



# Rethinking Our Story

Can We Still Be Christian in the Quantum Era?

Doug Hammack

## Can we still be Christian in the quantum era?

It is no secret that things are not going well for the Christian church these days. Despite great effort; despite trying to be trendy and tech-savvy, entrepreneurial and coffee-house gritty, nothing seems to be helping.

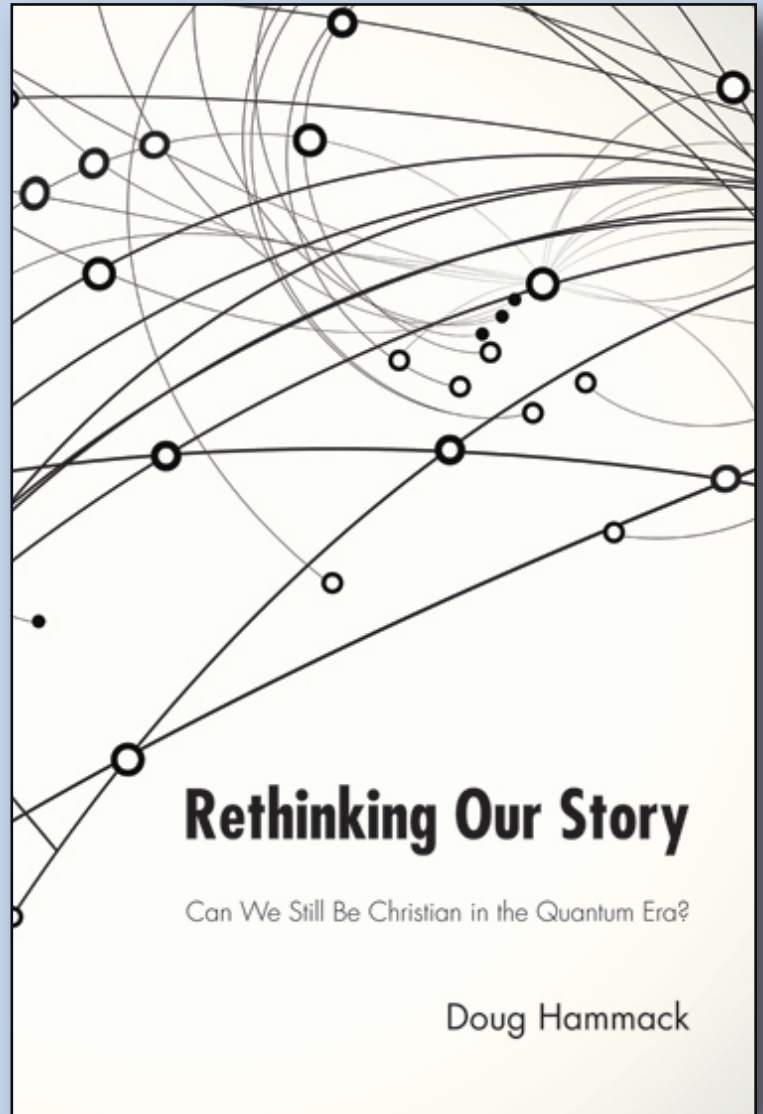
Rethinking Our Story suggests that our problems run deeper than better strategies can fix. Our problem lies with our instincts - instincts informed by the way we have told the Christian story.

There was a time when the Church was a powerfully transformative presence in society. It can be again, but it will require a vigorous rethinking of the story that informs our instincts.

We live in a moment in history when the worldview we have held for five hundred years is being upturned by quantum physics. Rethinking Our Story revisits the basic elements of the Christian narrative, framing them in ways that work with our newly emerging sensibilities.

The future of the church and the health of our society depend on our willingness to rethink, retell, and live out our story in this newly emerging world. We will either update our instincts and contribute to the earth's well-being - or disappear into oblivion.

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# 1

## The Universe Is Changing

### A Tale of Three Balls

Since this is a book about rethinking stories, let's begin with one.

