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**Jesus, Mark, Paul, and John Said WHAT?
The Evolution of Deliberately Puzzling Material in
the New Testament**

by

Scott Gambrill Sinclair

Dedicated
to
the faculty, staff, and students
of
Dominican University of California
in thanksgiving for their love and support
over so many years.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Chapter 1: The Pervasiveness of Puzzling Sayings in the Teaching of Jesus and the Limitations of Some Possible Approaches to Understanding Them.

Chapter 2: The Meaning of Jesus's Puzzling Sayings in the Context of His Historical Message. Discerning equality and the heart as we face God's unknown but trustworthy future.

Chapter 3: Puzzling Material and Mark's Gospel. We must have the humility to realize that we cannot know the crushing power of suffering and the greater power of grace until the time of testing comes.

Chapter 4: Strange Material in 1 & 2 Corinthians. The paradox of living simultaneously in two ages and the paradox of superiority through selflessness.

Chapter 5: The Puzzling Sayings in John's Gospel. Learning the paradox of Jesus's identity as we go through the stages of spiritual growth.

Chapter 6: Tracing the Evolution of the Paradox of the Eucharist.

Chapter 7: Some General Conclusions about the Deliberately Puzzling Material of the New Testament.

Bibliography

A Note about the Author

Introduction

The deliberately puzzling sayings of Jesus pose both historical and theological problems. When Jesus said that we must hate our father and mother to be his disciple or that if we only had a tiny amount of faith we could move a mountain, there is the historical problem of what he could possibly have meant and why he chose to express himself so strangely. There is also the theological problem of how Christians are to apply this material today. Do such statements make sense in our own lives, and should Christians today imitate Jesus in speaking in enigmas?

In the following brief book we will begin by tackling the historical problem of Jesus's enigmatic speech. We will consider some of the many possible approaches to understanding Jesus's puzzling rhetoric, and examine the limitations of them. Then I will outline what I think is the most fruitful approach and illustrate it by using it to interpret a series of strange sayings of Jesus.

To tackle the theological problem of how to appropriate Jesus's puzzling sayings, we will examine the evolving tradition of deliberately puzzling material in the New Testament. The book will argue that the Gospel of Mark, Paul's Letters to the Corinthians, and the Gospel of John continue the tradition of speaking enigmatically, and that this tradition steadily evolves as we proceed from Mark to Paul to John. After looking at these sources individually, we will confirm the contours of the evolution by looking at the one block of material that occurs in all of these sources, Jesus's institution of the Eucharist. Each stage of the evolution is intellectually interesting and pastorally helpful in its own right. The evolution as a whole gives us illustrations of how to apply the enigmas of Jesus today and how to determine when it is appropriate for contemporary Christians to speak enigmatically.

To the extent that I was able to, I have cited the work of other scholars, but for a variety of reasons there is little documentation. Part of this paucity is due to my own ignorance. This book covers a large range of material, and I have not been able to master the scholarly discussion. In addition, many of my proposals—so far as I know—have no precedent, and there was no one with whom to be in dialogue. For example, I know of no one who has

considered what I think the basic theme of Mark's Gospel is or what I think the final editor of John's Gospel was attempting to do, or whether there is an evolution of paradox in the New Testament as a whole. I have treated some of these ideas at greater length in other publications which I have listed in the bibliography. Of course, the slim amount of documentation in this book at least has the virtue of keeping the text briefer than it otherwise would have been.

In my citations from the Bible I have normally used the New Revised Standard Version. However, whenever the NRSV had the title, "Son of Man," I have substituted "Son of Humanity." Here the original Greek means a member of the human race but not necessarily a male. On the few occasions where I used my own translation, I have indicated this in parentheses.

I am indebted to Judith Berling, Alan Schut, and Caroline Summer for reading drafts of the typescript and making helpful comments.

Chapter 1

The Pervasiveness of Puzzling Sayings in the Teaching of Jesus and the Limitations of Some Possible Approaches to Understanding Them

“Let the dead bury their own dead” (Matt 8:22).

“If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off” (Mark 9:43).

The teaching of Jesus is full of deliberately confusing and disturbing material. I have quoted two illustrations above, and in the course of our discussion we will consider many more. In the deliberately confusing and disturbing material I would include at least the following categories.

First, there are the statements which are so extreme that it is difficult to take them literally. Often these are ethical exhortations. “If any want to sue you to take away half of your clothes, let them have the rest” (Matt 5:40, my translation). But sometimes these exaggerated statements are doctrinal. “Truly I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move” (Matt 17:20).

A different category of puzzling statements are the ones that are deliberately rhetorically offensive. “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). “Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant” (Matt 26:27-28). Here we may note that honoring parents is one of the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:12, Deut 5:16), and the Bible repeatedly forbids the drinking of blood (already, Gen 9:4; e.g., Deut 12:16).

Still another category of enigmatic statements are those that border on being meaningless because they are so ambiguous or contradictory. A famous example is, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17). Although this statement has inspired much reflection about the proper relationship

between church and state, the statement itself is problematic. After all, everything belongs to God! An important and pervasive ambiguity in the words of Jesus is the phrase “Son of Humanity” or in the older translations “Son of Man.” Jesus loved to refer to himself as the “Son of Humanity,” and the basic meaning of the phrase was “a human being.” But what was Jesus trying to communicate when he kept insisting that he was “the human being”? Surely, no one doubted that Jesus was human.

Then there are the strange stories that Jesus told. We may use Matthew 20:1-16 as an illustration. The owner of a vineyard hires people to work for the rest of the day at 6:00 A.M., 9:00 A.M., noon, 3:00 P.M., and 5:00 P.M. Then at quitting time, he pays them all the same. When those who toiled the entire day complain, the owner replies that he paid them the wage agreed on and to get out!

Finally, there are all the disturbing examples and images. We are supposed to model our behavior on a dishonest steward (Luke 16:1-7), and the Kingdom of God is like a giant weed (Mark 4:30-32).

Some strange sayings of Jesus simultaneously fall into more than one category. For instance, the statement that the sin against the Holy Spirit cannot be forgiven (e.g., Mark 3:29) is both extreme and ambiguous. Is Jesus claiming that no matter how repentant people may be about a past mistake, they can never be forgiven? What precisely is the sin against the Holy Spirit? Even the evangelists who recorded the saying apparently disagree on its intent. Mark seems to hold that the sin against the Holy Spirit is calling something evil which is manifestly good (Mark 3:22-30), whereas Luke seems to hold that this sin is apostasy (Luke 12:8-12).

It should be noted that among the “puzzling” sayings I am not including material that makes us uncomfortable but is not deliberately strange. Some sayings of Jesus disturb us because they reflect an outdated understanding of the universe or because they are too polemical or embody social values which today we may find offensive or because they have been disproven by subsequent events or are too demanding. We may not agree with Jesus’s assumption that what sounds like epilepsy to us was due to demonic possession (Mark 9:14-29). We may wish that Jesus had been more gentle in religious dialogue and stopped short of dismissing his Pharisaic critics as “whitewashed tombs” (Matt 23:27). We may bridle when Jesus initially refuses to help a desperate foreign woman, calling her a “dog” (Mark 7:27).

We may say that Jesus's prediction that his own generation would not pass away before the final triumph of God (Mark 13:30) was mistaken. We may not be prepared to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12:31). However, these statements were not deliberately puzzling and do not need to puzzle us. Jesus did not know modern medicine. The use of extreme language in religious debate was typical of the time in which Jesus lived. Jesus shared the prejudices of his own culture, and he did help the foreign woman when she showed him her earnestness. Jesus himself admitted that he did not know when the present world would end (Mark 13:32). We do not *in principle* object to the commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," and in Jesus's culture that commandment was already accepted as part of God's holy word (Lev 19:18). By a puzzling saying I mean something that apparently Jesus meant to be disturbing.

There have always been efforts to domesticate the deliberately strange material. Often the domestication has consisted of toning down the startling point. Perhaps Jesus himself occasionally first made a puzzling saying and then in response to a question or protest made a more sensible qualification. Mark's Gospel records that when Jesus stated that it was no more likely for a rich person to get into the "Kingdom" than for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle, the disciples objected. Jesus made the problematic response, "for God all things are possible" (Mark 10:27). This exchange may not be historical. It is at least possible that the qualification that all things are possible with God was a later interpretation of what Jesus had in mind. Be that as it may, after Jesus's death it became common to make Jesus's statements less extreme. Paul, the earliest Christian writer whose works survive, already reversed Jesus's statement about the amount of faith required to move a mountain. Jesus said that with only the faith the size of a mustard seed (proverbially, the smallest of seeds) one could move a mountain (Matt 17:20). Paul, obviously alluding to Jesus's teaching, said that someone who had total faith could move a mountain (1 Cor 13:2). The evangelists (or earlier tradition which they pass on) give us several examples of two versions of a saying, an extreme version that must come from Jesus and a softer version that arose later. Whereas Jesus in Luke's Gospel tells us that we must hate our parents to be his disciples (Luke 14:26), Matthew says only that we must love Jesus more than we love our father and mother (Matt 10:37). Whereas in Matthew the disciples are told to drink Christ's blood (Matt 26:27-28), in Luke we read that the "cup" is the new covenant in Christ's blood (Luke 22:20). Whereas in Matthew Jesus sends his disciples out with the order to take nothing with them, not

even a walking stick (Matt 10:10), Mark permits a walking stick (Mark 6:8). Whereas in Mark Jesus forbids divorce under any circumstances (Mark 10:2-12), Matthew allows divorce on the grounds of adultery (Matt 5:32, 19:9; for further details, see below).

The effort to make Jesus's sayings more "reasonable" has continued down through the ages. The Gospel of Thomas, which probably comes from the second century, has two versions of the saying that one must hate one's parents, a radical version and a toned down one. The first tells us simply that we must hate our parents if we are to be Jesus's disciples (log. 55). The second is, "He who shall not hate his father and his mother like me cannot be my disciple, and he who shall not love his father and his mother like me cannot be my disciple" (log. 101; translation in Hennecke-Schneemelcher with the brackets removed)! Nearly two thousand years later I myself learned in Sunday school that there was a gate in Jerusalem called the "Eye of the Needle," which a camel could barely squeeze through. The rider had to dismount and unload all of the baggage. The point apparently was that when Jesus said it was easier for a camel to go through the "Eye of the Needle" than for the rich to enter the Kingdom (Mark 10:25), he only meant that the rich would have to humble themselves to get into heaven and certainly could not take their possessions with them. Unfortunately for my Sunday school teacher, there is no historical evidence that this particular gate ever existed.

A different way of domesticating the puzzling material of Jesus has been to ignore the major point of a troubling saying and focus on a minor one. We may use Luke's treatment of the Parable of the Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1-8) as an illustration. The disturbing major point of the parable is that it is fine for someone to do what is right for the worst possible reasons. The story explicitly tells us that the judge was despicable. He "neither feared God nor had respect for people" (Luke 18:2). He had no interest in helping a "widow" (in the Bible the very personification of the needy whom God supports) in getting justice. He only agreed to hear her case after being worn down by her nagging. Yet the story with a touch of humor uses him as an illustration of behaving wisely. By finally giving the widow justice, he made life easier for himself. Enlightened selfishness is a good thing! Luke obviously could not imagine that this was the point which Jesus was making. How could a judge who "neither feared God nor had respect for people" be a role model? So Luke made the widow the role model. Her persistence in seeking justice despite initial rejection by a heartless judge

was admirable. By implication, the followers of Jesus must persist in seeking justice for the marginal. And Luke used the parable to illustrate one of his themes, the importance of prayer. Luke prefaced the parable with his explicit interpretation, lest the reader go astray, “Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart” (Luke 18:1).

Such domestication of the paradoxical sayings has been pastorally helpful. Toning down extreme statements certainly has been useful. Adding “for God all things are possible” (Mark 10:27) to Jesus’s stark statement that the rich could no more be part of the Kingdom than for a camel to pass through a needle’s eye was helpful. Obviously, it is desirable to have rich persons in the Church. And certainly any compassionate person would believe that it is *possible* for at least some rich people to enter heaven at death. Changing Jesus’s condition for being his disciple from hating one’s parents to loving Jesus more even than one’s parents was helpful. Surely, the Church should teach people to keep the Mosaic commandment to honor one’s father and mother rather than hate them. Mark was being sensible when he allowed missionaries to have a walking stick. Is it realistic to send out missionaries with no resources? How would the missionaries even get to their intended mission fields? In many cases adultery does make divorce a better option than staying married to an unfaithful spouse, and Matthew was right to allow for divorce on these grounds. And if such reflections seem obvious to us, they should have occurred to Jesus.

The domesticated versions of the paradoxical sayings of Jesus did preserve parts of the original message. Jesus’s strange statements usually point in a certain direction which makes sense; it is only the details that disturb us. If we eliminate the offensive details, the basic point often remains. For example, adding “for God all things are possible” to Jesus’s statement that the rich could not get into heaven any more than a camel go through the eye of a needle preserves the perspective that the rich will have difficulty being ethically responsible members of the church and entering heaven at death. Similarly, focusing on minor points rather than major ones in difficult sayings at least preserved the minor points. In the Parable of the Unjust Judge the widow’s perseverance in seeking justice is indeed admirable and a good role model, and Jesus certainly was implying this.

However, the domestication of Jesus’s sayings must have lost something crucial in his teaching. Jesus must in general have had a major goal by teaching in confusing, even shocking ways, and we must discover what it

was. And obviously we should not ignore the primary message that Jesus was making in any particular startling or enigmatic saying and only concentrate on a minor point!

Once we recognize that sometimes the evangelists have domesticated sayings of Jesus, we discover that even ones that the Church had no trouble taking literally were originally disturbing. Here we will briefly look at three which subsequently have been influential. The first, the parable of the shepherd looking for a lost sheep (Matt 18:10-14, Luke 15:1-7), has been a favorite among Christians. I suspect that the famous sermon on Jesus as the good shepherd in John's Gospel was a meditation on this parable. In any case, pictures of Jesus as a shepherd cherishing his sheep have been part of Christian art and piety down through the centuries. The parable of the shepherd searching for the lost sheep has illustrated God's love for every person, even the most lowly or sinful, and has challenged Christians not to abandon anyone. Apparently, neither Matthew nor Luke saw any problem with the parable, and most subsequent Christians have not seen any problem either. However, in both Matthew and Luke the shepherd abandons ninety-nine sheep in a dangerous place just to look for one. Matthew tells us that the shepherd left the ninety-nine "on the mountains" (Matt 18:12), and Luke tells us that the shepherd left the sheep "in the wilderness" (Luke 15:4). But if a shepherd abandoned his sheep in these locations, the entire flock would wander off and become prey to predators. No shepherd in his right mind would abandon ninety-nine sheep on the mountains or in the wilderness just to look for one stray. Since Jesus grew up in the countryside, whereas Matthew and Luke probably lived in cities, he must have known that the parable was absurd.

A second example of a saying which the Church took literally but which was originally weird was that someone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery. The Catholic Church has traditionally taken this dominical word as law and denied communion to people who are divorced and remarried. And the evangelists already took the saying literally, since they added commentaries. As noted above, Matthew makes an exception for adultery (Matt 5:32, 19:9), and Matthew and Luke both expand the saying by adding that marrying a divorced woman is adultery (Matt 5:32, Luke 16:18). Mark, by contrast, says that if a woman divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery (Mark 10:11-12). Since these commentaries are diverse, and since it would have normally been impossible for a woman to divorce her husband in first

century Israel (but was possible at Rome where Mark probably wrote his gospel), it is unlikely that any of these commentaries goes back to Jesus himself. Jesus only said, “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery” (Luke 16:18a). This statement is a paradox, because adultery is only possible if one of the parties is legally married! Building on the insight of Bruce Malina (Malina:120), we may say that, “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery,” is analogous to, “Whoever purchases a television, is dissatisfied with it, returns it to the store, and exchanges it for another commits theft.”

As a final example of a paradoxical statement that the Church did not recognize and, therefore, misunderstood, we will consider Jesus’s saying in Matthew’s Gospel, “There are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven” (19:12). In the literary context of the passage in Matthew, where Jesus calls divorce and remarriage adultery, the saying must mean remaining celibate after a divorce. In later Church history, the saying was a scriptural justification for celibacy as a requirement for a priestly or monastic vocation. Nevertheless, it must be insisted that a eunuch is neither a celibate nor a divorced person, but someone who is sexually incapable due to a physical defect. And according to an e-mail sent to me from Dr. Gary Brower who did a scholarly study of this saying, the term “eunuch” was never used figuratively of human beings in Mediterranean culture prior to Jesus. Moreover, being a eunuch was a bitter social disgrace. To make oneself a eunuch, particularly in first-century Jewish culture, would have been seen as an act of moral depravity (Keener: 471). Therefore, Jesus’s original statement that some become “eunuchs” for the “Kingdom of Heaven” was both weird and offensive.

