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

are joining in with the prayer of Jesus Christ" and "their prayer reaches the ears of God."<sup>124</sup> So when we pray the Psalms we are doing much more than reciting the Psalmist's words in our own context. Since Christ is 'the Word made flesh' (and hence Scripture is part of him) by using the Psalms for prayer we cosmically attune ourselves to the Divine and step into Christ's power. Hence praying the psalms not only gives a firm Scriptural foundation for worship and working through emotion, but also uses the Psalms – in a way worthy of the great Christian mystics - to summon the to Divine direct action. Reading and praying and feeling our faith through the Psalms' timeless poetry hence becomes a way that we can *know* that God and Jesus are *with us*.

However, in order to find a way to more constructively connect the reading and praying of the Psalms to Park's Four Stages of the Resolution of Han, it is good to make use of Walter Brueggemann work *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*. In it, he posits dividing the Psalms into 3 general groups - each group speaking something of the process of the life of faith: ***psalms of orientation, psalms of disorientation, and psalms of new orientation.***<sup>125</sup> Not only are these divisions helpful in analyzing and comprehending the Psalms themselves, but Brueggemann's analysis cannily highlights ways in which the nature and purpose of each group addresses the needs and goals raised by Park's Four Stages of the Dissolution of *Han*.

***Psalms of orientation*** are "created, transmitted, valued and relied upon by a community of faithful people" who have no burning questions about God, faith, or life.<sup>126</sup> For such people God has proven to be "trustworthy and reliable" and as a consequence they are at ease with their

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<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>125</sup> Brueggemann, Walter. *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House. 1984, 206 pp. p. 19.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

decision to "stake life on this particular God."<sup>127</sup> They are also "*expressions of creation faith*" - where the world is in something of an Edenic state - "well ordered, reliable, and life-giving."<sup>128</sup>

These psalms can provide an excellent rhetorical vehicle for Recovering Christians who are exploring the root of their *han* as part of their *awakening*. As a pastoral or ministerial tool, they give ready and easy voice to the contented, loved, and secure life of faith they may have lived before their estrangement and the memory of that idyllic stage before their 'fall' that likely sustains their faith despite that estrangement. Curiously, though, Brueggemann cannily reveals a dark subtext to these psalms of orientation that is just as relevant to the 'fallen' state of Recovering Christians as the 'edenic' one. These psalms also have a "*social function*" which proclaims the existence of a "sacred canopy" under which those who follow God may safely dwell.<sup>129</sup> Brueggemann is quick to note that psalms of this nature were likely written by and for "the economically secure and the politically significant" for whom the good things of this world were easily taken for granted. Consequently, these psalms might have also been used to 'justify the moral view that those who do not prosper in the world are those who live outside the parameters and priorities of God's creation' and hence are themselves somehow responsible for their own toils and struggles, or even deserving of hardship and condemnation.<sup>130</sup> When seen in this darker light, talking about this shadow of exclusion which lurks in these psalms' facile theology can be a very effective way for Recovering Christians to add yet another level of

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<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

contemplation, understanding, and prayer along their journey of *awakening* themselves to their own *han*.

As Recovering Christians then progress in unraveling their *han* the *psalms of disorientation* work as a bridge from the *awakening* stage towards and into the *understanding* phase. These psalms are characterized by their ability to "acknowledge and embrace negativity" and hence bring a level of honesty and vulnerability to worship and prayer. Brueggemann makes the simple assertion that, until brought to speech, feelings of pain, fear, or anger cannot be healed. This understanding is analogous to Park's understanding of *han* as suffering that accumulates in an individual who "needs to go through grief" but can't because of being "boxed-in and suffer[ing] with... no means to express their grief."<sup>131</sup> The psalms of disorientation can be seen as transcripts of the moment that the victims of *han* can begin to express their grief, their fear, their rage - and thus initiate its healing - confirming the truth that "*language leads experience*."<sup>132</sup> The psalmists vividly illustrate how once their *han* is processed enough to be put into speech it can be "addressed to God... the final reference for all life" and be made as an offering for healing.<sup>133</sup> What's more bringing vulnerability and darkness into worship shows that God "is present in, participating in, and attentive to the darkness, weakness, and displacement of life."<sup>134</sup> Or in my words, God is *with* people in the darkness and displacement of life. God is not a god who is present *only* when "everything is polite and civil," but even (and especially) when