It is a simple story, a story about three balls. Each ball is thrown at a different time in history, each ball tells us something about the time in which it was thrown, and each ball suggests how the church adapted to the world-view of its time.

#### *The First Ball: The Middle Ages and the Unknowable Unknown*

Thrown in the year 1300, before the Renaissance and Enlightenment, the path of our first ball was determined by the physics of the day. At that time, the world was a frighteningly unknown and unknowable place. Powerful forces were at work all around, forces we could not fully understand. Lightning struck, but we knew nothing about electrons or protons. Women died in childbirth, but we didn't understand the circulatory system. Crops failed, but we could not imagine microorganisms. There were so many unknowns that we developed a philosophy about reality that told us life's mysteries were simply unknowable to everyday people. It was not expected that humans could understand the deep mysteries of existence.

In this world, the path of the first ball, like most day-to-day realities, was determined by magical, mysterious, unknowable forces. Perhaps the ball's path was determined by tea leaves, or broken mirrors, or black cats. Perhaps the old lady at the edge of town put a spell on the ball. Superstition and magic

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were necessary guesswork for people who believed themselves powerless in a world that was intrinsically incomprehensible.

And the church of the Middle Ages adapted well to this worldview.

Recognizing people's basic need for meaning in an unpredictable universe, the church told the story of God in a way that fit with the reality of the day. The church positioned itself as a powerful agent, able to discern the mysteries of the universe, able to use spiritual power to protect, guide, and inform people. The church gave people access to powerful, religious magic. Celebrating the Eucharist, the priest would intone from the front, "This is the body," or in Latin, "*ho corpus est.*" The poor souls in the back knew something powerful was happening, but couldn't hear very well. It sounded like the priest was saying "hocus pocus," an incantation they took home to use themselves.

To match this pre-Enlightenment worldview, the church adopted the role of guardian, protector, and advocate. It helped people cope in their unknowable universe. "We'll get you to heaven," church leaders said. "We'll say the prayers that will get you saved. We'll read the Bible for you, explain the world to you, tell you what to do, what to say, and what to believe. We'll stand up for you against the wild forces in this dangerous world. Just do what we say, and you'll be fine."

And this powerful, parental, patriarchal church, this "advocating-for-the-outmatched" church, worked quite well for almost a thousand years. But then, Isaac Newton threw a second ball.

### *The Second Ball: The Enlightenment and the Solid Universe*

The path of the second ball was determined by Newton's precise, mechanical, elegant mathematical formula:  $F=ma$ ; Force equals mass times acceleration.

A shift was afoot in the 1500s. A crop of scientists were showing us that things once unknowable could be known. Galileo, Copernicus, and others made significant discoveries, but more than that, changed how we thought about reality. They introduced a "we can figure things out" mantra to Western society. By the early 1600s, everything from the circulatory system to the orbital paths of planets was becoming understandable, and a new view of reality began to emerge, the view that the universe was a precise and

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understandable place. Descartes capped this revolution, telling us that not only could we figure stuff out, but our whole identity as human beings was our ability to do so (*I think, therefore I am*).

Reality changed. Things once unknowable became simply “unknown as yet.” The universe became solid, precise, mechanical, and figure-out-able. A universe governed by discoverable laws and principles took root in our minds. We called our new worldview “The Enlightenment.” We could have called it the “We-Can-Figure-Stuff-Out” worldview.

Newton’s ball changed everything. Once it did, the everyday world had to adapt. In the philosophically unknowable universe, we needed champions: powerful people able to discern the unknowable and help us out. Consequently, social structures of the Middle Ages were built on a hierarchy of advocates that helped us navigate life’s harsh realities.

In the Middle Ages we needed kings to govern us. Commoners couldn’t fathom the mysterious affairs of state. We deferred governance to the divine right of the king. God appointed one man and one man only to determine political policy. His was a divine mandate to discern unknowable mysteries and lead us. But when the universe changed we began to believe we *could* figure out political stuff. Consequently, we had to build a new governing system for the new reality. And we did. We called it democracy. Now everybody got a vote, because everybody could figure out politics.