One way to deal with the paradoxical sayings of Jesus is to take them one at a time and in each case attempt to explain away the paradox on special grounds. There are unique considerations which allow us to conclude that each particular saying does not actually present a problem, even though at first glance it seems to. This approach has always been popular in commentaries and sermons. In his book, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*, F.F. Bruce, a major scholar, even tries to explain away all of the disturbing sayings by careful individual analysis. As an illustration, we may use Bruce’s discussion of Jesus’s saying that one must hate one’s family to be his disciple (Luke 14:26). Not surprisingly, Bruce stresses that this saying contradicts Jesus message of love and is shocking. Nevertheless, Bruce assures us that Jesus was only insisting that the Kingdom of God must take

precedence even over family ties. The Kingdom must come first. Bruce goes on to explain that “in biblical idiom to hate can mean to love less” and that Matthew 10:37 correctly renders the intended meaning with the words, “He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.” Of course, human beings are naturally attached to their relatives, and, consequently, Jesus had to use the “most arresting and challenging language at his command” to make this demanding point (Bruce: 119-121).

Although explaining away the “hard” sayings of Jesus on a case-by-case basis can produce insights, it fails to deal with the basic problem. Explaining away the difficulties individually does not deal with the larger question of why Jesus so often spoke in such strange ways. Why did Jesus habitually use surprising rhetoric? Thus, in the example cited above, Bruce assures us that because it is so unnatural to put something ahead of loyalty to family Jesus had to use the “most arresting and challenging language at his command.” The clear implication is that Jesus would not normally use such drastic language. But as we have already seen, and will see again, Jesus normally did use drastic language. Another problem with the “divide-and-conquer” approach to the paradoxical sayings is that in trying to explain away the difficulties of each saying individually the exegete inevitably goes beyond the evidence, often far beyond. Bruce is an important scholar, and there is much of interest in his treatment of the saying about the need to hate one’s parents in order to be Jesus’s disciple. Nevertheless, his remark “in biblical idiom to hate can mean to love less” is clearly beside the point in dealing with Jesus’s original statement. Even in the Bible to hate can only mean to love less when there is a comparison. Of course, in Matthew’s toned down version of the material, there is a comparison. A disciple must love parents less than Jesus. But the statement that Jesus actually made does not contain a comparison. It simply says that one must hate one’s family to be his disciple.

A popular way of dealing with at least many of the difficult sayings is to treat them as mere hyperbole. Jesus resorted to extreme exaggerations to make his points. Jesus clearly loved to use hyperbole. For example, he told a parable comparing a debtor who owed ten thousand talents (billions in our money) with someone who owed only one hundred denarii (in our money, minimum wage for one hundred days [Matt 18:23-35]). Therefore, it is often suggested that many of the difficult sayings of Jesus are only hyperbole. When Jesus said that with a tiny amount of faith one could move a mountain (Matt 17:20), he meant that one could accomplish a lot

with only a small amount of trust in God. When Jesus said that if our hand causes us to sin, we should cut it off (Mark 9:43), he only meant that we must take sin seriously and struggle to overcome it. In his explanation of hating one's parents Bruce seems to regard that statement of Jesus also as hyperbole. Jesus was only using the "most arresting and challenging language at his command."

Although there is some truth in the claim that many of the enigmatic sayings of Jesus are hyperbolic, basically they are not. It is certainly true that at least many of the difficult sayings of Jesus exaggerate and, therefore, are technically hyperbolic. Jesus was exaggerating when he said that with a small amount of faith one could move a mountain or that one should cut off one's hand rather than commit a sin. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that hyperbole has the opposite literary effect from Jesus's difficult sayings. Hyperbole strengthens a point by exaggerating it. By contrast, in the hard sayings, Jesus's rhetoric weakens his points by making us wonder whether the speaker is serious or sane. When Matthew says that we must love Jesus more than we love our families, he is (*pace* Bruce) using the "most . . . challenging language at his command." By contrast, when Jesus says that we must hate our families to be his disciples, we are inclined to think that Jesus is joking or else is nuts. No wonder people said Jesus "has gone out of his mind" (Mark 3:21). To understand why Jesus spoke so strangely, we must explain why he wished his original hearers to question what he himself was saying.

A different approach to some of the difficult sayings is to suppose that they were only meant for a special elite audience. Thus, an earlier period of Church history assumed that the extremely demanding ethical sayings were not for normal folks but for monks and nuns who took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. A normal Christian could not be expected to go out with nothing and preach the gospel and depend totally on the generosity of the hearers (cf. Matt 10:6-10). The mendicant orders did that. In normal society it was important to respect the privileges, both social and material, of those on top. It was only in the monastery or the nunnery that everyone should dress alike and have the same standard of living and thus fulfill Jesus's vision of a community in which the first should be as the last (e.g., Mark 10:43-45). Today we might doubt whether Jesus intended his hard sayings to be for monks and nuns. However, a modern scholar could argue that many of Jesus's most demanding sayings were only for a small group of disciples who had left all and followed him. The gospels frequently

tell us that Jesus sometimes gave private instruction to people who had left or were preparing to leave their homes and families to follow him, and some of this instruction was paradoxical. For example, it is to a would-be disciple who wants to bury his father before following Jesus that Jesus in Matthew's Gospel says, "Let the dead bury their own dead" (Matt 8:21-22). Moreover, in the gospels many of Jesus's more radical and unrealistic commands are to a special missionary group. These missionaries are to be like "sheep in the midst of wolves," "wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matt 10:16). They must go out to preach and heal without taking along any money (Mark 6:8) and endure violence without retaliation (Matt 5:39). Jesus did not expect the rest of his followers, like Mary and Martha who did not leave all and follow him, to live by such extreme standards. And the teaching of Jesus does not imply that most Christians today should live by such standards either.

One advantage of assuming that Jesus's most extreme ethical demands were for a spiritual elite is that historically heroic Christians down through the centuries took these demands literally and changed the world. Anthony of Egypt did take literally Jesus's command to the rich man to sell everything, give the proceeds to the poor, and follow Jesus with no possessions (Mark 10:21), and Anthony founded the desert monastic movement which swept Egypt, Israel, and Syria. Francis of Assisi literally followed Jesus's command, "If any want to sue you to take away half of your clothes, let them have the rest" (Matt 5:40, my translation). Francis gave his angry father who was suing him all of his clothes and stood naked before him. Also following Jesus's command to the letter, Francis literally went out to preach without taking money or sandals or even a staff (Matt 10:9-10). And Francis founded a mendicant movement that swept Western Europe. Gandhi took literally Jesus's command not to resist violence with violence (Matt 5:39), and he began a movement of non-violent resistance which led to the liberation of India from the British and inspired Martin Luther King to use the same tactics successfully to liberate African Americans in the United States.

Nevertheless, it is unlikely that Jesus's extremely demanding ethical sayings were primarily for a limited, elite group. The evangelists often arrange material by topic rather than chronologically. Therefore, we cannot assume that historically all of the private instruction to disciples in the gospel accounts was just for this restricted audience. The gospels record that often the most committed followers of Jesus did not live up to basic

ethical demands, and in the end Judas betrayed Jesus and Peter denied him. Hence, we may wonder whether the extreme demands of many of Jesus's statements were primarily intended for this group. Moreover, surely Jesus did not expect any, no matter how virtuous, to cut off their hands or pluck out their eyes to avoid sin (Mark 9:43-47) or become eunuchs for the Kingdom of God (Matt 19:12). Nothing in the gospels suggests that anyone during Jesus's lifetime ever engaged in such self-mutilation. Jesus was also opposed to making spiritual distinctions between ordinary people and some moral elite. In a society which considered some people as pure and others as impure and limited association with the latter, Jesus was notorious for eating with "sinners" (Mark 2:15-16). Jesus did not assume that Pharisees were necessarily more righteous than prostitutes (Matt 21:31-32), and in his own movement the first would be as the last (Matt 20:16). Some of Jesus's most paradoxical teachings concern not the core of his followers but the least of them. Jesus said that the least of those who believed in him was greater even than John the Baptist (Matt 11:11), and those who had only as much faith as the size of a mustard seed could move mountains (Matt 17:20). Surely then the difficult sayings were not, for the most part, directed to a limited group within Jesus's followers.

If the hard sayings were not addressed to an elite group, perhaps they were the guidelines for an alternative society composed of all those who took Jesus's teaching seriously. Jesus might have envisioned a radical new community which would live by a different set of rules than those of Jewish Palestine where his disciples resided. In this new community it would not be legally possible for a man to divorce his wife and marry another. In this new community people would never be legally compelled to take oaths, and they could observe strictly Jesus's commandment not to swear at all (Matt 5:33-37). When Jesus said that his followers must hate their natural families, he might have meant that his followers must withdraw from their kinship groups. In Jesus's own society the leadership of the Essenes had withdrawn from other Jews and even from other Essenes to live as celibates in a monastery. Down through the centuries various Christian groups have attempted to form new, separate societies that would faithfully abide by the extreme demands of Jesus. There have been communes and even whole denominations, such as the Waldensians, Lollards, Mennonites, and Quakers, who understood that God was calling them to take the extreme ethical sayings of Jesus literally and live them in a community. These communities renounced violence even in self-defense (Matt 5:39) and had

no oaths (Matt 5:33-37). Maybe it was these groups, which were so often persecuted by more lax Christians, that truly understood what Jesus had in mind. Moreover, Jesus's own use of obscurity sometimes created a group of insiders. Mark's Gospel records that Jesus spoke to the crowds in obscure sayings but explained everything privately to his disciples (Mark 4:1-33). Thatcher has pointed out that riddles tend to produce a "community of knowledge," namely that group of people who, in contrast to outsiders, have the information to solve the enigma (Thatcher: e.g., 23-26).

Nevertheless, the hard sayings do not appear to be guidelines for an alternative society. Not all of the strange sayings concern social interaction. For example, the saying that with only as much faith as the size of a mustard seed one could move a mountain does not concern relationships. And it would be no more possible to move a mountain in an alternative society than elsewhere. Jesus also seems to have been concerned not to produce a separate community which required its members to live by a set of radical rules. He invited everyone to be part of his "Kingdom." In the gospels, Jesus never expels anyone from his movement or even disciplines an individual for not living up to a code of conduct. Indeed, Jesus seems to have been uncomfortable with formulating rules. He did not object to the Mosaic Law in principle, but he was critical of religious lawyers who tried to spell out exactly what the Law required and who demanded that people live up to these standards. The radical commandments that Jesus himself taught, such as one should gouge out one's eye to avoid sin (Mark 9:47), sound less like new legislation than an attack on the very idea that precise legal standards are helpful. Normally, Jesus's strange sayings did not create a community of knowledgeable insiders. At least in the gospel record, Jesus often does not explain his enigmatic utterances to the disciples. And it is possible that the few private explanations which we do find are later commentaries which tell us only what members of the early Church concluded that Jesus had meant. The fact that the gospels record so many disturbing statements from Jesus without any commentary certainly suggests that Jesus had no qualms about leaving even the inner core of his movement in confusion. Jesus, like John the Baptist before him, was not trying to found a new Jewish sect to live in opposition to all the other sects. He was calling Israel as a whole to repentance and transformation.

Another way of trying to explain the extremely demanding sayings of Jesus

is to hold that they were meant to be crushing and force people to rely on God's mercy. This approach fits well with some passages in Paul's Letters, especially his letter to the Romans. Various parts of Romans insist that no one is righteous (e.g., Rom 3:9-20) and that all are justified as a gift on the basis of their faith in God (e.g., 3:22-24). God has consigned everyone to sin in order that he may have mercy on all (11:32). It is essential for everyone to depend on God's mercy, because if people could fulfill God's demands on their own power, they would be boastful (e.g., 4:2-5). Moreover, a salvation that is earned, rather than graciously bestowed, is not true salvation, for salvation includes a relationship of grateful dependence on God. Therefore, the legal demands of God must be more than anyone can achieve so that all must rely on God's merciful grace. Of course, using Paul to explain sayings of Jesus presupposes that Paul is teaching what Jesus taught. One can argue that here Paul is. We can consider, for example, Jesus's strange Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1-16) which we have already looked at above. The laborers work very different amounts of time. Some work all day; others, only one hour. Yet, the Master (surely a symbol for God) pays them all the same. The parable illustrates the great mercy of God, a mercy which is one of Jesus's more frequent themes. Certainly, as we have seen, some of the ethical sayings do set impossibly high moral standards. One additional example would be, "Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you" (Matt 5:42). Given the number of beggars during Jesus's day and our own, this demand, if taken literally, surely is crushing and forces us to rely on God's mercy.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that the sayings which make disturbing demands are not an attempt to crush people with impossible ethical standards. Some of the demanding sayings do not concern ethics. Is the requirement to hate one's father and mother a moral standard? However, even the sayings that clearly articulate an impossible moral demand are not an attempt to crush the hearers. Jesus's concerns about the law were at least in some respects very different from those of Paul in the Letter to the Romans. Paul feared that being able to fulfill the law on one's own power would distort a person's relationship with God. We must be dependent on God. Jesus, by contrast, was concerned with how those who did fulfill the legal requirements would relate to those who did not. The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard makes it clear that the laborers who toiled all day fully earned their wage. They were, so to speak, justified by works! The problem is, as the owner of the vineyard points out, that they begrudge his

mercy to people who were paid more than was earned. Jesus did not doubt that some of his audience were “righteous.” The saying, “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners” (Mark 2:17) presupposes that some people were indeed righteous. The problem was whether the “righteous” would accept Jesus’s gracious ministry to the “sinners” and join them in the Kingdom which Jesus was inaugurating. We may note in passing that in Romans Paul is dealing with the same problem as Jesus and offers the same solution. Romans’ primary concern is that the Jews who received the gospel first and the Gentiles who have become Christians later can live together in unity with neither side condemning the other. Paul stresses that the gospel is for the Jews first but is also for all (e.g., Romans 1:16). Like Jesus, Paul in Romans stresses that the reason that different groups can live together in love despite their differing moral or religious backgrounds is that now God is inviting everyone to join a new community in which salvation is available for everyone.

A possible way of dealing with the strange statements of Jesus is to propose that they are about life in the world to come. They are not descriptions of present day reality; they are descriptions of the blessedness that the saved will enjoy when God is all in all. Thus, the statement, “You will be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48, my translation) might not primarily be a command, but a promise. Those who imperfectly follow Jesus now will be perfect when the Kingdom comes in power. Then each of us will be greater than John the Baptist (Matt 11:11). Then even the least of us will have enough faith to move mountains (Matt 17:20). Then indeed we will love our enemies (Matt 5:44). It is undeniable that Jesus did talk about the future when the Kingdom would come “in power” (Mark 9:1). Surely, the paradoxical sayings must be, at least partly, about the future.

In my opinion this approach is half right but gets things backward. The extreme difference between the way things are and the way that they ultimately will be when God’s will is done on earth as in heaven is indeed the supreme paradox. This supreme paradox gives birth to another, the paradox of the hidden presence of God’s future in the midst of the sinful, broken, and confused present. To speak about these paradoxes, we use paradoxical language. We say that the Kingdom is both present and not yet, or that the Christian life inevitably involves both anxiety and peace. The enigmatic statements of Jesus are not about the life to come; they are about life now. In the life to come everything will be clear; everything will be appropriate. When the Kingdom comes in power, the fact that a woman

was married more than once will not be a problem. In paradise people are not married. They are like the angels (Mark 12:18-27). The command not to resist evil (Matt 5:39) will cause no problems in the world to come, because there will be no evil. When God's will is done on earth as in heaven, no one will have faith the size of a mustard seed (Matt 17:20). Everyone will have complete faith. We use paradoxes about our present existence because we are not yet able to perceive fully how the glory which is to be is already paradoxically present now. We use paradoxes here because it is difficult to know exactly how we should act and how to advise others to act. When the consummation comes, we will know. We use paradoxes about our present existence, because we cannot perceive fully how even God can make the transition from the present mess to the perfect existence. Like the Sadducees whom Jesus criticizes in Mark's Gospel, we do not know the power of God (Mark 12:24). Earlier I gave an example of Paul having a different vision than that of Jesus. Here, I believe, we have an example of Paul agreeing with him. In a famous passage Paul insists that in the present time we see only dimly as in a mirror, but later we will understand fully (1 Cor 13:12). Jesus insisted that in the present life there are important things one cannot know. One cannot know the precise time when God will definitively establish the Kingdom (Mark 13:32).

Still another possible approach to extremely demanding ethical sayings is that Jesus only expected his followers to obey them partially or be able to follow them for a very limited time. Jesus was setting ideal goals. He knew that his followers could not meet them fully or maintain them for long. But his followers could go part way or could make a super human effort for a brief period. Jesus did not actually think that his disciples could give to everyone who begged from them (Matt 5:42), but they could give to someone. Albert Schweitzer famously proposed that Jesus's extreme moral demands were an "interim ethic," commandments that one could obey only for the brief time which remained before the Kingdom of God came in power. As when students stay up all night to cram for a final examination, Jesus's demands only made sense because the end was near.

A major problem with this partial or temporary approach is that the goals that Jesus sets often are not ideal, and, therefore, realizing them even partially or temporarily would be immoral or insane. When Jesus declared that his disciples must hate their parents, was he suggesting that his disciples should merely dislike them? When Jesus insisted that we should cut off our hands to keep ourselves from sinning, was he only expecting his

followers to amputate their index fingers and thumbs? Is it right even temporarily to hate one's parents or maim one's body in the hope that God will soon intervene and repair our relationships and restore our severed members?