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<sup>131</sup> *The Body of God.*, 40.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

we are overcome with difficulty and have to find ways of continue with life despite "the resilience of the darkness."<sup>135</sup>

Psalms of disorientation illustrate the transformation of Park's *passive emotion* (inadequate or confused ideas tied to 'external things' that 'become the source of human bondage and misery') into *active emotion* - feelings of liberated well-being, themselves the fruit of inner peace and understanding, that drive the self to happiness and wholeness - best represented by "unqualified acceptance." And the moment of this transformation, too, has an analogous moment in the psalm - an inevitable moment in many psalms of disorientation where everything "is transformed," where our lives - in suffering and anxiety - are seen as being "on a pilgrimage."<sup>136</sup> And, unexpectedly, "new-ness not of our own making breaks in upon us" and the source and root of the affliction is healed.<sup>137</sup> It is curious, Brueggemann notes, because often times the Psalms give no explanation of *what* has broken and *why* things are suddenly better, let alone *how* - merely the announcement that God has answered to the one who called out and restored life to justice. The details are ultimately left to the reader or the listener. Taken together, then, the psalms of disorientation are also excellent vehicles for chronicling the route from the *understanding* one's *han* to *envisagement* - the step where the visualizing and concretizing of hope provide one's first steps with the 'new self' that comes after such trial and tribulation. This, the end result of the wrangling within the psalm, is a "*transformed faith*" which makes us stronger, wiser, more at peace with ourselves, the world, and God.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.* p. 52.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

This then leads us to the *psalms of new orientation*. These psalms "regularly bear witness to the surprising gift of new life just when none had been expected."<sup>139</sup> Not that this new orientation is "a return to the old, stable orientation, for there is no such going back... the remembered trouble is still quite visible."<sup>140</sup> But despite the shadow of hard times the speaker and community are "surprised by grace" - where a new possibility of life and renewal is "wrought by the inscrutable power and goodness of God."<sup>141</sup> As with the psalms of disorientation, we know very little about what brought this change about - merely that it came about. All we know, as readers, is that the change happened and that God was responsible for it. This then leads to a statement of "*celebrated victory*" that then gives credit to God for the deliverance and helps to re-establish the self in a *new* orientation with even deeper awareness of and gratefulness to God.<sup>142</sup>

These then, correspond to Park's *envisagement* and *enactment* stages. The envisagement stage is relatively easy to apply to Recovering Christians. Once a Recovering Christian reaches this stage, they will likely feel renewed energy for their life, their future, and their commitments. It may also be the time to start moving from the use of the Psalms for *han*-healing to general spiritual formation rooted in their reclaiming all of Scripture with their new selves entire - or maybe even journaling, and continued dreaming. It will be an exciting and invigorating time for a Recovering Christian who reaches this phase. And though - as mentioned in the previous chapter - some of their plans and ideas may seem a bit naive, a community that hopes to minister

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<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

specifically to Recovering Christians must always treat their ideas and plans with sincerity and blessing. This gush of emotion and enthusiasm is, in a way, the rekindling of their former edenic hopefulness and newness, once so horribly shattered. A church leadership and its community must be sure to bless and encourage this ebullience, as in doing so they are healing the deepest, most wounded, and most precious part of the person themselves - their ability to hope and live into that hope.

Applying this last stage - *enactment* - to Recovering Christians is a tricky thing. If it is seen as finding ways to use their new found sense of self and 'compassionate confrontation' for the sake of greater commitment to social issues (the causes of *han*) or greater to commitment to the pursuits of their dreams and visions for the future, this is one thing. But as beautiful and wonderful a thing as it is to see someone who has overcome their abuse and pain to then turn around and stand tall in the face of the situations and people that hurt them in the first place, this kind of action cannot and must not be seen as obligatory, nor should the church play a directive role. Rather, when speaking of the possibility of a Recovering Christian's compassionately confronting their offender the church should never presume that it will be done, nor speak of it in any way that suggests that it is a requirement. On the other hand, knowing the potential for further healing, the Church and its leaders would do well to mention it as a possibility, once it is clear that a Recovering Christian has reached the point of envisaging their life anew and with strength. And if and when the Recovering Christian chooses to compassionately confront the pastor, or church, council, or church family that hurt them, the community that helped bring them to this point must be ever-nearby, offering continued love and healing for what may become the hardest test of their new self yet.