We also had to rebuild our economic system. In the old world order, we deferred economic production and distribution to a champion who possessed divinely ordained economic insights, the feudal lord. But once the universe changed, and we realized that we *could* figure this stuff out, we had to build a new economic system. Feudalism gave way to capitalism. We gave everybody economic access because in the new reality, we believed everybody could figure out economics.

In this new universe, the church had to be rebuilt as well.

So we had a Reformation. No longer needing the church to be our champion, we created a new system in which everybody could figure religion out on their own. We didn’t need a hierarchy of advocates to mediate our salvation anymore; we could do that on our own (*sola fide*). We didn’t need champions to read scripture for us and tell us how to live. What we needed was a printing press. What we needed was access to the scriptures (*sola*

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*scriptura*), an authoritative document with which we could figure religion out. So we began to rebuild our religion, hammering out a personal faith independent of the pesky meddling of the old world church. The battle cry of the Reformation was informed by the battle cry of the Enlightenment: “We can figure this stuff out!”

And Western society ate it up!

They loved us! People flocked to the church and stayed. Telling the story of God in Enlightenment terms really worked for us. The years after the Reformation were explosive times of growth and influence for us. We grew in numbers and were given prominence, authority, and an influential voice in society.

During those years, we tailored our story to fit in the new universe. Like it, our religion became solid, precise, and mechanical. Scouring the scriptures, we came up with a clearly articulated, highly understandable religion. We determined all the right doctrines, systematized them in books, and congratulated one another on a job well done. We figured out a proper doctrine for God, Jesus, human nature, sin, redemption, and the afterlife.

We perfectly mirrored the culture. We became steeped in certitude, confident we had the right doctrines, and comfortable that we had discerned the true principles by which to live. The culture was looking for dependable answers to spiritual questions, and we had answers aplenty.

And things would have continued right on being so successful, except a bunch of quantum physicists threw a third ball: a teeny, tiny, subatomic ball.

### *The Third Ball: Quantum Physics and a Return to the Unknown*

Our third ball didn't behave in solid, precise, or mechanical ways. Not at all! It wiggled around in ways that were random, chaotic, uncertain, and once again, mysterious. Neils Bohr threw it first in the early 1900s. Atoms, he showed us, the tiny little balls that make up the universe, are *not* solid after all. The table, once the very picture of solidness, became decidedly not so. It is made up of empty space and electrical charges. Sure, a table *appears* to be solid when a cup is placed on it, but in the new universe, we all began to understand that the very concept of solidness is an illusion.

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Then Einstein showed us that the universe isn't a precise place either. A ball thrown near the speed of light demonstrates that time and space are not as constant and absolute as we thought. So called constants are no longer constant. They shift and change depending on where we're standing when we experience them. The new universe became unsolid, illusory, relative, and no longer absolute.

Heisenberg gave us a universe that is fundamentally unknowable. He showed us it is philosophically impossible to understand the basic nature of things. We can know where the little balls that make up the universe are, but not how fast they're going. Or, we can know how fast they're going, but not where they are. Fifty percent of reality is inaccessible to us at all times. The nature of things became, once again, unknowable.

In the early part of the last century, these physicists changed our universe. Solid gave way to unsolid. Certainty gave way to mystery, and absolute gave way to relative. Our universe became a vastly different place.

### **A New Universe; A New Society; A New Story; A New Church**

For the last fifty years, our society has been hard at work rebuilding itself in response to quantum physics, just as it did in response to Newton several centuries ago. We're rethinking politics to match the new reality we live in. Fifty years ago, one's political "ism" was precise, solid, and unquestionably "right." If one's "right" was socialism, democracy was by definition, "wrong," and visa versa. But as a fuzzier, less solid universe overtakes our imagination, we are hard at work rethinking how we do politics. In global political dialog these days, many are working to integrate the truths of both democracy *and* socialism. It has become common to question if democracy is right for all nations at all times. These kinds of thoughts never occurred to us when the world was a solid place.