One could argue that literarily the enigmatic sayings of Jesus resemble Zen koans and have the same goal, namely to undermine our present understanding of reality. Certainly some of the sayings of Jesus sound a little like Zen koans. John Dominic Crossan believes that Jesus said "to those who have, it will be given, and from those who do not have, it will be taken away" (cf., e.g., Mark 4:25). Crossan compares this paradoxical statement to one from the great Buddhist poet Basho. Basho said, "When you have a staff, I will give it to you. If you have no staff, I will take it away from you" (Crossan:77). Of course, it is undeniably true that both the difficult statements of Jesus and the paradoxes of Zen attempt to get people to see the world in a different and more "spiritual" light.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that Jesus's enigmatic sayings differ fundamentally from Zen koans. Zen koans are pure contradictions. They express ideas that are logically incoherent and, therefore, in principle are incomprehensible. To the famous Zen riddle, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" no logical answer is possible. By contrast, the paradoxes of Jesus, regardless of how strange they may be, avoid outright logical contradiction and at least point in a certain direction. The saying that one must hate one's parents in order to be Jesus's disciple is logically coherent. The saying also clearly implies that one needs to put loyalty to Jesus ahead of loyalty to one's family. Matthew's adaption that those who love father or mother more than Jesus are not worthy of him has a clear basis in the original saying. We may note in passing that Crossan does not compare Basho's paradox of giving a staff to someone who already has it with a recorded saying of Jesus, but only with a hypothetical reconstruction. All the versions of Jesus's saying that have come down to us avoid a logical contradiction and merely say that to those who have, more will be given and those who do not have will lose the little that they do have. The goal of Zen koans differs fundamentally from the goal of the paradoxes of Jesus. The purpose of the koan is to induce an experience that there are no separate selves in the universe. When the Zen devotee reflects long enough on a pure paradox, the mind's normal perception of the differentiated world shatters and the distinction between things disappears. One Zen Buddhist describes part of the experience this way, "I was the cosmos. No individual

existed” (Smith:136). By contrast, as we shall see, one purpose of Jesus’s paradoxical sayings is to expose and undermine social distinctions, such as those between “righteous” and “sinner,” leader and follower, deserving and undeserving. The parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard discussed above is an illustration. The Master (God) pays everyone the same regardless of who “deserved” a higher wage.

In line with modern taste, we may consider the possibility that the hard sayings of Jesus were only attempts to provoke reflection and that all interpretations are equally valid. This possible approach fits the intellectual spirit of the contemporary West. Nowadays in the West we encourage people to think “outside the box,” to come to unique personal and group perspectives. We reject the idea that a work of art has only one meaning. Instead, we now insist that meaning can only arise from a dialogue between a work of art and an audience. Each individual and each ethnic community may legitimately get a different message from the same poem or novel—or religious text. We also insist that it is impossible to translate a work of art into set of ideas. Similarly, an enigmatic or paradoxical utterance cannot be rendered in another form. This contemporary enthusiasm for multiple meanings and untranslatability has impacted scholarship on the sayings of Jesus. The days when scholars held that each of the parables of Jesus had only a single point and this point could be clearly stated are long over! Now at least some scholars find complex and even conflicting messages in the same words of Jesus. To us today it is intriguing to postulate that the primary goal of Jesus’s strange sayings was to get people to think, to question, to discover. What conclusions people came to was less important. Certainly, it is true that the enigmatic sayings of Jesus do force people to think and to question. And certainly, as we have seen above, the conclusions that Christians have come to about the meaning of these sayings have been many and diverse. Why should we not conclude that all of these interpretations are valid and that no one has been mistaken?

However, in my opinion such an approach is hopelessly anachronistic, and Jesus did intend for his paradoxical sayings to be more than prods for reflection. The present enthusiasm for finding multiple meanings in texts reflects the social values of an American society which wishes to honor the diversity of individuals and ethnic groups. Jesus did not live in such a society. Moreover, the literary form of the strange statements of Jesus does not invite polyvalence. As we have seen already, the hard sayings do have

specific content; they do point in a basic direction, even if the details are obscure. If the scholars of a previous generation were mistaken in concluding that the sayings of Jesus had only one point, it remains true that the sayings of Jesus had a *primary thrust and one can state what that thrust was*. Jesus was not advocating the modern view that everyone should “do their own thing” and find their own truth. Instead, his message was the God was doing something fundamentally new and that people needed to perceive it accurately and respond appropriately.

We may note in passing that what was true of Jesus was also true of Mark and Paul and John: The strange material in their writings must also have a primary thrust. Such enigmas as the messianic secret in Mark, the unsettling changes in mood and topic in Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians, and the peculiar editing of John’s Gospel must each originally have had a clear and consistent purpose. The challenge two thousand years later is to discover what it was. Later in this book I will make proposals as to what each of these purposes was. Even if my own positions do not ultimately prove to be convincing, scholarship should not give up on the quest for simple explanations.

Of course, one way to deal with the difficult sayings of Jesus is to hold that different sayings had different purposes. The hard sayings themselves are diverse. Why not conclude that their purposes were diverse? Why should we force all of the enigmas of Jesus to make the same one or two points?

We should certainly admit that in some cases we are no longer in a position even to know what Jesus had in mind when he uttered a seeming enigma. An especially daunting problem is reconstructing the original context which Jesus was addressing when he spoke one of his riddles. The evangelists sometimes arrange Jesus’s sayings by content rather than occasion. We have a series of parables about the Kingdom or a series of sayings with the image of salt. In such cases we have few clues as to the situation on which Jesus was commenting. Moreover, we must also reckon with the strong possibility that even when the gospels give a historical context for a paradoxical utterance, the context may only be a later guess. It seems likely that sometimes people remembered a striking saying but not the occasion on which Jesus used it, and the evangelists subsequently invented a suitable setting. Of course, if one does not know the original context of a saying and the saying is itself enigmatic, the likelihood of misunderstanding the original intent is high. For example, the saying, “Have salt in

yourselves, and be at peace with one another” (Mark 9:49) is grouped with other sayings about salt and is highly ambiguous. It would be more than optimistic to suppose that today we can know what Jesus meant. And we must acknowledge that it is possible that if we knew the original settings of some of the sayings that seem paradoxical to us, we would see that there was no paradox initially. The saying, “Let the dead bury their own dead” (Matt 8:22), might not have been strange or offensive originally. The burial may not have been urgent. In Jewish Palestine there was a second burial. After the body of the deceased had rotted away, the bones were gathered and placed in an urn. The second burial could be done at any time after decomposition. And Jesus could have been speaking metaphorically. The “dead” could be the spiritually dead, i.e., people who were not his disciples. Perhaps Jesus was only saying to a would-be disciple that someone else could deal with the secondary burial.

I am sympathetic to the proposal that the enigmatic sayings may have had many different goals and that in some cases we cannot even know what the sayings meant or even if they were unclear originally. No doubt, Jesus used strange sayings in various situations to elicit various responses. It is reasonable to suppose that the purposes of the sayings differed depending on the topic which Jesus was covering and on the audience. And in some instances there is not enough surviving information to know what an enigmatic saying originally meant. It may even be that sayings which seem challenging to us may not have been so in their original contexts which we can no longer ascertain. Surely, we cannot expect to be able to explain every difficult saying by appealing to a few principles!

Nevertheless, we should investigate whether at least many of the enigmatic sayings of Jesus have a consistent goal which allows us to know their meanings. It seems likely that Jesus had some fundamental reason for speaking in strange (and irritating!) ways. And even if Jesus did not always use enigmas consistently, there still might be major patterns. Jesus may have frequently used different material to make the same points in approximately the same settings. Perhaps we can reconstruct these settings and points. If in fact these patterns existed, they must have been important to Jesus.

Moreover, even if we cannot specify the entire meaning of an enigma, we may be able to specify part of that meaning, and this part may be vital. For example, I am skeptical as to whether we can know what sin Jesus had in

mind when he famously declared that the sin against the Holy Spirit could not be forgiven. As have noted already, the evangelists give conflicting interpretations. However, the primary theological—and pastoral—problem is not what the sin in question was but the terrifying prospect that *any* sin could be unforgiveable. And clearly the statement did not mean that. As we have noted repeatedly, the paradoxical statements of Jesus (e.g., “If your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out” [Mark 9:47]) point in a certain direction and are not to be taken literally. Consequently, when Jesus said that the sin against the Holy Spirit could not be forgiven, he was only declaring that some particular sin was especially dangerous. Of course, a number of sins fall into that category, and it is not surprising that different evangelists give different illustrations.

Finally, the way that most Christians and even many scholars have dealt with the enigmatic sayings of Jesus is to ignore them and concentrate on his teachings that are clearer and more comfortable and seem more significant. If it makes no sense to cut off one’s hand to avoid sin, if we cannot move mountains despite our faith, then let us ignore these problematic utterances. Let us instead concentrate on Jesus’s vision that God is like a loving father and on his emphasis that the greatest commandments are to love God and love one’s neighbor. Surely here we find the core of his message.

A major problem with this approach is that the enigmatic material is what we can be most certain that Jesus actually said! The gospels, which are our best source of information about Jesus, were written decades after his death and resurrection. After such a long time, it seems inevitable that there would be distortions. People would not always remember exactly what Jesus said, and what they did remember would to some degree reflect their own perspectives. The gospels are also theological documents which are trying to convince the reader that what the Church taught about Jesus was true. John’s Gospel is explicit: “These things have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, God’s Son” (John 20:31, my translation). Consequently, we can only wonder how much of what is in these books actually comes from Jesus himself and how much arose later either by accident or by theological reflection. There has been continuing debate. Conservative scholars have contended that virtually everything which the gospels tell us about Jesus is historically accurate. Radical scholars, such as Rudolf Bultmann and the fellows of the (in?)famous “Jesus Seminar” have argued that very little of what the gospels attribute to

Jesus actually goes back to him. What all sides seem to agree on is that at least the enigmatic sayings come from Jesus. Later Christians certainly would not have made up this problematic stuff! To ignore the difficult sayings of Jesus and concentrate on other material is to ignore what we can be most sure that Jesus said and build our reconstruction of his teaching on shaky foundations.

To understand the enigmatic sayings of Jesus, we must look at his larger message and how these sayings reinforce it. By themselves, the sayings are bewildering. However, if we consider the rest of what the gospels tell us about what Jesus taught, perhaps we can make sense of the enigmatic material. And if we can make sense of the enigmatic material on the basis of the rest of what the gospels record, we can be confident that we have understood Jesus's message as a whole. To that larger message and how the difficult sayings fit into it, we now turn.

Chapter 2

The Meaning of Jesus's Puzzling Sayings in the Context of His Historical Message. Discerning equality and the heart as we face God's unknown but trustworthy future

It is clear that the basic message of Jesus was the coming of the Kingdom of God. The coming of the Kingdom is a frequent theme in the parables. The coming of the Kingdom is like a mustard seed growing into a great plant, like yeast leavening a mound of flour (Matt 13:31-33), like a net which gathered many kinds of fish, some of which were kept and some of which were discarded (Matt 13:47). Jesus promises the poor that it is they who will inherit the "Kingdom" (Matthew 5:3, 10; Luke 6:20). Jesus teaches his followers to pray for the coming of the Kingdom (Matt 6:10, Luke 11:2). Mark can even summarize Jesus's preaching with the words, "The Kingdom of God has come near" (Mark 1:15). We may mention in passing that "Kingdom of Heaven" is only a synonym for the Kingdom of God. In Judaism "God" is a sacred word and should be used sparingly. Heaven is a regular verbal substitute.

It is true that the Gospel of John rarely speaks of the Kingdom of God (only 3:3-5) or its coming, but nevertheless John at least often presupposes them. John focuses more on the exalted identity of Jesus rather than on what historically Jesus taught. John emphasizes that Jesus is a divine "king" (already 1:49). But, of course, as a "king," Jesus has a kingdom, as John's Gospel notes (18:36). And that king's rule is coming. When Jesus enters Jerusalem in John's Gospel the crowd shouts, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel" (12:13; Psalm 118:26), and the evangelist tells us that Jesus was fulfilling the prophecy, "Your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!" (John 12:15; Zech 9:9).

By the coming of the "Kingdom," Jesus meant God reigning over a renewed Israel which would expand to include the world. In the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures God chooses the people of Israel and gives them a land and a king. Indeed, God gives the land to the Israelites as an eternal possession and promises that the monarchy will last forever (e.g., 2 Samuel 7:8-16). Some psalms even flatter the king by speaking as if he will

rule the earth. In Psalm 2, for example, God promises the king to “make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession” (vs. 8). The collapse of the Jewish state and its monarchy in the sixth century did not destroy such hopes. Instead, there were prophecies of the restoration of Israel as an independent nation with its monarchy (e.g., Ezekiel 37:15-28). We even have texts which envision the whole world becoming Jewish and a universal reign of peace (e.g., Psalm 87, Isaiah 2:1-4). Jesus was the heir of these hopes, and looked forward to their realization. “Many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom” (Matt 8:11). As N.T. Wright has shown (Wright, 1992:291-97), the sayings of Jesus about the triumphant coming of the “Son of Humanity” (traditionally rendered “Son of Man”) originally referred to the rise of a renewed Israel that would include the world. The triumph of the “Son of Humanity” first appears in Daniel 7. In that passage God condemns the Gentile empires that have oppressed Israel and gives universal dominion to “one like a son of humanity” (Daniel 7:13). The text explicitly identifies the “son of humanity” as the “holy ones of the Most High” and proclaims that they shall “possess the kingdom forever” (Daniel 7:18). When Jesus spoke of the coming of the Son of Humanity, he was predicting the realization of Daniel’s vision of a renewed Israel that would extend to the ends of the earth.

In Jesus’s vision of a renewed Israel obedient to God's will, the leaders would act as servants, and no one would have special privileges. There would still be leaders. Jesus appointed twelve who would in some sense govern, presumably under his supervision. He prophesied that they would sit on thrones judging the tribes of Israel (Matt 19:28). Nevertheless, power would not lead to privilege. Instead, Jesus insisted that whoever would be first would have to be the servant of all (Mark 10:44). Everyone in the Kingdom would have their needs abundantly met. Those who were presently poor or hungry would have more than enough (Luke 6:20-21). Everyone who presently enjoyed high social status would have to surrender it to be part of the Kingdom. It would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God (Mark 10:24-25). The paradoxical saying, “The last will be first, and the first will be last” (Matt 20:16) presupposes a society in which those who have power serve those who do not.

In the renewed Israel people would have transformed personalities. Some of the prophecies of the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures looked forward

to an era in which people would no longer sin against God because now their “hearts” would be righteous. In biblical usage the “heart” means the hidden core of one’s personality. Previously God’s people had a perverse heart, and they disobeyed God’s commands, and in response God allowed other nations to oppress Israel. But now, the prophets insisted, God would give his people a new heart, which would make the people obey him forever. Jeremiah looked forward to a time when God would write his laws on the hearts of the Israelites (Jer 31:33), a time when God would make an everlasting covenant with them, and put his fear in their hearts so that they would never again disobey (Jer 32:40). Ezekiel too foresaw a coming time when God would give Israel a new heart and Israel would follow his laws (Ezek 11:19-20, 36:26-27). Malachi predicted that when Elijah returned to prepare Israel for the “terrible day of the LORD,” he would “turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents” (Mal 4:5-6). Jesus believed that the coming of God’s Kingdom would realize such hopes. He emphasized that the source of sin was a wicked heart. “Out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander” (Mat 15:19). Jesus challenged people to love God with all of their hearts, to love their neighbors as themselves (Mark 12:29-31), and even to love their enemies (Matt 5:43-44). Such exemplary love was becoming possible because the Kingdom of God had come near. In past history the greatest of human beings was John the Baptist, but the least in the Kingdom of God would be greater than he (Matt 11:11). God would give people new hearts.

Jesus emphasized that the Kingdom of God was open to all. God cared about everyone and desired all to be saved. Jesus invited the rich and the righteous to enter the Kingdom. In the Parable of the Great Supper (Matt 22:1-14, Luke 14:15-24) the invitation to the feast goes out first to the privileged of society. Jesus could say that a “scribe” was “not far from the Kingdom of God” (Mark 12:34). Nevertheless, Jesus especially reached out to the sick and the sinful. He wanted to save the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 10:6, 15:24). He said that he did not primarily come to save the righteous but sinners (Mark 2:17). He was famous for healing the diseased, including those like the lepers and the demon-possessed, whom society feared and had marginalized.

Jesus believed that the Kingdom would come in at least two stages. It was quietly present (“hidden”) in the movement that Jesus himself had started. The Kingdom was like a little yeast hidden in a mound of flour (Matt 13:33)

or like a treasure hidden in a field (Matt 13:44). The Kingdom was already “among you” (Luke 17:21). Jesus was teaching people to live as equals and challenging people to let God change their hearts. Later the kingdom would come in power. The promises of the prophets would be fulfilled. Indeed, Jesus proclaimed that some of those who were with him would live long enough to see the definitive realization of the Kingdom (Mark 9:1).