## Limitations and Conclusions

It's been a long ride since August 2011, when I started cracking open the first books for my constructive. And in the course of the months of readings, writings, interviews, and feedback I didn't often have the worry I'd left something out - gotten something wrong, *definitely* - but not left something out. Sadly though, now that I'm in the final hours before I hand this thing in - and anticipating the coming defense - my limitations are now evident, so I have to come clean.

The first is that this thesis focuses *only* on Recovering Christians who want to go back to or who are willing to go back to church. For many returning to church itself is too hard. Their abuse has been too much and whether or not they identify as Christians they no longer see the church as a place of honesty, openness, and community - let alone healing. Others, though they may still identify as Christians and still have pain related to their estrangement, simply have no need for church anymore and are indifferent to it. Still, I believe that the Church must hold itself responsible for their healing. At one point in their lives they were baptized believing members of Christ's body and the Church needs to make good on the broken promises and pain that such Recovering Christians still feel. How? I don't know. But maybe I'll make that a chapter if I'm ever lucky enough to turn this paper into a book.

However, my single biggest mistake is that, despite the hours I spent talking to Recovering Christians, I never actually *asked* any of those interviewed what kind of church they *would* go back to. This is partially because my main priority in each of these conversations had been to listen - to provide care and acknowledgement when possible and to get to know them. But even after this questioning was hinted at in one of my chapters' feedback I resisted the idea

because I thought that asking a question like 'What kind of church *would* you go to?' would have sounded presumptuous and insensitive - thereby implying '*I know you left church, but you really should go back.*' Now, however, I'm thinking that *not* asking this question not only denied me the chance to get more information for my Church and Ministry chapters, but showed me that I was being somewhat dishonest in my discussions with them. I didn't want to seem like I was hoping to evangelize them while I was trying to find ways to ultimately evangelize them. My only comfort from this that my genuine desire to bring them healing is based on the *hope* that I can heal them, not the *presumption* that I will - and hence, I hope that keeps the tone of the essay from being too self-assured.

I also could have used a chapter on pneumatology. My reflection on healing techniques is one thing, but ultimately it will be the Holy Spirit that will be breaking down many of the barriers and binding them up again. Hence, it is very important for me to talk about how the Holy Spirit herself will be showing up in this healing. But time constraints and the desire to focus on the praxis side of ministry made me put that chapter aside for the time being. I have revisited it though - Park's *Triune Atonement* speaks to the issue of the how of the Spirit in great detail and awoke in me a need to further ponder the specific ways in which the Holy Spirit can and will work healing.

Finally, the last major limitation is that I know that all of this is just a hypothesis. I have no proof that any of my ideas will work - only my own hope that they will. And in the meantime, as I work to put some of these insights into practice, I plan on seeking out more feed back. As I mentioned earlier in the paper. The project is still a good year or two away, as I want to complete

my ministry formation - but in the meantime I have been speaking openly of my desire to form a church and all conversations that I will have along those lines will be centered on this paper.

As for my conclusions. I am *very* glad I wrote this paper. It afforded me an opportunity to interrogate my assumptions on ministry to Recovering Christians, and to posit ways that I can bring their plight to the awareness of the church-at-large. I do not by any means consider this paper finished. Now my goal is to go over and try to make up for the limitations that I mentioned in the beginning of this section - most importantly in now broaching the subject of forming a church more openly with some of my Recovering Christian friends, and asking them the very question that I had been so reluctant to ask: What *would* a good church look like for you? Or more importantly: How do you want a church to be *with* you?

And finally, my next step is to figure out exactly how the intersection of Park's four stages for the dissolution of *han* and Brueggemann's psalms of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation can translate into an effective ministry praxis. You can really go anywhere with it. Maybe it could be a liturgy service where a church offers up the worship space for the Recovering Christian to tell their story through the Psalms - coupled with collaboration with a congregation's worship team. It could be used in a small-group ministry as well, where Recovering Christians (both outside and inside congregations) work out and discuss the ways that they grow and develop through the language Psalms - both in prayer, reading, and discussion. The possibilities are endless, and I look forward to exploring them.

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