During the Cold War, capitalism was one of the strongest pillars of Western society. It had done so much to increase productivity and prosperity that it never occurred to people that it might need rethinking one day. However, as our reality is shifting, many are questioning even the solidness of capitalism.

The truth of Western medicine has become a relative truth. Today it has to compete on equal footing with Eastern medicine. Redirecting one's *chi*

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is just as valid a health option as Western drugs and surgery. Likewise, the concept of family has moved from fixed and certain to fluid and situational. We are testing all kinds of social arrangements that would never have been entertained fifty years ago, when there was only one right way to do family.

And what about the poor preacher, still standing firm on his Reformation-era absolute truths? In a world where few believe that any truth *can* be absolute, what is to become of his solid, precise, absolute doctrines about God, Jesus, and the Bible?

Christians believe that the life and teachings of Jesus were relevant in the Middle Ages, were relevant in the Enlightenment era, and will be relevant as the quantum era unfolds.

However, the way we *tell* the story *will* have to change. We won't be able to continue telling our story with the absolute certitude with which we've become so comfortable. That universe has gone away. As it goes, it makes many Christians really uncomfortable. As we begin rethinking our story for the new universe, there is more than a little reactionary hostility in response. Of course. It is an understandable human reaction to the ground getting shaky under our feet.

It may be small comfort, but we *do* have a Christian doctrine that can help us navigate this transition. It's the doctrine of the ineffability, or incomprehensibility, of God. It tells us that even when we *felt* confident and certain in our doctrines, we weren't. We never fully comprehended God anyway. All we ever had were temporary, incomplete, and inadequate thoughts about God and our God-story. Once we reorient ourselves to the idea that God can never be contained in any thought we think, the rethinking this new era demands of us becomes a lot less frightening.

### *Bad Stories Lead to Bad Actions*

Human beings are storytellers. Stories are the way we make meaning out of experience. Early in our history we told stories to explain the powerful forces of nature. We made meaning with stories of gods riding the storm on chariots of thunder. To help us navigate adversity, we told stories of heroes embodying the virtue and strength we need to face our own struggles.

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Stories give us meaning and either embolden or demoralize us. Stories tell us how to act, what to believe, and what we aspire to become. Stories tell us what to look for in life. And since we tend to find whatever we look for, stories are pretty deterministic in the lives we live. They inform our deepest instinctive approach to life.

The more noble and beautiful our stories are, the better we live our lives. If they tell us we are unlovable, hateful, or corrupt beings, that affects us. If they tell us the point of life is to accumulate stuff, or that the world is a dog-eat-dog competition, our instincts adapt accordingly. If we live in a story where we must compete for status, recognition, acceptance, or love, our instincts evolve to match. Stories inform our deepest instincts.

Bad stories lead to bad instincts.  
Bad instincts lead to bad actions.

And this is true of spiritual stories most of all.

Since the beginning, stories have been the preferred way to speak of spiritual truths: stories about God and stories about people experiencing God. Over time these smaller stories fused together into a broader, overarching, capital “S” Story, the Story of God. Spiritual stories become *the* Story of the human quest for something higher, lovelier, nobler, and more beautiful. The Story of God informs the deepest human longings. Our yearnings to transcend hate, war, prejudice, lust, and vices of all sorts are inspired by those occasional glimpses of the Divine that affect us so deeply.

Of all our stories, our Story of God interacting with our souls most powerfully impacts the instincts by which we live.

Consequently, when our Christian story gets encrusted or corrupted, the consequences are grave. When church folk become harsh, critical, or judgmental, when grace and forgiveness do not awaken in our souls, a polluted story is the most likely culprit. When church folk become the least likely to care for the environment, to recycle, to vote for environmental concerns, most likely, there is a tweaked story somewhere inside us. When church people fail to rise above the American deception that accumulating and consuming more stuff is the way to happiness, again, it’s probably our story that is to blame.