Jesus stressed that now was the time to perceive the Kingdom and “enter” it. When the Kingdom came in power, it would come as judgment on those who had earlier ignored it. The coming of the Kingdom would be like a master returning at an unexpected hour and checking up on whether his slaves were at their posts and had taken good care of the property. The slaves who were “watching” and had successfully invested the master’s assets would receive a reward, but any slave who was drunk or had abused his fellow slaves or failed to invest would suffer (Matt. 24:36-25:30). Therefore, it was a dire mistake to postpone entering the Kingdom until it came in power. It was essential to realize that the Kingdom was already hidden “among you” and to enter it now.

To enter the kingdom now, people had meet three challenges. First, members of the Kingdom could not judge one another or presume to see some as righteous and some as wicked. Jesus stressed that God freely welcomed all regardless of their past lives. In the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard the owner (i.e., God) hires people at different hours of the day; yet at quitting time he pays them all the same. When one employee who worked twelve times as long as another complains, the Master rebukes him (Matt 20:1-16). It is the same with the Kingdom. What a person had done before accepting the Kingdom did not matter. Moreover, even those inside the Kingdom were not to judge each other on their present lives. Judgment belonged to God. People who presumed to judge others would themselves be judged (Matt 7:1-2). When the Kingdom came in power, God would separate the righteous from the wicked. Jesus compared the Kingdom to a (foolish!) farmer who did not root out the weeds from his wheat field, but instead waited until the harvest. Only then did he instruct the reapers to gather the wheat into his barn and burn the weeds (Matt 13:24-30).

The second challenge that people who entered the Kingdom now had to meet was to recognize the hidden evil in their own hearts whether in each individual or in each group. Jesus emphasized the extreme danger of being

unaware of one's own unperceived sinfulness. He warned, "Consider whether the light in you is not darkness" (Luke 11:35). His most common criticism of others was hypocrisy, that is playing a role that does not correspond with who one truly is.

It was especially important for the moral leaders to see their own hidden sin, and Jesus was consequently critical of them. Naturally, those whom society shunned for moral lapses were aware of their sin. Their social status as pariahs was a daily reminder. However, precisely because they knew they were sinners, they were more open to the challenge to reform. As Jesus noted, when John the Baptist told the nation of Israel that it needed to repent, the prostitutes accepted the message. However, the priests and the elders did not (Matt 21:31-32). It was harder for those whom society respected to acknowledge their sins. However, such acknowledgement was all the more necessary. If those to whom the society looked for moral guidance did not see their shortcomings and repent, the society as a whole would remain in moral confusion. Hence, Jesus was especially caustic in his criticism of the Pharisees--and of his own disciples.

A final challenge for people in the Kingdom was to live in expectation of a future which contradicted popular expectations. The popular expectation among Jews of the time was that God would restore Israel to national glory under a new monarch from the House of King David. God had promised in the scriptures that the House of David would reign over Israel forever (e.g., 2 Samuel 7:8-17), and even after the collapse of the monarchy prophets foretold that the line of David would rule again (e.g., Ezek 38:24-25). Indeed, various people tried to persuade Jesus himself to assume the role of a davidic king. When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the crowd shouted, "Blessed is the coming Kingdom of our ancestor David" (Mark 11:9). Earlier Peter had declared that Jesus was the expected davidic Messiah (Mark 8:29), and a crowd wanted to seize Jesus to make him king (John 6:15). Jesus rejected all suggestions that the Kingdom would involve returning Israel to political rule or that he would be an earthly monarch. After the crowds hailed him as the new David, Jesus disrupted activities in the temple, because the temple was to be a "house of prayer for all the nations," not a stronghold for nationalism (Mark 11:17; Wright, 1996:418-421). When Peter hailed him as the "Messiah," Jesus dismissed him as satanic (Mark 8:33), and when the crowd wanted to make Jesus king, he retreated up a mountain (John 6:15). Clearly then Jesus demanded that his followers reject the idea that in the future God would restore Israel to

national glory through him. Jesus's insistence that leaders must act as servants and that his followers must love even their enemies was not compatible with a Davidic monarchy which would rule over an earthly empire.

It was especially challenging to accept Jesus's vision of the future, because he did not give a clear and consistent presentation of how this "Kingdom" would arrive and when. It is true that in the gospels we find texts which teach that Jesus himself would return as the triumphant Son of Humanity ("Son of Man" in older translations) to rule the world. However, these texts seem to have originated after Jesus's resurrection and ascension. Only after Christ's departure from this world did it make any sense to talk about his return. As we have noted above, earlier the coming of the Son of Humanity meant the rising of a new Israel. During his lifetime Jesus did not specify in any consistent way how or when the Kingdom would appear "with power" (Mark 9:1). Instead, Jesus gave contrasting views. Sometimes he spoke as if the kingdom would come gradually and logically. Like a seed growing by itself, there would first be the blade, then the ear, then the grain, then the harvest (i.e., the realization of the Kingdom [Mark 4:26-29]). At other times Jesus spoke as if the Kingdom would come suddenly and unexpectedly. The Kingdom would arrive like a thief in the night (Matt 24:43-44). We read that before the triumph of the Kingdom "there will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress (Luke 21:25). And we read, "The Kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed" (Luke 17:20). Such tensions have led some scholars to insist that all of these contrasting sayings cannot have come from Jesus himself. He must have believed either that the Kingdom would arrive slowly or that it would arrive by an apocalyptic intervention by God. Jesus could not have believed both. However, it seems far more likely to me that Jesus did not claim to know how and when the Kingdom would triumph. Consequently, he prepared his disciples for any eventuality. Be that as it may, Jesus felt certain that God would do what was necessary and expressed that certainty in images. The Master (God) would return and settle accounts with his servants (the people of Israel). The Son of Humanity (i.e., the new Israel) would bring salvation to the world. This much Jesus felt was sure. But these images did not explain how or when. How God would accomplish his purposes was known only to him. And not even the angels, not even the Son (i.e., the Messiah) would know when. Jesus's disciples had to await a new world which would arrive in an unpredictable way at an unknown hour.

The enigmatic sayings of Jesus made it difficult to view some people in the Kingdom as righteous and others as sinful. As we have already noted, the sayings of Jesus point in a certain direction but are too extreme or vague to be taken literally. Consequently, they do not set up standards that some people achieve and others do not. Instead, everyone achieves the standard or no one does. The saying that someone who has as much faith as a mustard seed can move a mountain (Matt 17:20) does not allow us to separate those with strong faith from those with weak and condemn the latter. Anyone who followed Jesus had at least faith the size of a mustard seed (proverbially, the smallest of seeds). No one, no matter how great their faith, could literally move a mountain. Similarly, the saying that if our eye causes us to sin we should gouge it out (Matt 5:29) does not separate the good from the bad. Everyone's eye on occasion causes one to sin; and no one should gouge out an eye in a vain attempt to improve ethically. Jesus's concern that we not separate the righteous from the sinful also explains why Jesus often used sinful people as examples for us to imitate. We can learn even from a dishonest and lazy steward (Luke 16:1-7), even from a judge "who neither feared God nor had respect for people" (Luke 18:2-5). In the parables of the dishonest steward and the unjust judge, these despicable characters at least recognize what is truly in their selfish interest and do what is right. The dishonest steward does reduce the debt of his employer's creditors—a great mercy, given the desperate situation of the poor in Galilee. He is merciful for the worst possible reason, so that his employer's creditors will be generous with him when he loses his job. The unjust judge hears the widow's case just so she will stop nagging him. Nevertheless, he does give her justice. The selfish as well as the self-sacrificing are welcome in the Kingdom. One does not have to repent for the best of motives; the worst will do. And the righteous need to accept all who repent regardless of why.

The puzzling sayings also challenged people to look into their hearts and see what was hidden there. Since the puzzling sayings often could not be taken literally, they forced the hearer to ponder what they could mean. This pondering invited the audience to look at themselves more deeply, whether as individuals or as members of a particular group. Some of Jesus's strange stories exposed the original hearers by tricking them into assuming that the story would end in one way and then the story in fact ends very differently. As a result, the story invited the original hearers to notice their hidden presuppositions and whether these presuppositions were valid. This

challenge was perhaps especially intended for moral leaders who were unaware of their own failings. Let us consider three of these subversive stories.

In the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1-16), the beginning of the story invites the hearers to assume that the laborers will receive different amounts of money at the end of the day. The first laborers contract for a denarius. Subsequent laborers agree to accept whatever is right. The last laborers do not even discuss what they should be paid. Consequently, the hearer naturally expects that the first laborers will receive more, since they work all day. Of course, the first laborers also make this assumption. Consequently, when the owner pays all the laborers a denarius, and the first laborers complain, the owner's response is also directed at the audience. There are no grounds for complaint. The first laborers receive what they agreed to, and it is wrong to begrudge the owner's generosity to others. So too moral leaders should not begrudge the sinful having equal rights in the Kingdom.

In the famous parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-35) the ending was originally even more surprising and invited the hearers to take an even deeper look at the sinful assumptions in their hearts. The Jewish audience whom Jesus originally addressed would have assumed that the hero of the story was going to be a Jewish layperson. After the priest and the Levite (assistant priest) callously pass by the wounded traveler, the audience assumed that naturally a Jewish layperson would give the needed assistance. But in fact a Samaritan—a hated foreigner who was surely stereotyped as unethical—helps the Jewish traveler and does so at great personal cost. Hence, the Parable forced the original hearers to look at their stereotypes and ask whether these were justified.

As a third example of a story that has an unexpected ending that challenged the original audience to look into their hearts, we may consider the Parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14-30, cf. Luke 19:12-27). The master in the story entrusts money to his slaves and goes away. Some of the slaves invest the money. One slave decides not to take the risk and hides the money. Jesus's peasant audience, and Oakman claims, even Jesus himself, would have been sympathetic toward the slave who took the more cautious approach (Oakman:93). Peasants were hostile to banking, since peasants often fell into debt and struggled to repay loans. And culturally, peasants were adverse to risk taking. Consequently, Jesus's peasant audience would have

suspected that the slaves who invested would have lost some of the money. When the master returned, he would punish them and reward the slave who hid the money and can now give it back in full. However, the actual story ends very differently. The slaves who invested made large profits and receive the master's approval, whereas the slave who did not take any risk ended up being severely punished. Therefore, the parable challenged Jesus's peasant audience to reexamine their own assumptions about what was truly risky and to ask whether it was wiser to become followers of Jesus rather than try to be safe by remaining uncommitted.

The puzzling sayings also reminded the original hearers that they did not know in detail what God would do to make the Kingdom come in power and what the Kingdom would be like, and reminded them that they had to trust God's future. As we have seen, the enigmatic sayings point in a certain direction but are too extreme or vague to be taken literally. Hence, they give us a general perspective but few details. From the puzzling sayings and other material, Christ's hearers learned that in the Kingdom, the leaders would act as servants, and that God would provide for the marginal, and a renewed Israel would expand to include the world. But Jesus did not reveal how God would accomplish all of this, or how life would then be like. Jesus's audience had to await God gracious but unknown acts of salvation in trust. They had to allow God to make a better world without their knowing exactly what this new creation would entail.

Now that we have made generalizations about the basic message of Jesus, let us take a new look at a few of the deliberately puzzling sayings of Jesus and determine what their message originally was. We have seen that Jesus was opposed to viewing some as righteous and some as wicked, that Jesus felt that people needed to look at what was in their hearts, whether as individuals or as communities, and that Jesus felt that in the future God would do something dramatic but, as of yet, unknown. How then are we to interpret his saying that whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery? How are we to make sense of the weird story of a shepherd abandoning ninety-nine sheep to be lost in order to search for one? What might it possibly mean to become a eunuch for the Kingdom? And what was the point of claiming that someone who had only as much faith as the size of a mustard seed would be able to make a mountain move? And why did Jesus say that his disciples must "hate" their parents?

I would suggest that the saying which equates divorcing one's wife and

marrying another woman with adultery was inviting the original hearers to come to three conclusions. First in line with Jesus's concern about the heart, the saying suggested that adultery was primarily a matter of the heart, not about the technicalities of the law. Legally, divorce forestalled adultery. By law, when a man divorced his wife, he could no longer commit adultery against her. However, socially, psychologically, and spiritually he still could. The former husband was no longer obligated to support his wife. And in first-century Jewish Palestine a woman would have had difficulty supporting herself unless she became a prostitute. To avoid that fate, a woman would either have had to return to her father's house or find a second husband. If her father was no longer alive, a likelihood, given the fact that most people died before turning fifty, the woman would have had to commit adultery psychologically. She would either have to become a prostitute or marry another man when emotionally she was still attached to her first husband. In line with Jesus's concern about the marginal, Jesus's saying also invited his hearers to consider whether Jewish society sufficiently respected the dignity of women. A patriarchal society normally blames the wife when a marriage fails, regardless of where the actual fault lies. In Jewish Palestine a man could divorce his wife without her consent. A wife could not normally divorce her husband. Jesus's saying equating divorcing one's wife and marrying another woman with adultery clearly labeled the husband as a wrongdoer and undermined the basis for a discriminatory law. Once again Jesus was especially challenging the moral leaders—which in this patriarchal society were the males. Finally, in line with Jesus's belief that God would do something dramatic which would change the world and make it fundamentally better, Jesus's saying about divorce raised the question of whether, when the Kingdom came in power, the laws and psychological dynamics of marriage might be very different. Perhaps people would have a new power to love and be faithful, and divorce and remarriage would be a thing of the past. Perhaps women would have equal rights with men.

The Parable of the Lost Sheep originally made the point that the coming of the Kingdom would overturn everything that seemed sensible and inaugurate a strange and wonderful new order of existence. A shepherd would be crazy to abandon ninety-nine sheep to search for one. Yet, this shepherd does so. In the parable, the Shepherd and his search stand for God and his coming Kingdom. In the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures God is Israel's Shepherd. Psalm 80:1 calls God "the Shepherd of Israel," and Psalm 23 famously begins with the words, "The LORD is my shepherd."

The Parable of the Lost Sheep portrays God as appearing to act irrationally by choosing to have one sheep rather than ninety-nine. However, God is supremely wise. Therefore, if God appears to be acting irrationally, we must change our way of thinking. Now that the Kingdom is coming we must realize that what was once unrealistic is realistic. To use the language of Paul, the “foolishness of God is wiser than human beings” (1 Cor. 1:25, my translation).

As Luke’s Gospel emphasizes, the Parable of the Lost Sheep was a defense of Jesus’s invitation to outcasts to enter the Kingdom on the same terms as the righteous and a warning to the righteous that they must not object (Luke 15:1-7). Luke groups together three parables about the lost, the Parable of the Lost Sheep, the Parable of the Lost Coin, and the Parable of the Lost Son (conventionally called the Prodigal Son). Luke rightly sees that all of these parables were a defense of Jesus’s ministry to “tax collectors and sinners” despite the complaints of the righteous. Luke does not deny (at least in this passage) that the people who were complaining were righteous. In defense of his ministry Jesus declares in Luke’s Gospel that there is more “joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (15:7). The lost sheep did go astray. However, without the re-inclusion of the stray, the flock will be incomplete, and there will be little joy in heaven.

Of course, the Parable of the Lost Sheep invited its original hearers to look into their own hearts and see whether transformation was necessary. By marginalizing sinners, the righteous were assuming either that sinners could not be rehabilitated or that the only way for them to be rehabilitated was by them making amends and becoming like the righteous. Social standards could endure only if society made wrong doers pay for their past misdeeds and start to behave properly. Any other way of dealing with sinners would be unrealistic and undermine society. When Jesus compared the Kingdom to a mustard seed (Mark 4:30-32), an invasive weed, he was implicitly acknowledging this perceived threat. But, if, as the parable of the Lost Sheep suggests, God was creating a new society based on different principles, then the righteous had to reexamine their own deepest principles about what was realistic and what God plans for the future might be.

Jesus’s startling Parable of the Lost Son issues a dire warning: Those who are not willing to be part of a kingdom that includes the morally marginal

will themselves forfeit salvation. The climax of the parable is the scene between the father and the older brother. Here we have another astonishing ending. Jesus's audience would have assumed that the story would have concluded with the father rejecting his wayward second son. The second son had behaved unacceptably in demanding his inheritance while his father was still alive and then squandering the money. As the younger brother himself admits, he is no longer worthy to be called his father's son. However, to the surprise of the original hearers, the father welcomes him and even has a festive barbeque to celebrate his son's safe return. Like the older brother in the parable, the original audience was undoubtedly outraged. The Father in the Parable of the Lost Son represents God, and the older brother represents the conventionally righteous. The younger son who wasted the family's property represents the sinners. The barbeque which the father gives to welcome the son home is surely the Kingdom. The question with which the parable ends is whether the older brother will agree to attend the party, since his younger brother is there. If the righteous do not choose to be part of a Kingdom which includes the conventionally immoral, the righteous will not be part of the Kingdom at all. Those who do not want someone else in the Kingdom do not understand God's love for every person and do not obey Jesus's command to love all. That divine love and that command are the bases for the Kingdom. Anyone who assumes that God is crazy in devoting more attention to saving sinners than rewarding the righteous will be lost.