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Bad stories lead to bad instincts.

Bad instincts lead to bad actions.

And the deteriorating condition of our church today would indicate that our story has gotten bad.

Our story is not inspiring most of us to virtue. It is not inspiring us to live nobly or selflessly. It is not enabling us to rise above our lower, lesser natures, and live on behalf of the weak and vulnerable. It is not calling us to stand against evil with a single voice, together resisting the greed, hatred, or bigotry that infect our national life.

### *The Difference between Story and Doctrine*

One of the first classes young seminarians take is “Systematic Theology.” It is how we prepare them to be guardians of the faith. The word “systematic” in the title tells something about the way they learn our story. They learn it as a “system.”

After Newton threw that second ball, and we Christians adapted our story to match the new universe, an immediate task was to thoroughly inventory and catalog our scriptures into doctrines. We took a scripture from here, a scripture from there, gathered them together by topic, and created a series of doctrines. Chapter 1: the doctrine of God. Chapter 2: the doctrine of human nature, and so forth.

These scripture based doctrines became our way to tell the story. They outline what God is like, what humans are like, how salvation happens, and what souls can expect in the afterlife. Believing the scriptures told us everything we needed to know, believing in logic and deductive reasoning, we felt pretty confident we had religion figured out. We built our doctrines into statements of belief, canons of faith that told us how things are.

But things are changing. Since I was in school, in addition to Systematic Theology, another class is being offered: Narrative Theology. It marks a new approach to theology, stepping back from a system of doctrines, and speaking of the truths of God through story, returning to the way things have been for most of human history.

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A list of doctrines is brittle. When our understanding of the universe expands, doctrines don't have the elasticity to expand with us. Story does. When we are exposed to new ways of thinking about God or our own humanity, doctrines tend to constrain us, and eventually break. Story, on the other hand, stretches wide enough to contain our new understanding. Unlike precise doctrines, stories can have more than one meaning. A story can be understood one way in an absolute universe, and then expand to convey different truths in a relative one.

While Enlightenment era Christians were hammering out a good doctrinal system, the universe was precise. Consequently, if we believed "A" was true, then "not A" was by definition not true. This belief, enshrined in sound, irrefutable logic, was the bedrock of Enlightenment and Reformation thinking.

With this approach, once we figured out an "A" truth about baptism, or salvation, or such, anybody who held a "not-A" view was, by definition wrong. *"I'm sorry. You seem like a nice group of Christians, but we cannot stay in fellowship with you. You believe the wrong thing."* Consequently, over the last five hundred years, we've gone from two denominations to thirty-eight thousand, each splitting from one another because we couldn't agree on who had the "A-truth."

Spiritual stories, however, don't require we divide ourselves from one another this way. It is quite possible to see two very different truths from the same story, and savor one another's insights instead of disputing them. A story is more elastic, flexible, and pliant. A story can adapt when needed.

## **Another Reformation**

The quantum era demands that Christians throw another Reformation just like the Newtonian era did. A central demand of another Reformation is rethinking our story. It is happening, but not without some conflict. As happens when change is demanded, many are resisting the process and getting upset with those who are undertaking the task. My goodness! If you want to see hateful, just look at the Christian blogosphere respond to some of the emergent church voices.

But if we resist this rethinking process we will leave for our children a church continuing to suffer a slow death. If we had been born one hundred years earlier, we could have lived out our lives with a stable worldview, a stable

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church, a stable story. But we weren't. The universe those pesky physicists gave us is now *our* universe. It is the organizing principle behind popular culture, and it *demand*s we change. We *have* to rethink our Christian story. We *have* to figure out how to tell our story in terms our young people understand.

But rethinking religion isn't easy. Religion touches a deep part of our souls, and when our cherished beliefs are challenged, we don't tend to respond well. The religious transition being forced upon us can feel very threatening. It is a truism that conservative institutions are conservative because they have something to conserve. The Enlightenment church had a great run. Things went really well. It is not hard to understand why our instincts run deeply to keep things the way they have been.

Again, rethinking religion is not easy.

During the last Reformation we burned each other at the stake. When Protestants today look back at that upheaval, we see it as a slight bend in a mighty religious river flowing directly from Jesus to today. But for those who lived through it, the Reformation must have felt like starting a brand new religion. The idea that one's salvation was found by faith alone, eliminating one of the church's main jobs, must have felt like heresy of the worst order and worthy of death!

Thank God we don't burn people at the stake any more, but the same discomfort is in play as Christianity moves into the quantum era. Religious change is uncomfortable! We fear that deviating from the old ways will imperil our souls. We fear that if we don't tell the story the way it was told to us, we may corrupt the one and true faith, invoking the wrath of God and even condemning our souls to eternal damnation.

In my own attempts to retell our story, I've been called up for a few uncomfortable orthodoxy checks. Members of my own community and denominational supervisors alike have questioned my fidelity to the faith. They are good people intending only to keep our religion safe, and to make sure we honor God. Tinkering with the way we tell our story makes folks really uncomfortable. I've made *myself* uncomfortable. On more than one occasion, I've anguished over the potential that I am corrupting the religion I so cherish. I imagine the Reformers felt the same kind of trepidation.

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When I was young I heard a sermon that profoundly shaped how I think about the demanding change our times require. The minister told the story of a job he assigned his kids in the back yard. They got things terribly wrong and made a hash of the area he had them working on. Looking out the window, he saw them huffing and puffing away, doing their best, but making a mess. Before going out, he took a moment to consider what he should do. Should he scold them for getting things wrong or affirm them for working so hard? "I went outside," he said, "I affirmed them, thanked them for their hard work, and worked alongside them to get the job done properly." Of course. That's what good fathers do.

If, in our sincere efforts to retell our Christian story, we get things terribly wrong, shall we fear retribution from God? I don't think so. The testimony of our tradition is sure. While we cannot contain a full understanding of God, we contend that the fundamental nature of the Divine is Love. The testimony of our faith is that the nature of God is grace and tender mercy. If we get things wrong, the Holy Spirit patiently and graciously nudges our hearts. If we are receptive, we find our way. Punishment or banishment just does not figure into the equation. We need not fear, nor react from fear. Ours is simply to proceed with an open, listening posture. We are safe before our God.

A seismic shift is afoot in Western society right now and the church is behind the curve. We honed the telling of our story to work extraordinarily well in the Enlightenment world, but that world is going away rapidly. The challenge before us is to muster the same courage and resolve the Reformers did, to question things we hold sacred, to ask ourselves if our truths are *eternity-true*, or just *Enlightenment-true*.

In the process, we will inevitably get things wrong. We'll swing to one extreme or another. We'll dismantle too much or too little. We'll use bad metaphors and interpret scripture poorly. And when we do, my hope is that we are as gracious to one another as our God is to us. There are a lot of hateful Christian words being thrown at those reinterpreting our story these days. Who knows if the experiments being undertaken are right or wrong, but one thing can be certain. Hatefulness isn't consistent with the life and teaching of Jesus.

When Jesus' followers were rethinking Judaism, they created quite a stir. Some in the old guard thought the upstarts should be killed for their impudence, but one man, Gamaliel, took a posture that should inform our own

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approach. He suggested a wait and see attitude. “If this thing is not of God,” he said, “It’ll pass away like so many things in history. But if it *is* of God, it may just be our salvation, and we should certainly not resist it.”<sup>1</sup>

This seems a much better approach than burning one another at the blogosphere stake.