The Parable of the Lost Son even explains why the righteous should rejoice that God is welcoming the sinful into the Kingdom, because the salvation of each person contributes to the salvation of all. At the end of the Parable, the older brother complains to the father about "this son of yours." In reply the father reminds him that the person in question is "this brother of yours" (Luke 15:30-31). The family is incomplete without one of its members. And, by implication, the Renewed Israel is incomplete without any person, no matter how sinful at present, who is willing to repent and join. The salvation of any person contributes to the salvation of every person. Those who think that Jesus is undermining society by in God's name welcoming sinners and inviting them to be part of the Kingdom do not realize that God is beginning to create a strange new society based on different principles.

As Countryman has suggested (*Dirt*:171-72), the strange saying about becoming a eunuch for the Kingdom originally was a demand that male disciples give up their sense of superiority, because males and females are

equal in the Kingdom. The ancient Mediterranean world assumed that men were superior to women, both physically and psychologically. Women had soft bodies that could be penetrated, and they had foolish minds that could easily go astray. Therefore, it was the responsibility of men to guide and protect women. It was the responsibility of women to submit to the sexual domination and moral leadership of males. In some respects women had an even lower social status in first-century Judaism than in the Gentile world. Jewish males regularly thanked God that they had not been born as women. Women were ritually impure during their menstruation, and brought impurity on everything and every person whom they touched. It was essential to ensure that women did not defile sacred precincts (Lev 15:19-32) or persons who needed to be ritually pure. Women could not become priests or come too close to God's sanctuary in Jerusalem. In this cultural situation males were proud of their masculinity and obsessed with preserving their social honor. Physically that honor was "incarnated" in intact sexual organs. Being a eunuch was an extreme disgrace. Given these patriarchal perspectives, it is not surprising that ancient Jews "were horrified by castration" and thought that anyone who voluntarily made himself a eunuch was morally depraved (Keener: 471). Indeed, theoretically, a eunuch could not become a Jewish proselyte (Deut 23:1). In keeping with his concern for the marginal and the despised, Jesus had a different attitude toward women than his contemporaries did. Despite social custom which limited discipleship to males, Jesus invited women to become his disciples. He had some of these females travel about with him to the scandal of conventional society which apparently assumed that he was promiscuous. The charge that Jesus was a friend of sinners (e.g., Matt 11:19) had a sexual component! Jesus seems not to have been concerned with preserving ritual purity. In the one case that the gospels record of Jesus being touched by a woman who was suffering from menstrual bleeding, Jesus commended the woman's faith rather than rebuking her for presumption (Mark 5:25-34). Jesus's male disciples had to adjust to this higher position of women both in Jesus's vision and in the community that he was establishing. The saying about becoming a eunuch for the kingdom was originally a shocking challenge to make this adjustment. In conventional society, "real men" who had "balls" kept women in their inferior place. In the teaching of Jesus, males who wished to enter the Kingdom would have to behave differently.

Consequently, the saying about becoming a eunuch for the kingdom was another illustration of the triple challenge of Jesus's teaching. The saying

challenged people to accept the marginal as equal to themselves. It invited people to look into their own hearts and see if their ingrained attitudes toward sexual roles were due to social prejudice. It prodded people to imagine the previously unthinkable, that God might be calling into existence a society in which there would no longer be male domination. The prophet Isaiah had looked forward to a day when even eunuchs would have an honored place in God's house (Isa 56:3-5). Jesus invited people to consider the even more radical notion that God would produce a society in which women would be seen as equal to men. A generation later, the greatest follower of Jesus would write that ideally in Christ there should be "no male and female" (Gal 3:28).

The puzzling saying that a disciple who had only as much faith as a mustard seed could move a mountain also was a triple challenge. The setting of the story was Jesus's own ministry of miracle working. He had worked wonders on the basis of faith. According to the gospels, Jesus gave his disciples authority to do the same (e.g., Mark 6:7). Their success was mixed. Sometimes they were able to drive out demons and cure the sick. However, we read of at least one instance where their faith was insufficient and they could not cure an epileptic ("demon" possessed) boy (Mark 9:17-18). Presumably, disciples who had less success in working miracles felt inferior and wondered about the power of their own faith. In response, Jesus insisted that even the smallest amount of faith, a faith no bigger than a mustard seed, would allow the most spectacular conceivable miracle. That small amount of faith could move a mountain. Of course, this strange statement reassured unsuccessful miracle workers that their faith must not be the problem and emphasized the equality of all of Jesus's followers. Everyone who chose to follow Jesus had at least a little faith. But the saying also invited unsuccessful miracle workers and all other disciples to look into their own hearts and ask what miracle they could work, especially since there was no need to move a mountain. And the saying invited the question of whether in the future something would happen that would enhance people's ability to work miracles.

The saying that one must hate father and mother emphasized that joining the Kingdom made disciples act as if they did hate their parents. Israelite society was based on a series of kinship commitments. In theory all Israelites were related as descendants of Jacob (whose name was changed to "Israel"), and loyalty to this blood relationship was seen as essential. Even God had a special relationship with Israel which at least symbolically

made him kin. He was first and foremost the “God of Israel” and could be pictured as Israel’s father or husband. Of all the blood relationships in first-century Judaism, the most important was one’s relationship to parents, and loyalty to parents was paramount. In a society in which there was a constant struggle for social honor, the members of a family were obligated to support one another. And since honor depended especially on lineage, it was essential for a family member to defend parents against any insult. Moreover, socially unacceptable behavior by children brought disgrace on their parents. Jesus violated social norms by abandoning his own biological family and associating with tax collectors, prostitutes, and other “rejects.” He envisioned a Kingdom which would overturn the established loyalties. For example, he taught that his followers must love their enemies. Inevitably, loving one’s enemies must include loving the enemies of one’s father and mother and the enemies of Israel. Jesus also insisted that loyalty to the Kingdom must take precedence over all other loyalties. Consequently, Jesus was at best a highly controversial figure. When respectable people joined his movement, they brought shame on their parents. Disciples who left all and followed Jesus also deprived their parents of financial support. The story of James and John abandoning their father and the hired hands in the fishing boat and following Jesus had economic implications for those left behind (Mark 1:19-20)! Being loyal to Jesus made people act as if they did hate their parents. And Jesus’s saying about the need to hate one’s parents acknowledged the pain which becoming his disciples brought on their parents.

The saying that one must hate one’s parents invited Jesus’s disciples to look into their own hearts and also consider God’s future. This shocking saying forced people to look within and feel the pain and guilt that disgracing and impoverishing their parents must have entailed. The disciples had to acknowledge that they were acting as if they actually did hate their parents. And the statement also invited people to think about God’s future. If it actually was God’s will for people to abandon their parents in order to follow Jesus, following Jesus must be what would ultimately bring a blessing on one’s parents. Jesus taught that those who put the Kingdom ahead of all other concerns would through God’s providence receive every needed blessing (Matt 6:31-33). Surely, for those who had brought hardship on their parents by following Jesus, one supremely needed blessing was that their parents would one day rejoice that their children had decided to follow Jesus.

By referring to himself as the “Son of Humanity” (“Son of Man” in older translations), Jesus was emphasizing both the equality of everyone in the Kingdom and the promise of God’s unknown future. In the Bible the meaning of the phrase “Son of Humanity” is “a human being.” Often the phrase even means a mere human being. For example, when God constantly addresses the prophet Ezekiel as “Son of Humanity,” God is contrasting his own divine majesty with Ezekiel’s lowly status. In colloquial English one might translate God’s words as, “Hey, human!” Therefore, when Jesus constantly refers to himself as a human being, he is emphasizing that he is like everyone else in the Kingdom. Even though he is the founder of the Kingdom, he is not claiming to be superior. He is only a mere human being. We see the same emphasis in sayings such as, “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:35). Of course, if the founder of the Kingdom is not claiming to have a special status, then no one else can claim to have special status either. In the Kingdom the first must be as the last. However, as the founder of the Kingdom, Jesus was also the first illustration of the new “human being.” And by referring to himself as “the human being,” he was holding himself up as an example of what the Kingdom would allow everyone to become. Jesus once remarked that, “among those born of women” no one was greater than John the Baptist but nevertheless, “the least in the Kingdom” was even greater than John (Matt 11:11). In the Kingdom people would have transformed hearts. Jesus constantly referred to himself as “the human being” because the ambiguity of the phrase emphasized both the equality of all in the Kingdom and the promise that an otherwise unknown future would make a new humanity possible.

Underlying the puzzling sayings of Jesus was his vision of God’s astounding love and the demand that those in the Kingdom begin to love as God did. God loved even sinners so much that he would defy all conventional standards to welcome them. The only possible explanation of why the father in the Parable of the Lost Son forgives his son’s despicable behavior is the father’s incredible love. He is moved to pity by the son’s wretched state, and he embraces and kisses him. It is the father’s love which makes him act in ways that would have seemed strange to Jesus’s audience. The only explanation of why the owner in the Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard pays those who worked just one hour a full day’s wage is that the owner has compassion and is merciful. It is the owner’s concern which makes him act inequitably. A shepherd who abandons ninety-nine sheep to search for one is crazy. By normal social standards, the God whom Jesus

proclaimed acts insanely by inviting sinners into the Kingdom on the same terms as the righteous. But then to those who do not love, the actions of lovers are incomprehensible. The critics of Jesus dismissed him as possessed. Jesus replied that they were blaspheming the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:22-30). As this response implies, Jesus was indeed possessed, but by God. Jesus expected those who were entering the Kingdom to love in the same astounding way that God did. God does not discriminate but gives sun and rain to the evil as well as to the good. Those who would accept Jesus's vision of the Kingdom would have to love not only God and their neighbors; they would even have to love their enemies (Matt 5:43-48). And those who loved everyone would not feel diminished when the "undeserving" entered the Kingdom but would rejoice.

Subsequent historical events would invite the followers of Jesus to reinterpret his puzzling sayings and to compose ones of their own. Jesus predicted that within the lifetime of some of his disciples God would do something momentous that would vindicate what Jesus had said and done. The Kingdom which he had foretold and quietly begun would come in power (Mark 9:1). But Jesus did not give details about how God would bring the Kingdom in power, and what the Kingdom would then be like. Historically, several things quickly occurred. First, there was the torture and execution of Jesus himself. Whatever Jesus's expectations about the climax of his own ministry may have been, it ended in crucifixion. Then there were the resurrection experiences. Whatever the disciples of Jesus may have expected about the future, they had startling experiences which convinced them that Jesus had physically risen from the dead and now reigned as Lord of all. Next, there was the gift of the Holy Spirit and the resulting mission to the Gentiles. The followers of Jesus felt that he had bestowed on them the very Spirit of God himself. This Spirit invited them, sometimes drove them, to convert the entire world—even the Pagans—to become disciples of the risen Jesus. Finally, there was the destruction of the temple. When the nation of Israel as a whole rejected his message, Jesus like the Hebrew prophets before him, predicted that God would destroy Israel's most sacred place. And so it occurred. Instead of accepting Jesus's message that they must love their enemies, the majority of Jews chose violent revolt against the Roman occupiers. The revolt ended with the slaughter of countless Jews, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the end of the temple. These events would place the paradoxical sayings of Jesus in a new light and require a new interpretation of them. These events would also inspire Christian writers to produce enigmatic material of their own.

Chapter 3

Puzzling Material and Mark's Gospel. We must have the humility to realize that we cannot know the crushing power of suffering and the greater power of grace until the time of testing comes.

This chapter will argue that the puzzling material in Mark's Gospel is a step beyond the enigmatic sayings of Jesus because Mark focuses on the challenge of the cross. Jesus's teaching came before the crucifixion. As we have seen, the goal of his puzzling sayings was to get people to struggle with his vision of the Kingdom. The Kingdom would upset the traditional structures of society by making people equal and by exposing the heart. Yet, no one could know what the Kingdom would be like or how or when it would come. The enigmatic sayings challenged people to struggle with these unsettling truths. By contrast, Mark wrote his gospel after the crucifixion of Jesus and at a time when Christians were dying for their faith. Under these circumstances there was no need to talk enigmatically about equality and an unknown future. The likelihood of imminent martyrdom made the future in some ways terrifyingly clear. The fact that Jesus himself had suffered torture and death and that also many of his disciples had already done so made the basic equality of Jesus and his followers obvious. Anyone might be called to lose everything for the faith. What Mark was concerned about was to prepare his readers to face what can never be known in advance—the experience of one's own death and the crushing suffering that may precede it. Mark's puzzling material attempts to get readers to acknowledge that they do not know the cost of their own martyrdom and that the only way to prepare is to cultivate a dependence on God. God will give to those who rely on him the strength to endure what cannot be known beforehand. It is essential that beforehand people do not underestimate the coming ordeal and overconfidently assume that they are ready to deal with it on their own strength. The puzzling sayings in Mark try to deflate this overestimation of one's own heroism.

I will develop the argument as follows. We will begin by noticing that there is no consistent pattern as to which of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) preserves the original puzzling sayings of Jesus and which

has a domesticated version. However, then we will note that in contrast to Matthew and Luke who strive to be transparent and easy to follow, Mark deliberately composes--and even emphasizes--enigmatic material. Next I will argue that the theme of Mark's Gospel is that Christians must not proclaim that Jesus is the savior until they fully understand that he suffered and, therefore, that his disciples must be prepared to suffer. We will then see that this theme—and the historical situation which it addresses—clears up the many enigmatic passages in Mark.

As we have seen, there was already a tendency in the earliest church to make sayings from Jesus less puzzling. The early church found the strange utterances of Jesus troubling and was eager to making them more comfortable. One way to make them so was to revise them slightly. Instead of having to hate our families to become Jesus's disciples, we must love Jesus more. Instead of divorcing one's wife and remarrying always being adultery, divorce followed by remarriage is not adultery if the first wife has been unfaithful.

Consequently, in the gospels we find a mixture of sayings. Sometimes the gospels retain the sayings as Jesus spoke them with all of their offensiveness, strangeness, or ambiguity. But sometimes what the gospels record as something that Jesus said is in fact a toned down version with the original offensiveness removed, the strangeness explained away, or the ambiguity resolved.

It would appear that there is no pattern concerning which gospel retains the original paradoxical sayings and which gospel has the retouched versions. Certainly, one can quote contrasting examples. Matthew 26:28-29 gives us the shocking command from Jesus that we must drink his blood, whereas Luke 22:20 has the retouched saying in which Jesus only commands us to drink the "cup" which is the new covenant in his blood. By contrast, Luke 14:26 has Jesus's shocking statement that we must hate our family to become his disciples, whereas Matthew 10:37 has the revised version that we only need to love Jesus more than we love our family. In Matthew 10:10 Jesus forbids his disciples even to take a walking stick when they go out to preach, but in Mark 6:8 Jesus permits a walking stick. In Mark 10:11 Jesus allows no exception to the rule that divorcing one's wife and marrying another woman is adultery. In Matthew 19:9 Jesus makes an exception: Divorce and remarriage are not adultery if the first wife was unfaithful.

Presumably the reason that there does not appear to be a pattern as to which gospel retains the original enigmas of Jesus is that different evangelists depended on different sources. Unfortunately, we do not have much information about what sources the evangelists relied on for the teaching of Jesus. Most scholars believe that Matthew and Luke made use of Mark. However, clearly Matthew and Luke had other sources, since these gospels have much material that must go back to Jesus that is not found in Mark. We cannot be sure what these sources were. The most popular theory is that Matthew and Luke independently made use of a written collection of the sayings of Jesus. But even this theory is controversial, and only accounts for the material that Matthew and Luke share that is not in Mark. The material that only occurs in Matthew or only occurs in Luke presumably came from other sources about which we have no secure knowledge. We also do not know what sources Mark himself used. Presumably, many of the sources that the evangelists relied on were oral. People repeated what Jesus had said. Oral sources do not always preserve the exact wording. Hence, it seems likely that some of the oral sources retained the puzzling language of Jesus, whereas other sources softened it. The evangelists recorded the particular source that they had, or in the cases where they had conflicting sources, the evangelists recorded the version that they thought was more accurate or the version that they personally preferred.

Nevertheless, it is striking that Matthew and Luke as evangelists seem far less comfortable with obscure sayings than Mark is. We can see the difference if we compare three passages in Mark with how Matthew adapted them to make them less problematic.

Mark 4:10-12:

When he [Jesus] was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God. But to those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that they may indeed look but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven."

Matthew 13:10-13

Then disciples came and asked him [Jesus], “Why do you speak to them in parables?” He answered, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. The reason I speak to them in parables is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand. . . , because this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look . . . [Isa 6:9-10]’”

Mark 8:17-21

And becoming aware of it, Jesus said to them, “Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?” They said to him, “Twelve.” “And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?” And they said to him, “Seven.” Then he said to them, “Do you not yet understand?”

Matthew 16:8-12

But becoming aware of it, Jesus said, “You of little faith, why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? How could you fail to perceive that I was not speaking about bread? Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the Sadducees!” Then they [the disciples] understood that he had not told them to beware of the yeast of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Mark 9:11-13

Then they [Peter, James, and John] asked him [Jesus], “Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?” He said to them, “Elijah is indeed coming first to restore all things. How then is it written about the Son of Humanity,

that he is to go through many sufferings and be treated with contempt? But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written about him.”