## About the Book

A good story always has good characters. In ours, the main characters are God, Jesus, and the human race. The first part of the book will look at these three players in our drama. What is God like? What are human beings like? What is Jesus like? Should we think of Jesus as a deity, and if so, what does that mean? Are human beings fundamentally good or bad? How about God? Good? Bad? Capricious? Even a Being?

After that I’ll weave the players into a narrative that will hopefully be compelling for folks in the quantum era. I’ll ask what *did* happen, before you and I arrived on the scene. We human beings wake up inside this life and find ourselves carriers of a beautiful, glorious, and divine nature. At the same time, we find ourselves living inside a selfish, petty, and often evil nature. Can we hammer out a story that helps us make meaning of this experience? How did we get here? What does God do about it? What should we do about it? How does Jesus fit in the whole thing?

After that, I’ll ask what *will* happen. How does our story end? How will things turn out? Is there an afterlife? If so, is it good or bad? Good for some, bad for others?

But before we can begin exploring any of those, we have to first do some thinking about the Bible, our traditional source material. We could have titled those chapters, “Why Do We Wear Poly-Cotton Shirts?” (since the Bible prohibits wearing two fabrics at the same time). It’s pretty clear that Christians pick and choose which sections of the scripture we pay attention to. Who decided which ones we heed and which ones we ignore? What were the rules by which we decided?

1. Acts 5:39.

*A Brief Warning as We Begin*

In this book, we're going to bump up against some people's ideas of what is, and what isn't, orthodox. That can be a little unsettling.

It should be noted that Christian orthodoxy exists as a pretty wide spectrum. We are Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic. We are Protestants of all kinds; Lutherans, Calvinists, Anglicans. We are Fundamentalists and Liberals, Pietists and Holiness-ers. We are Baptists and Anabaptists, Evangelicals and Pentecostals. We are Celtic Christians and we are Roman Christians. All of us have different views of how the story should be told, but over the years we have all identified together as "Christian."

But for many Christians in twentieth century America, this wide swath of belief and practice has been reduced considerably. It happened for perfectly understandable reasons. In the late 1800s, the American church was feeling the same kind of threat the Roman church felt when Galileo suggested the earth was not the center of the universe. Darwin had suggested that human beings were created through an evolutionary process. At the same time literary analysis was being applied to the scriptures, and all kinds of new and frightening ideas were emerging about the origins, authorship, and interpretation of our ancient documents.

In 1895, in response to this perceived threat, a group of people at the Niagara Bible Conference in Niagara, Ontario laid out fourteen points to which Christians must assent to be in the club. These became known as the Fundamentals of the Faith, and marked the founding of American Fundamentalism.

By the 1920s, those who wanted to adapt the Christian story to the emerging science and those who wanted to hold to the fundamentals of the faith squared off in a full-blown conflict: the Fundamentalist-Modernist debates. It happened first in the Presbyterian Church, but soon exploded into all the major denominations.

One group contended that new understanding was not a threat, but required adapting the Christian message. The other contended that if we deviated too far from the ancient traditions, soon we would no longer be Christian in any real sense of the word.

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As happens when sides are fussing at each other, the two groups didn't do their best listening. Each side demonized the other and spent more energy defending its own concerns than listening to the other. Each side became a caricatured version of itself, holding positions that marginalized the other more than fostering a vibrant spirituality.

And then in the 1960s the American church began its decline. When it did, the Modernist side of the debate started declining first. The Fundamentalists saw this as a validation of their view, and celebrated a victory of belief. By the time they started their own decline a couple decades later, their narrowed version of orthodoxy had become firmly established in the minds of many Christians. Consequently, today many of us believe that some of the most reactionary interpretations of Christian belief are in fact the only "orthodoxy."

As we rethink the Christian story, we'll be pushing up against a few of these historically reactionary views. When we do, I encourage you to remember the broad swath of belief that constitutes our Christian heritage; belief that predates the 1895 Niagara Bible Conference. Second, I encourage you to consider our specific moment in history. The relatively new universe we find ourselves in makes this moment a time we *must* see things from a variety of perspectives.