Matthew 17:10-13

And the disciples asked him, “Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?” He replied, “Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things; but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Humanity is about to suffer at their hands.” Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist.

In each of these passages Matthew eliminates the problem. In Mark’s version of the first passage Jesus makes the shocking statement that he speaks to the crowds in parables so that the crowds may not perceive, repent, and receive forgiveness. Mark gives no obvious explanation of why Jesus engages in this strange (and seemingly perverse) behavior. By contrast, Matthew who relied on Mark as a source carefully goes on to explain—and uses scripture to justify the explanation—that Jesus’s audience, not Jesus himself, is to blame for the lack of perception. The audience has closed its eyes in order to avoid seeing. In the second passage Jesus berates the disciples for not understanding something about the feeding of the five thousand and the feeding of the four thousand. By implication, Mark puts great pressure on the reader to comprehend what the disciples do not. But it is, to say the least, not immediately obvious what the reader is supposed to perceive. Matthew was clearly uncomfortable with this obscurity. Consequently, he spells out for the reader that Jesus was giving a warning against the teaching of his (both Jesus’s and Matthew’s) Jewish opponents. In the third passage Jesus makes the strange statement that the ancient prophet Elijah has reappeared and suffered, and Mark gives no clarification. Again Matthew was uncomfortable. He explains that Jesus was alluding to John the Baptist who many people believed was the new Elijah.

It is noteworthy that Luke who was also using Mark goes even farther in eliminating the difficulties. He simply omits the offending material. In the first passage, Luke cuts out the material about not receiving forgiveness, and Luke omits the second and third passages altogether!

It is at least plausible that in all of these passages it was Mark himself who created the strangeness. Of course, in each case the problem appears in something which Jesus says. But all of these sayings occur in private conversations with the disciples. All of these sayings are also commentaries. The first passage is part of a commentary on the Parable of the Sower. The second passage is a commentary on the feeding miracles. The third, a commentary on the ancient prophecy of the return of the prophet Elijah to prepare for Day of the Lord (Mal 4:5-6). It is tempting to think that when Mark gives us commentaries in private, he is giving us his own interpretation of the meaning of Jesus's ministry rather than merely recording something that Jesus literally said.

Be that as it may, Mark's rhetoric is generally closer to that of Jesus than Matthew's or Luke's is, and it is not surprising that there is more deliberate obscurity. Mark preserves more of the Jesus's Aramaic words than Matthew does. Luke eliminates them all. Mark is also closer to giving the patterns of oral speech, whereas Matthew and Luke are more literary. Hence, it would seem natural that Mark is more puzzling. He imitates the style of the Master.

Some of this faithfulness to the style of Jesus may be due to the fact that Mark's Gospel is earlier. Scholars generally hold that Mark wrote around the year 70 which is forty years or so after the crucifixion. Forty years is a long time in human life and was especially long in the ancient world where the average lifespan was less than fifty. Nevertheless, when Mark wrote, there must have still been a lot of people who had actually heard Jesus and could imitate his way of teaching. The gospels record that during his lifetime Jesus sent out disciples to preach the message. Presumably, these disciples at least attempted to sound somewhat like Jesus. Mark could have spoken to a number of them. By contrast, Matthew and Luke wrote later, probably at least fifteen years later. By then the number of living eyewitnesses of the ministry of Jesus was probably very few. The tradition about Jesus was already becoming ossified. People could repeat what Jesus had said, but they could no longer talk like Jesus.

Nevertheless, it seems that Mark himself deliberately created enigmas. Matthew and Luke sometimes repeated enigmas when the tradition which they were relying on remembered that Jesus had said them. But Matthew and Luke they did not create obscurities. Mark apparently did.

In addition to creating puzzling sayings for Jesus, Mark also apparently created puzzling actions by Jesus. Here I will only take space to give two illustrations. In my study guide to Mark I have commented on others.

A first example of a strange action that Mark apparently created is two *unsuccessful* attempts by Jesus to hush up miracles. In chapter 1 Jesus heals a “leper” and tells him, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest” (1:44). But instead of obeying Jesus, the leper publicizes the miracle everywhere. In chapter 7 Jesus heals a deaf and dumb man and again orders people “to tell no one,” but Mark stresses, “the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it” (7:36), and that the publicity led to widespread acclaim for Jesus. It is puzzling that Jesus tries to prevent the spread of information which leads to public approval. It is even more puzzling that Jesus, who elsewhere in Mark’s Gospel can predict the future, here strenuously attempts to prevent something despite the fact that his efforts turn out to be futile. Why did Jesus order people not to talk about his miracles when the order accomplished nothing? Of course, Mark here is presenting an incident that is probably historical, and one could argue that he is merely recording what happened. But it seems almost certain that Mark is *emphasizing* that Jesus tried to hush up certain miracles and utterly failed. Why is Mark underlining this strange and embarrassing fact? Matthew and Luke, even though they were using Mark as a source, omitted the detail that the leper disobeyed Jesus’s command (Matt 8:1-4, Luke 5:12-14), and both evangelists omitted the story of the healing of the deaf and dumb man entirely!

As a second illustration of a strange action of Jesus which Mark emphasized, we will consider the cursing of the fig tree. Mark tells us that Jesus cursed a fig tree for failing to bear fruit. And Mark adds to the oddness of this incident by even writing “it was not the season for figs” (Mark 11:13), thus making Jesus seem to act totally irrationally. Moreover, surprisingly, Jesus’s miraculous curse apparently did not take effect immediately. It is not until the next day in the gospel that the reader sees that the fig tree has withered. It is most unlikely that such an odd incident happened historically. Perhaps Mark adapted some legend or a parable that Jesus did tell about an unfruitful fig tree (cf. Luke 13:6-9). In any case, Mark chose to make Jesus act bizarrely. Not surprisingly Matthew in retelling the story omitted the detail that it was not the season for figs and recorded that the fig tree withered “at once” (Matt 21:18-19). Luke omitted

the story entirely.

Perhaps the most striking and the strangest material that Mark produced is the end of the gospel. In the concluding verses a (presumably, heavenly) messenger in white says to the women to tell the other disciples to go to Galilee to see the risen Lord. But the women say "nothing to anyone" because they are afraid (16:8). This ending is more than provocative; it is weird. Instead of concluding in triumph, the Gospel ends in failure. The women fail to obey the command to share the good news that Jesus has risen and that he will soon appear to his followers. The gospel also ends in uncertainty. The reader is left wondering what happened next. If the women did not report the message, did the disciples ever receive it? And if the disciples did not receive the message, did they go to Galilee and meet Jesus? The original ending is even implicitly absurd. If the women never said anything to anyone, how could Mark know about the incident? This ending was so strange and unsettling that Matthew and Luke, who were using Mark, altered it completely. In both gospels the women do share the message of the resurrection. Then Jesus himself triumphantly appears. Even the people who transcribed Mark's Gospel changed the original ending. The vast majority of surviving ancient copies of Mark have longer, more comfortable conclusions. Several scribes apparently felt that the original ending was so unsatisfactory that it was up to them to produce better ones. The Church as a whole agreed that a new ending was essential. Only a couple of copies in the original Greek survive with Mark's own conclusion. However, two of these copies are on the whole the most reliable manuscripts of the New Testament that we have, and they are among the earliest. There is no question that they preserve the original ending, since no scribe would have produced that unsettling enigma. Only Mark could have written it.

The original ending of Mark turns the entire Gospel into a riddle, a hard saying, and so we need to look at the book as a whole. Normally, the conclusion of a document tells us what the main point is. Even when the conclusion does not, at least it is the last thing that the reader encounters and leaves a final impression which shapes how the whole is remembered. A disappointing and puzzling conclusion necessarily casts a dark shadow over a literary work. It forces the reader to ponder what the message of the entire document might be. The strange ending to Mark leaves readers unsettled and challenges us to struggle with what the entire Gospel could mean.

An especially strange theme in Mark's Gospel as a whole is the so called "Messianic Secret." Mark clearly believes that Jesus is the Messiah ("Christ" in the original Greek). Indeed, he opens his gospel by telling us so: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus *Christ*" (1:1). Yet in much of his gospel Mark emphasizes that Jesus tried to keep people from knowing that he was the Christ. For example, in chapter 8 when Peter declares that Jesus is the "Christ," Jesus orders his disciples "not to tell anyone" (8:29-30). Of course, it may be that historically Jesus did try to keep his messianic claims private to avoid the extreme danger that public knowledge of these claims would entail. Would-be Messiahs were normally executed, as Jesus himself ultimately was. However, from a literary perspective it is striking that Mark apparently *fabricates* scenes in which Jesus *unsuccessfully* tries to keep his identity secret. For example, in chapter 1 a demon possessed person publicly proclaims that Jesus is "the Holy One of God," and Jesus responds, "Be silent" (1:24-25). Yet, Jesus's fame spreads. The testimony of demons can scarcely be historical. Instead, the demons are a literary device that Mark is deliberately employing to emphasize that Jesus tried to keep his messianic identity secret, even though Mark himself in his gospel is publicizing Jesus's messianic identity! Not surprisingly, scholars have struggled to explain the Messianic Secret ever since Wilhelm Wrede called attention to the problem more than a century ago.

Another pervasive enigma in Mark's Gospel is his complex and seemingly inconsistent use of "Son of Humanity" in describing Jesus. Often Mark refers to Jesus as the "Son of Humanity" when previewing Jesus's passion. "The Son of Humanity must undergo great suffering and be rejected . . . and be killed" (8:31). Sometimes Mark refers to Jesus as the "Son of Humanity" when looking forward to Jesus's triumphant return and final judgment of the world. "Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Humanity will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father" (8:38). Occasionally, Mark refers to Jesus as the Son of Humanity when emphasizing Jesus's authority during his ministry to interpret the Mosaic Law and pardon sin. "The Son of Humanity has authority on earth to forgive sins" (2:10) and "is lord even of the Sabbath" (2:27). Why does Mark use the title "Son of Humanity" to refer to Jesus in these apparently disparate roles? Of course, one could argue that since Mark only uses the phrase "Son of Humanity" when quoting Jesus, the inconsistency of usage does not tell us anything about Mark's own theology. However, we should accept this conclusion

only as a last resort. Mark wrote in Greek, and in Greek the phrase “Son of Humanity” was meaningless (as it is in English). Mark could have translated the phrase differently or simply replaced it in Jesus’s sayings with “I” or “me.” Mark chose to retain a (meaningless!) phrase, and he probably knew what he was doing. We should only conclude that Mark himself had no agenda in using the phrase if we cannot think of any way that the three disparate roles of the “Son of Humanity” in the Gospel might cohere with each other and Mark’s overall message.

In my opinion the primary theme of Mark’s Gospel is that Christians must not proclaim that Jesus is the Messiah, God’s Son, until they accept that he suffered and truly learn that they will have to suffer too. This theme pervades the book as a whole.

In the opening chapters of Mark we have a series of scenes in which demons try to derail Jesus’s ministry by publicly proclaiming his greatness before he can suffer, and Jesus silences them. As we have already noted, in chapter 1, a demon cries out that Jesus is the “Holy One of God,” and Jesus responds by telling the demon to shut up (literally, “be muzzled” [1:24-25]). Later in the chapter when Jesus casts out “many demons,” he does not allow them to speak because they know who he is (1:34). Near the beginning of chapter 3 the demons shout to Jesus, “You are the Son of God!” but he orders them severely “not to make him known” (3:11-12).

Then in the middle of the gospel we have two scenes in which Jesus privately reveals to his disciples who he is and insists that he must suffer before they can proclaim his identity to the world. In the first of these scenes (8:27-38), Jesus himself asks his disciples who they think that he is, and Peter says that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus orders them not to tell anyone, since Jesus must suffer. When Peter objects, Jesus calls him “Satan.” This reprimand is not figurative. Demons had previously proclaimed Jesus’s identity publicly through people whom they had possessed. Now Satan himself speaks through Peter tempting Jesus to enjoy the privileges of being publicly known as the Messiah and to reject the path of suffering. In response, Jesus declares that any who would follow after him must take up their cross. Whoever does not follow this example will suffer condemnation at the final judgment. The following scene in Mark (9:2-13) repeats many of the same themes. Jesus reveals his exalted identity to disciples in private and again cautions them not to proclaim it. He takes Peter, James, and John up on a mountaintop by

themselves. There Jesus is transfigured with supernatural light, and a voice from heaven declares that he is God's Son. As they descend from the mountain, Jesus tells Peter, James, and John not to reveal what they have seen until after he rises from the dead. First he must suffer many things and be treated with contempt.

Two other scenes follow in which Jesus first announces privately to his disciples that he must suffer, the disciples react negatively, and Jesus insists that his followers must deny themselves. Here I will only take space to summarize the second of these passages. In 10:32-45 Jesus takes aside the twelve and gives them a detailed prediction of his coming suffering and execution at Jerusalem. He will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes. They will condemn him to death and hand him over to the Pagans. The Pagans will mock him and spit on him and beat him and kill him. Three days later Jesus will rise from the dead. James and John, apparently ignoring this dire prophecy, blithely ask that they may sit at Jesus's right hand and left in his glory. In response, Jesus does not grant their request but instead tells them that they too will drink the cup of suffering. When the rest of the disciples hear that James and John requested the best seats in the coming Kingdom, they become angry. Jesus in reply tells them that they are acting like Pagan rulers who lord it over their subjects. By contrast, among Jesus's followers the person who would be great must be servant of all. Jesus himself did not come to be served but to serve and to give up his life for the sake of others.

In the climactic chapters of the gospel, Jesus does reveal to the world who he is, but he reveals his identity in order to force the world to kill him. Thus, the climactic chapters of Mark begin with Jesus publicly announcing his messianic dignity. He orchestrates a triumphant entry into Jerusalem while the crowds shout, "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" (11:10), thus clearly acknowledging Jesus's messianic identity. Then Jesus stages a dramatic protest in the temple courtyard. In response, the chief priests and scribes "kept looking for a way to kill him" (11:18). Then at his hearing before the High Priest Jesus deliberately proclaims his exalted identity in order to get himself executed. The testimony against Jesus is false and inconsistent. The case against Jesus is collapsing on its own, and he says nothing. The reader gets the impression that Jesus might be released if he continues to remain silent. In desperation the high priest asks, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One [i.e., God]?" (14:61). It is at this point that Jesus proclaims before everyone, "I am; and 'you will

see the Son of Humanity seated at the right hand of the Power [God]’ and ‘coming with the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:62; cf. Psalm 110:1, Dan 7:13-14). The High Priest declares that what Jesus has just said is itself sufficient for the death penalty, and Jesus is condemned.

Mark drives home the point that Christians cannot confess that Jesus is the Messiah, God’s Son, until they learn that he suffered by two contrasting scenes involving Peter. The first scene we have already noted. In chapter 8 Peter proclaims that Jesus is the Messiah and objects to Jesus’s response that Jesus must suffer. Jesus tells Peter not to reveal that he is the Christ, and that all who would follow him must “take up their cross” (8:34). By contrast, in chapter 14 after Jesus publicly proclaims that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, and gets condemned to death, Peter denies before the servants of the High Priest that he even knows Jesus. Peter cannot confess Jesus publicly because Peter is not prepared to suffer (14:66-71). The reader is supposed to learn from Peter’s bad example!

Mark’s Gospel also suggests that it is only through their suffering that Jesus and his followers will convert the world. The climax of Mark’s Gospel is when the centurion who supervised the crucifixion of Jesus proclaims, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” Since it is historically unlikely that the centurion would have declared that Jesus was God’s Son, these words must be from Mark himself and express his theology. Mark tells us that the centurion said these words when he saw how Jesus died (15:39). It is the suffering and death of Jesus which convert him. As a Roman soldier, the centurion is presumably a Gentile, and his conversion symbolizes the coming of the gospel to the Pagans. Mark looks forward to the missionary work and the suffering of later Christians. The gospel will be preached to the whole world, but the missionaries will be rejected even by their own families and will be put on trial, beaten, and killed. This suffering will be their primary testimony to Jesus (Mark 13:9-10).

The rending of the veil of the temple that occurs in Mark at Jesus’s death symbolically reinforces the point that the crucifixion makes God available to the world. A veil separated the Holy of Holies, where in some sense God dwelt, from the rest of the temple, and the temple itself was only accessible to Jews. Gentiles could not go, on pain of death, beyond the outermost courtyard. In Mark’s Gospel Jesus condemns the ethnic exclusiveness of the temple. When he stages a protest in the temple, Jesus cites the scripture that God’s “house shall be called a house of prayer for all the

nations” (Mark 11:17). This scriptural passage looks forward to the conversion of Gentiles (Isa 56:6-7). The rending of the veil at Jesus’s death immediately followed by the centurion’s confession that Jesus is God’s Son symbolizes that the crucifixion of Jesus removes the barrier between God and the unbelieving world and brings the world to faith.

The suffering and death of Jesus and his followers convert the world because that endurance manifests love. Mark’s Gospel emphasizes that the primary Christian responsibility is to love. Mark records that in response to a question from a scribe about what was the first commandment Jesus said that the first was to love God with all of one’s heart and the second was to love one’s neighbor as oneself. When the scribe agreed that these commandments were “much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices,” Jesus replied, “You are not far from the Kingdom of God” (12:33-34). Love is more important than all religious duties and rituals. Love brings people into the Kingdom of God. Mark then records, “After that no one dared to ask him [Jesus] any questions” (10:34). It is love that silences the critics of Jesus and his followers. The suffering and death of Jesus and his followers supremely manifest their love for God and for the world, and it is this love which converts.

The theme that Christians must not proclaim that Jesus is God’s Son until they learn that he and they must suffer explains the otherwise bizarre original ending of Mark. When the women say nothing to anyone because they are afraid, the reader reacts negatively. Certainly, when the women heard the command from the messenger in white to talk about the resurrection, the women should have obeyed. Why did they not do so? Because they were afraid. The reader must not be afraid to proclaim Jesus despite the risks and suffering involved. If Mark had ended with triumphant resurrection appearances, as the other gospels do, that would have become the climax of the narrative. Consequently, the basic message of Mark’s Gospel would have been that Christian faith primarily depends on miracles, especially the miracle of Jesus’s resurrection. The emphasis that Christians like Jesus must suffer, and it is this willingness to suffer that converts the world, would have been lost.

Mark stresses that an intellectual knowledge that as disciples of Jesus we may have to suffer is not enough, because in our pride we may imagine that we will be able to endure suffering when in fact we may not be. In the gospel the disciples of Jesus repeatedly say that they will be able faithfully

to endure the coming ordeal. When Jesus asks James and John whether they can drink the cup of suffering that he will drink, they say that they can (10:38-39). When Jesus tells the disciples that they will all fall away, Peter insists that he would never deny Jesus. Peter is even prepared to die for Jesus. The other disciples make the same claim (14:29-31). But in fact, all the disciples of Jesus flee when he is arrested (14:50), and Peter goes on to deny Jesus three times (14:66-72).

To get through suffering, we must realize how horrible it will be and cultivate a disciplined reliance on God's grace, perhaps especially through prayer. Mark emphasizes that Jesus is under no illusions about the horror of suffering. As he faces what is to come, Jesus is "distressed and agitated" (14:33), and Jesus says to his disciples that he is "mortally wounded with grief" (14:34, my translation). In his actual narration of the crucifixion, Mark does nothing to relieve the starkness of the event. Luke can picture Jesus calmly extending forgiveness to a repentant thief and then die peacefully after commending his spirit into God's hands. John can picture Jesus thoughtfully entrusting his mother and John into each other's care. By contrast, Mark's description of Jesus's suffering is grim. Jesus makes only two sounds, a question as to why God has forsaken him and a loud cry at death. Mark emphasizes that unlike Peter and the other disciples, Jesus did not blithely volunteer to suffer. On the contrary, in Mark's Gospel just before his arrest Jesus prays that if it is possible he might be crucified. He only accepts his coming ordeal when he is sure that it is God's will for him. And to get through the ordeal he earnestly prays. The disciples who are totally unprepared to suffer do not pray but instead go to sleep. Jesus rebukes them three times, warning them to watch and pray. Their willingness to accept suffering will not be matched by their ability to do so unless they turn to God. To use the actual language of Jesus in Mark's Gospel, the disciples' "spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (14:38). Of course, here Jesus's behavior is an example for Mark's readers to imitate, and the behavior of the disciples is an example of what to avoid. Jesus who prays is able to remain faithful in his ordeal. The disciples who do not pray are not. In the previous chapter Mark stresses that his readers must "keep awake," that is, be alert and ready. As Jesus looks forward to the future suffering of his disciples, he repeatedly emphasizes that his followers must keep awake. Indeed, Jesus ends his long address with the words, "What I say to you [Peter, Andrew, James, and John] I say to all: 'Keep awake'" (13:37). In this climactic ending Mark shows how great his concern is that disciples in his own time "keep awake." Mark even visibly

alters the words of Jesus. Obviously, Jesus did not say in a private speech to Peter, Andrew, James, and John, “What I say to you, I say to *all*.” But, by definition, “all” includes the readers for whom Mark wrote. Mark was stressing to them, that they must “keep awake” unlike Jesus’s first disciples who slept and ended up being unfaithful.

Mark’s Gospel originally addressed Christians who were suffering. Chapter 13 indicates that Mark and his readers were living about the time of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus’s speech is a response to the disciples’ question as to when the temple will be destroyed. In the speech Jesus outlines coming events up to the end of the present age and Jesus’s return to rule the world. Of course, these events were all future from the perspective of Jesus. But we should not assume that they were all future from the perspective of Mark who was writing after the crucifixion and the resurrection. In the speech Mark adds the words, “let the reader understand,” when Jesus speaks about the “desolating sacrilege” (13:14). In the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures that phrase describes the defilement of the temple (Dan 9:27, 11:31, 12:11; 1 Macc 1:54). Therefore, we should assume that Mark was writing about the time that the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, especially since Jesus’s entire speech is a response to the question of when the temple will be destroyed. Mark claims that the suffering of this period was greater than any other in all of history (13:19). We may regard this claim as hyperbole. However, any persecution in which people are being tortured or killed is the worst thing in all of history *for them*. And Christians were being tortured and killed. Just a couple of years before the temple’s destruction, the Emperor Nero blamed the great fire of Rome on the Christians living in the city. He had them executed in sadistic ways, including being torn apart by dogs and being burned alive. By the time of the temple’s destruction, Nero was no longer emperor, but the political situation was fluid. There was no reason that persecution could not break out again. Meanwhile, there was the war between the Jews in Israel and the Romans which culminated in the destruction of the temple. It would appear that both sides persecuted Christians living in the combat zone. To the Jewish rebels, Christians were not faithful Jews, since Christians welcomed Gentile membership. To the Romans, Christians were Jews, since they worshiped a Jewish savior. The ancient church historian, Eusebius, tells us that on the eve of the war, the church in Jerusalem fled from the city (E.H. III.v).

In response to this suffering, Christian miracle workers were promising to

protect followers who revered them as new messiahs. Mark tells us that during the period of unprecedented suffering, “false christs” would appear and work “signs and wonders.” Although Mark does not explicitly say so, he implies that these miracle workers were Christians. In chapter 13 Mark records that Jesus warned against people who would come *in his own name*, claiming to be the new Jesus (13:5-6). Mark also indicates that even the “elect” might be led astray by their signs and wonders (13:22). For Mark the “elect” must be Christians. And historically Christians would have been interested in charismatic miracle workers who themselves claimed to the faithful to Jesus, the supreme miracle worker. Given the situation, it is probable that the false christs were offering protection in return for worship. Presumably, in a period in which Christians were fearing the worst, they would be hoping for miracles. Clearly, the “false christs” were miracle workers and expected people who benefited to honor them as messiahs.

A major goal of Mark’s Gospel is get the original readers to reject these miracle workers. The gospel explicitly calls them “false christs,” which in a Christian document is an extraordinarily damning description. The beginning of the Jesus’s speech in chapter 13 warns the reader against people who will come in his own name claiming to be the new Jesus. Presumably, Mark begins this way to highlight the danger, especially since the rest of the speech presents future events in their chronological order and only here previews something that will be dealt with in detail later. When chapter 13 does get to the era of the false christs, Mark issues the most severe warning possible. These imposters might even deceive the “elect” [Mark’s own Christian readers! (13:22)]. “But be alert. I have already told you everything” (13:23).

Nevertheless, Mark does not want his readers to overestimate their own ability to withstand hardship without the miraculous intervention of the false christs. If Christians do not turn to the false christs and yet cannot endure suffering, they will be tempted to give up their faith altogether to secure safety. Like Peter they will deny that they are followers of Jesus in order to protect themselves.

To help his readers withstand hardship, Mark emphasizes that God’s future will be very different than the present. In the present Christians are tempted to rely on their own limited power. Mark gives the example that they will want to prepare their legal defense in advance of the interrogation.

But Mark assures his readers that when the time of testing comes God will give them new power. When Christians are on trial, the Holy Spirit will speak through them (13:11). Mark also stresses that the time of suffering will be brief, and then God will inaugurate a wonderful new era which one can scarcely imagine. God has shortened the time of tribulation (13:20). In only a little while Christ will return with “great power and glory” (13:26), and will send out his angels and gather his elect.

Of course, the reason that Mark’s readers can know that the future will be very different than the tribulations of the present is the suffering and triumph of Jesus. Jesus went through terrible suffering. But then God raised him from the dead. This last event was so shocking that the women who found his tomb to be empty and heard the messenger in white proclaim his resurrection were afraid even to share the news. Nevertheless, Jesus did rise from the grave after torture and death. Likewise God will indeed rescue Mark’s readers who remain faithful in the present tribulation.

Earlier we looked at several passages where Mark is deliberately obscure. Mark tells us that Jesus spoke to the crowd in parables so that people would not understand. But Mark does not tell us why Jesus did not want them to comprehend the message. Mark tells us the exact numbers of the two feeding miracles, how many loaves of bread Jesus started with, how many thousands of people were fed, how many baskets of leftover food there were. Mark emphasizes that there is some fundamental point that the disciples are not getting that we the readers must get. But Mark does not tell us what the point is. Mark tells us that Elijah has indeed returned and suffered, but Mark does not explain who this “Elijah” was.

In each case Mark is obscure because he is inviting the reader to struggle with the paradox of salvation through the cross. Mark does not want the reader to understand an obvious message immediately and then forget. Mark wants us to struggle so that we will ponder, and when we have discerned the point, we will remember it. The obscure message that we must discover is that, as much as we would prefer things to be otherwise, the path to salvation is through suffering. The reason in Mark that Jesus does not want the crowds to understand his preaching during his ministry and convert is that conversion prior to the cross would only lead to apostasy. If his audience understood the message and became disciples, they would be like the seed which fell on the rock or like the seed that was

choked by thorns. The seed that fell on the rock sprouted quickly and then withered because it had no root. Jesus explains to his disciples that this seed represents people who desert the gospel when persecution arises. The seed that was choked by the thorns represents people who convert and then give up their commitment to the Kingdom in order to pursue wealth. The crowds must not convert until Jesus's own crucifixion warns them of the great cost of being a follower of Jesus, and Jesus's resurrection proclaims the great reward. Indeed, in his comments about the Parable of the Sower and his desire that the crowds not understand it, Jesus stresses that there will come a time for the crowd to understand: "There is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light" (4:22). Mark even challenges the reader to get this message by adding, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" (4:23). After the resurrection, it will be time for the world to understand that the crucified Jesus is indeed the Messiah who is God's risen Son. The reader of the gospel lives in that later, challenging time and must struggle with the implications.

The reason that Mark emphasizes the exact numbers of the miraculous feedings is to make the reader struggle with the fact that the time for miracles is over and that what remains is the cross and resurrection. As Countryman (*Baskets*) has shown, the point of the numbers is that the miracles of Jesus are decreasing. In the first feeding Jesus starts with less bread, feeds more people, and more is left over. The second feeding is in every respect inferior. In the following miracle it takes Jesus two tries to heal a blind man completely. In the miracle after that when Jesus first lays his hands on the demon-possessed boy, the boy has such a severe seizure that the bystanders conclude that he has died. The time for miracles is ending; the time for the cross is near. The last positive miracle in the gospel makes the point clearly. Jesus heals Bartimaeus of his blindness, and in response Bartimaeus follows Jesus "on the way" (10:52). Three previous passion predictions also mention the "way" (8:27, 9:33, 10:32). That way is the way of the cross. Indeed, in the introduction to the last passion prediction Mark tells us that Jesus and his disciples were on the "way" leading to Jerusalem. "Jesus was walking ahead of them" "and those who followed were afraid" (Mark 10:32). The primary message of the miracle in which Jesus heals Bartimaeus of blindness, and Bartimaeus follows Jesus "on the way" is that those whom Jesus has healed of their (spiritual) blindness accept that they must suffer. Mark is telling his original readers who were tempted to try to escape their ordeal by relying on the miracles of the "false christs" that the time to rely on miracles is

over. Yes, Jesus worked miracles, but he did not use them to escape the cross. On the contrary, when he himself was actually on the cross, his enemies challenged him to use a miracle to save himself. But Jesus did not comply and come down from the cross (15:29-32). Instead, he waited for the resurrection. So too Mark's readers must realize that there is no acceptable way to avoid the cost of being a Christian. But the reward of that cost will be everlasting life.

The reason that Mark does not tell us who "Elijah" might be is to make us struggle with the unsettling irony that God's exalted messengers must suffer. How can it be that Elijah who was taken up into heaven has now been treated with contempt? Who is this Elijah, and what are the implications of his life and suffering for us, Mark's readers? Mark wants his readers to ponder. Of course, the explanation that Matthew supplies, lest his readers not get the point, is correct: This "Elijah" is John the Baptist. John was great. He fulfills the prophecies of scripture. Indeed, he is the new Elijah, and Elijah according to tradition was the greatest of the prophets. But John had to suffer imprisonment and beheading nevertheless. Jesus was the Son of God and yet had to undergo crucifixion. If such exalted figures had to go through extreme tribulation, Mark's readers cannot expect to escape suffering. To be a Christian is to be chosen, but even the "elect" must take up their cross.

The strange story of Jesus cursing the fig tree symbolically points forward to the era in which Mark's own readers were suffering. Mark intercalates the story of the fig tree with Jesus's condemnation of the temple. Jesus first looks at the temple and departs (11:11). The next morning Jesus sees the leafy but fruitless tree and curses it (11:12-14). Then he stages his protest in the temple, condemning it as a "cave of bandits" (11:17, my translation). The following morning the disciples see that the fig tree has withered (11:20-21). This structure clearly links the temple and the tree, or to put it differently, the tree becomes a symbol for the temple. The temple had beautiful buildings but no spiritual substance; the tree had leaves but no fruit. The destruction of the tree, which apparently did not occur immediately and certainly was not noticed until the next day, foretells the coming destruction of the temple. And that destruction occurred during the era in which Mark's readers were living and suffering. The reason that Mark explicitly tells us that Jesus cursed the fig tree for not having fruit even though "*it was not the season for figs*" (11:13) is to make it clear that the story is symbolic. The story is not to be taken literally but instead

points forward to a different “season,” the time of Mark’s beleaguered first readers. In chapter 13 as Mark looks ahead to the tribulation which his readers are experiencing and to the hope for Jesus’s return to save them, he explicitly compares this time to a fig tree that has leaves but, as of yet, no fruit (13:28-29).

In Mark’s Gospel, one test of whether the leaders of the Church are faithful to the example of Jesus is whether they will serve those who are below them rather than seek privileges. Not every church leader will suffer imprisonment or torture or execution. But every church leader may be tempted to abuse the power of leadership for selfish gain. Immediately after each of the last two predictions of Jesus’s suffering in Mark’s Gospel, we hear that the disciples are vying for the privileges of leadership. Jesus responds by teaching that in his community leaders must serve. In chapter 9 after Jesus predicts his betrayal and death, we learn that the disciples have been discussing “who was the greatest.” Jesus in reply teaches, “Whoever wants to be first must be . . . servant of all” (9:34-35). In chapter 10 Jesus again predicts his suffering and death. Then James and John ask for the most prestigious places in the Kingdom, and the other disciples become angry. Apparently they wanted these privileges. In any case, Jesus insists that it is the Pagans who act as tyrants over their subjects. Among the followers of Jesus the first “must be slave of all,” just as Jesus has acted as a servant by giving “his life as a ransom for many” (10:45).

By stressing that faithful Christian leaders do not seek privileges, Mark is implicitly attacking the “false christs” and their claim to be faithful to Jesus. These Christian leaders are expecting their followers to revere them as new prophets or even as the new Jesus. But Mark suggests that they have no right to such acclaim. The real prophets, like John the Baptist who is the new Elijah, suffered, and the real Jesus only publicly proclaimed his messianic identity in order to get killed. Once Jesus had accepted through persevering prayer that God willed for him to suffer (Mark 14:35-42), he did not work a miracle to save himself. The false christs who seek public acclaim through working miracles and apparently promise to use miracles to save themselves and their followers from suffering contradict all that the real Christ taught and did. Therefore, the false christs have no right to claim that they are loyal to Jesus, and they have no right to the loyalty of Christians who are faithful to him.

By recording that twice Jesus tried to hush up miracles and failed, Mark is

also implicitly attacking the “false christs.” Earlier we noted the puzzling fact that Mark emphasizes that on two occasions Jesus tried to hush up a miracle and yet failed completely. Of course, all Christians knew that Jesus had worked wonders, and Mark cannot deny that Jesus’s miracles, which Mark himself records, must have become public knowledge. But Mark can and does claim that Jesus did not wish to be known primarily as a miracle worker, and Jesus did not work miracles for public acclaim. Indeed, Jesus sometimes tried to keep his miracles from becoming public knowledge, even though this effort was ultimately futile. The contrast with the false christs who deliberately publicized their miracles to gain acclaim must have been striking when Mark wrote.