## Why Do This To Ourselves?

That is an important question: Why impose upon ourselves the rigor and conflict required to rethink our story? Why do this to ourselves?

My answer is simple. I love the church. I've been in it all my life. I know its weaknesses and shortcomings better than most, but I love the church. I love the community. I love the spirituality. I love our call to better the earth.

But if we do not take up the challenge of rethinking the church for the quantum era, there will be no church to pass to our children. I believe the church is worth fighting for, even if the fight is with ourselves.

Several years ago, I was in my office on a Saturday afternoon preparing a lesson for our church (North Raleigh Community Church, "NRCC") the following day. My notes called for a phrase familiar to most Christians, "the mind of Christ." As I was getting ready to type those words, I had an inner pause, a nudge to think it over. I knew the good church people I would speak to the next day would all have a comfortable slot in their brains for the

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phrase. They'd heard it before. It was safe. However, in the year leading up to that day, I'd been engaged in many conversations with church averse people, folks steeped in the quantum worldview. I knew that to them the phrase would be meaningless, perhaps even off-putting. For them, another term, "the universal mind," would be much more engaging. It would invite inquiry and curiosity and help draw them into the spiritual journey.

However, I faced two complications. First, my church averse friends wouldn't be attending the next day. The good church folk would. Second, the folks who would be there would find the term "universal mind" more than a little off-putting. To them, it would sound like New Age heresy; apostasy.

But a pretty strong sense of responsibility had been brewing in my soul for a long time. I knew I had to start telling the Christian story in a way the new worldview could hear. So there in my office, I stood up, walked over to the window, breathed a prayer for wisdom, waited for clarity (or courage), and then sat back down and typed the words "the universal mind."

I made the determination that day that I would begin speaking to the people who did *not* attend NRCC rather than those who did. I decided to speak to people who could not access the older version of the Christian story. Within a few months of that day, forty percent of our community left. Most of them were quite upset with me. They felt I had stolen their church from them, stolen their tradition, and robbed them of the deep relationships they had formed in our community. Many felt I had betrayed them.

And I had. Earlier in my life, I would have felt the same way they did.

But there was more going on that day in my office than just deciding who would and wouldn't be comfortable at NRCC. I was also grappling with what it means to be a faithful Christian. If I was going to substitute the term "universal mind" for "mind of Christ," I had to know what ground I stood on to do so. To do that, I had to reconfigure my own understanding of our story; I had to begin the process of rethinking that laid the foundation for this whole book.

The synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) tell the story of Jesus with concrete specificity. They start off with his genealogy, telling us that *this* guy, walking around *this* real estate, at *this* moment in history, did *these* things. That's why we call their gospels "synoptic." They give us a synopsis of the time Jesus walked the earth. If their accounts had been film, theirs would have been the documentaries.



## Rethinking Our Story

John's gospel on the other hand, has an entirely different feel. If his gospel had been film, it would have been an artsy one. His account is abstract, with layers of thoughtful interpretation. Having had longer to think about things, the author of this gospel tweaked the story to make meaning out of the mind-bending experience of Jesus. He begins his gospel very differently. "In the beginning," he says, "was universal thought (*logos*)." "In the beginning," he says, "was the Greek construct for thought and idea, the universal mind." This *logos* existed in the beginning, comingled *with* the Divine and was itself an expression *of* the Divine. And then, we looked up, and this universal, Divine Mind was walking the earth with us in the person of Jesus . . . the universal mind.



I love my kids. They'll be having kids of their own soon and I will love them too. Also, I've been leading North Raleigh Community Church long enough now that I'm watching some of our babies becoming adults. I love those young people too. And I love the college kids I meet with who are struggling to frame a worldview that will work for them. I love this young generation.

I also love the Christian church.

I am sad, however, that the two will not share this journey together . . .

Unless we muster the courage to hold our own Reformation.

Unless we muster the courage to rethink our story.