The “Messianic Secret” as a whole is an attack on the “false christs.” They apparently proclaimed that they were the new messiahs in order to gain power and prestige. Jesus in Mark’s Gospel, by contrast, tries to keep his messianic identity secret when the proclamation that he is the “Christ” would lead to power and prestige. Jesus only proclaims that he is the “Christ” when that proclamation will lead to suffering and shameful death. Mark created the “Messianic Secret” to criticize Christians whom Mark thought were false messiahs. It may well be that Mark partly based the Messianic Secret on some historical data from the life of Jesus. During his early ministry Jesus may have tried to keep people from realizing that he believed that he was the Messiah. People who claimed that they were Messiahs risked being killed immediately by the government. Perhaps only when he entered Jerusalem in triumph and staged a demonstration in the temple did he make his messianic claims public. However, the “Messianic Secret” as a literary device was Mark’s own creation, and its goal was to discredit the claims of the “false christs” of Mark’s own time.

We now can see that Mark’s diverse use of the title “Son of Humanity” for Jesus is coherent, because the title evokes the entire irony of gaining authority through undergoing crucifixion. As we noted above, Mark uses the title “Son of Humanity” to refer to the suffering and death of Jesus, and to Jesus’s role as the final judge of the world, and to Jesus’s authority during his ministry to pardon sins and interpret the Mosaic Law. Mark knew that the phrase “Son of Humanity” meant a human being, as is clear from the quote, “All sins and blasphemies will be forgiven to the sons of humanity [i.e., human beings]” (3:28; my translation). In Mark’s Gospel when Jesus declares that he will suffer as the “Son of Humanity,” Mark is stressing that despite Jesus’s dignity as God’s Son, Jesus suffered the way

that only a mere human being can suffer. And Mark is stressing that Jesus is the model for the ideal human being, who for Mark is the faithful disciple of Jesus. Jesus's disciples must take up their cross and follow him. Because Jesus has suffered as a mere human being and given the world an example of how God calls every human being to costly servanthood, Jesus has the moral authority at the last judgment to judge other human beings. He will judge us on whether we have followed his example. And because Jesus will be our final judge, he already has during his ministry the authority to forgive sins and interpret the law.

The purpose of the hard sayings in Mark's Gospel and the hard sayings of Jesus are basically the same, but the context is fundamentally different. Both Jesus and Mark speak strangely to invite people to look into their own hearts and to prepare for a radically different future. Jesus's enigmas invite people to see their own hypocrisy and welcome the coming of the kingdom in which the first will be as the last. Mark's enigmas invite people to acknowledge their own weakness and prepare for suffering and resurrection. Jesus did not give his readers details about the future. They would have to await the unknown future in trust. Thanks to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, Mark's readers have a clearer roadmap. The crucifixion and resurrection have definitely revealed the path that disciples must follow and the goal which they can reach. In Mark's Gospel when Jesus predicts his death and resurrection, the disciples do not understand. However, the reader understands. The reader knows that the path we must follow is servanthood and suffering, and the goal is eternal life. Nevertheless, even Mark's readers cannot fully know in advance the horrors that await or the power of God's grace to enable disciples to deal with them. That mystery remains, and the literary puzzles of Mark challenge us to struggle to understand and accept our situation.

Chapter 4

Strange Material in 1 & 2 Corinthians. The paradox of living simultaneously in two ages and the paradox of superiority through selflessness

This chapter will argue that Paul's Letters to the Corinthians take the evolution of the puzzling material in the New Testament one step further. The enigmatic sayings of Jesus were an attempt to get people to wrestle with the startling new demands of a Kingdom which was still hidden and which would come at an unknown time in an unknown way. The enigmatic material in Mark was an attempt to get Christians who already knew about the crucifixion of Jesus to struggle with the stark reality that we can never know in advance about the experience of our own death and the suffering which might precede it. By contrast, the Corinthian letters are full of statements that theoretically would be puzzling or even paradoxical but which a Christian should be able to understand because of Jesus's death and resurrection. Therefore, the test of whether someone thinks like a Christian is whether one can make sense of these enigmas.

I will develop the argument as follows. I will begin with a technical section which is primarily for New Testament scholars and which other readers may wish to skip. In this section I will defend the common-sense notion that 2 Corinthians is what Paul actually composed. Probably the majority of scholars believe that an editor composed 2 Corinthians by splicing together fragments from two or more different letters of Paul. These scholars contend that only this extreme hypothesis can account for the many anomalies in 2 Corinthians. In response, I will argue that the present letter fits Paul's own circumstances and makes rhetorical sense. After this technical discussion I will point out that although the Corinthian Letters are not a biography of Jesus as Mark's Gospel is, they still do reflect some of Jesus's challenging teaching and puzzling way of communicating. We will then identify many paradoxical statements and strange ideas in the Corinthians Letters. We will also see that when Paul wrote, he was under attack from other Christians. Paul's reply was that their criticisms reflected a worldly perspective instead of a Christian one. In this present life, Christians have a paradoxical existence. Christians live in this world, but

they should focus on the coming resurrection and final judgment which will overthrow the structures of this present life. Hence, the Christian message and Paul's own behavior are bizarre from a worldly perspective but make complete sense from a Christian one. When one views the deliberate puzzles and even paradoxes of the Corinthians Letters from a Christian perspective, they are comprehensible, even compelling. The deliberate paradoxes in the Corinthians Letters are a challenge to the reader to think like a Christian.

2 Corinthians is disjointed. There are tremendous changes in tone. Sometimes Paul seems totally satisfied with the Corinthians and even says that he is proud of them. We read in 7:16, "I rejoice, because I have complete confidence in you." In 7:4 Paul says, "I often boast about you; I have great pride in you." Yet in other passages Paul is critical and even bitterly sarcastic. For example, in 11:19-20, he exclaims, "You put up with it when someone makes slaves of you, or preys upon you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or gives you a slap in the face. To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that!" Paul even threatens that he will not spare the sinners when he comes back (13:2). In addition to jarring changes of mood, 2 Corinthians has strange interruptions. Paul begins a subject, abandons it, and then resumes it as though there had been no digression. In 2:12-13 Paul tells us, "When I came to Troas to proclaim the good news of Christ . . . my mind could not rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said farewell to them and went on to Macedonia." Paul then drifts into another topic. Five chapters later Paul suddenly resumes the narrative, "When we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted in every way . . . But God, who consoles the downcast, consoled us by the arrival of Titus" (7:5-6). There is a similar unexpected connection between 6:13 and 7:2. The material between these two verses is especially strange. Paul warns the Corinthians not to be "mismatched with unbelievers" (6:14), because there can be no fellowship between Christ and Satan (6:15). Yet nowhere in 2 Corinthians does Paul discuss the relationship between Christians and non-Christians.

There have been at least three different explanations for these oddities. The radical approach has been to postulate that an editor assembled what we call 2 Corinthians from fragments of various different letters. A possible conservative approach is to assume that 2 Corinthians was poorly written because of Paul's own circumstances. Still another approach, which my

own teacher, Wilhelm Wuellner, advocated, is that the oddities are due to a special rhetorical strategy.

We should only follow the radical approach if all other explanations are obviously inadequate. 2 Corinthians is all that we have. The alleged letters from which an otherwise unknown editor took excerpts and assembled them to produce what we now call “2 Corinthians” have been lost. If we can plausibly explain why Paul could have written 2 Corinthians as it is, we should accept that explanation. Postulating an editor who produced a new document with many serious infelicities is a desperate hypothesis. It should be adopted only as a last resort.

I think that there is much truth in the suggestion that Paul’s circumstances explain some of the problems in the letter. The hypothesis that Paul wrote the letter poorly does make sense. In the letter Paul tells us that he has recently been through a shattering time of suffering when “we despaired of life itself” (1:8). The effects of this trauma are apparent in the Greek which often is nearly incoherent. The English versions of 2 Corinthians which we find in our modern Bibles are much better than the Greek which they translate. Consequently, it is not surprising that there are jarring shifts in subject and mood. Indeed, the many references in the letter to Paul’s sufferings and weakness can be understood as an implicit explanation of, and apology for, the roughness of the document. Of course, it is at least possible that news arrived while Paul was composing the letter, and this new information invited changes in subject and tone.

I also think that the letter makes sense rhetorically. In the letter Paul is trying to achieve two different goals and using different strategies to do so. His most important goal is to get the Corinthians to reject his competitors whom he labels as “super apostles” and return to loyalty to him. To achieve this goal, he criticizes the Corinthians and is sarcastic. Paul concentrates his attacks on the super apostles in chapters 10-13, and these are the most acerbic portion of the letter. A secondary goal is get the Corinthians to contribute generously to the collection for the church in Jerusalem. To achieve this goal, Paul flatters the Corinthians and challenges them to live up to the flattery. Paul concentrates on the collection in chapters 8-9. Chapters 1-7 prepare for both the flattering solicitation for funds in chapters 8-9 and the bitter attacks on the super apostles in 10-13. In 2:14-

7:2 Paul is attacking an unnamed adversary and defending himself. For example, he emphasizes that he does not hawk the word of God as “many” do (2:17) or need letters of recommendation as “some” do (3:1). When we get to chapters 10-13, it becomes clear that Paul has already been attacking the super apostles and been preparing for the all-out assault in this conclusion of the letter. However, Paul surrounds the implied attacks on the super apostles in chapters 2-7 with the narrative of his trip to Macedonia and the reception of the good news that the Corinthians punished someone whose behavior had offended Paul. Consequently, when the reader gets to the section on the collection, it appears that basically Paul is happy with the Corinthians. Then when Paul says that he has boasted to others about the generosity of the Corinthians, the reader does not find this praise to be strange or insincere. We can even appeal to rhetoric to explain the odd material in 6:14-7:1 about the dangers of being mismatched with unbelievers and having fellowship with Satan. This unexpected section does not seem controversial or even necessary when the reader gets there. Surely, every Christian would recognize the danger of becoming too involved with people who are hostile to the faith, and no Christian would wish to have fellowship with Satan. However, the purpose of this passage becomes clear later. The passage prepares for the explicit attack on the super apostles in chapters 10-13. There Paul actually says that they are “false apostles” (11:13) who are proclaiming a different Jesus and a different gospel (11:4). He even compares the super apostles with Satan, claiming that they are his ministers (11:14-15)!

Consequently, we should conclude that despite the many tensions in 2 Corinthians Paul did compose the letter as it presently is. Of course, it was extremely awkward *in the same letter* to flatter the Corinthians to get them to give generously and to blast the Corinthians for disloyalty. And, as we have seen, Paul was struggling with his own personal traumas. Consequently, 2 Corinthians sometimes feels incoherent. However, it is clear what 2 Corinthians is *trying* to do, and there is no reason why Paul could not have produced the document as we now have it.

Having seen that we can explain problems in 2 Corinthians by appealing to Paul’s personal trauma and his rhetoric strategies, we should also consider the question of whether the oddness of the letter is also due to Paul being deliberately paradoxical. In the letter Paul admits that in some sense he is beside himself (5:13) and can talk “like a madman” (11:23). At various

points he insists that he is speaking as a “fool” (11:1, 16-17; 12:11). We might reasonably expect that someone who is posing as a fool and who can talk like a madman might express himself strangely. Indeed, when Paul attacks his fellow Christian apostles as being ministers of Satan, he explicitly says that he is speaking as a “madman.”

Paul's Letters to the Church in Corinth were written earlier than Mark's Gospel. As we have seen, Mark wrote around the year 70 when the temple at Jerusalem was destroyed. By contrast, the Acts of the Apostles tells us that Paul ended his first missionary trip to Corinth when Gallio was the proconsul there, and we know from a surviving inscription that Gallio was proconsul around the year 52 (Acts 18:12). It was in the next couple of years that Paul wrote his letters to the congregations which he founded in Corinth. Consequently, the Corinthian correspondence predates Mark's Gospel by more than a decade.

Nevertheless, in content Mark's Gospel stands closer to Jesus than the Corinthian letters do. Mark gives us a brief biography of Jesus and concentrates on his life and teaching. The climax of Mark's gospel is the death of Jesus, and Mark has only a few lines about the resurrection experiences. It is true, as we have seen, that in chapter 13 Mark records a speech from Jesus about subsequent events, including the events of Mark's own time. But outside of chapter 13 Mark seldom deals with what occurred after the crucifixion and resurrection. The letters to the Corinthians deal almost exclusively with such later matters. The letters concern Paul's own past missionary work at Corinth, the subsequent problems in the congregations which he founded there, and Paul's advice on what to do in response.

Although the two letters to the Corinthians differ from one another in some respects, there is great continuity between them, and we will look at them together. Some of the differences between the letters we will note in the next paragraphs. Here we underline some of the major similarities. Both letters were written to the same church within a short period of time. Both letters defend Paul's apostolic ministry at considerable length. Both letters deal with the collection for the church at Jerusalem. And, what is most important for this book, both letters have paradoxical passages and puzzling ideas, as we shall see. We may also note that Paul seems to have

seen his entire correspondence with the Corinthians as connected. In what we call his first letter to the Corinthians he refers to a still earlier letter and corrects a misimpression which the Corinthians got from it (1 Cor 5:9). In what we call his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul refers to a previous tearful letter (2 Cor 2:3-8, 7:8-12) which may or may not be what we call 1 Corinthians. Apparently then, even though First and Second Corinthians are separate letters, they were in Paul's mind parts of a larger whole. Moreover, Paul knew when he was writing 2 Corinthians that his intended audience had already received 1 Corinthians and might read 2 Corinthians in light of what he had previously sent.

Among Paul's Letters 1 Corinthians is the only one which explicitly refers to otherwise known sayings of Jesus. Never elsewhere in his letters does Paul directly refer to a saying of Jesus that we can document in some other source. By contrast, in 1 Corinthians Paul refers to three. In 7:10-11 Paul says that he has a commandment from the "Lord" that people should not get divorced. And in line with Jesus's statement that divorce followed by remarriage is adultery (e.g., Luke 16:18), Paul says that even if a woman does separate from her husband, she is to remain unmarried. In 9:14 Paul explicitly says that the "Lord" directed that "those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel." Presumably, Paul is referring to Jesus's statement that missionary laborers deserve to be paid (Luke 10:7). In 11:24-25 Paul quotes Jesus's Eucharistic words that the bread is Christ's body and the cup is the new covenant in his blood.

One reason why 1 Corinthians repeatedly refers to sayings of Jesus is that Paul wanted to reinforce that what he is mandating is what the entire Christian community believes and that this shared faith is based on the teaching of Jesus himself. Already in the opening verses Paul reminds the Corinthians that they are only part of the larger community of "all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:2). Paul goes on to emphasize that even though some Corinthians support Apollos, and some support Paul, Apollos and Paul themselves are only servants working together for Christ (3:5). In chapter 7 Paul stresses that his rule "in all the churches" is that every person should stay in the state that Christ has assigned (vs. 17). In his discussion of spiritual gifts, Paul stresses that all gifts come from "the same Lord" (12:5), and this God does not produce disorder but instead peace "as in all the churches of the saints" (14:33). Later he sarcastically asks whether the Corinthians think that they are the

only Christians (14:36). In chapter 15 Paul emphasizes that all of the apostles proclaim the resurrection the Jesus. In chapter 16 Paul says that he is giving to the Corinthians the same directions that he has already given to the churches in Galatia (vs. 1). Wilhelm Wuellner used to point out in lecture that the last major topic of 1 Corinthians, other than Paul's personal plans, is the collection for the church in Jerusalem. And this topic implicitly reinforces the theme that the Corinthians are only part of a much larger church and Christianity did not begin in Corinth but in Jerusalem.

By appealing to the common tradition that ultimately goes back to Jesus, 1 Corinthians was stressing to its original readers that they had strayed and it was especially important for them to return to the common faith and practice. Here Paul is dealing with the fundamentals, what Jesus himself taught and what all Christians believe. The Corinthians needed to listen.

The fact that in 1 Corinthians Paul consciously emphasizes the historical Jesus at least raises the question of whether Paul might have chosen to write more paradoxically than he normally would have. As we have seen, paradox was a hallmark of Jesus's own style. Could it be that in a letter in which Paul is appealing to the teaching of Jesus, Paul might have decided, whether consciously or unconsciously, to sound more like Jesus by being paradoxical?

In any case, 1 and 2 Corinthians have paradoxical statements. Here are some striking ones. "The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor 1:25). "If we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you" (2 Cor 5:13). "He [God] made him [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin" (2 Cor 5:21). "Whenever I [Paul] am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:10). Paul says that he is "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing . . . as having nothing, and yet possessing everything" (2 Cor 6:10). How could a Christian apostle claim that God is in any way foolish and weak, or that Jesus became sin? How can Paul claim that he is both "beside himself" and in his "right mind," and what does it mean to be insane because of God? How can Paul say of himself that he is strong when he is weak and is sorrowful and joyful simultaneously? How could he have nothing and possess everything?

1 and 2 Corinthians also have puzzling theological ideas. Here are three. The first is that Paul simultaneously claims to be a leader who has legitimate power over the Corinthians and a servant who in some sense is inferior to them. Thus, Paul can say that he is a father to the Corinthians (1 Cor 4:15). He claims that he has authority from the “Lord” to discipline the Corinthians (2 Cor 13:10). He can command them to expel an incestuous man from the congregation (1 Cor 5:13). Yet, he can also insist that he and his fellow missionary Apollos are their servants, “All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos” (1 Cor 3:21-22). Paul can claim that he is a “slave” of the Corinthians (2 Cor 4:5) and even declare that he is “nothing” (2 Cor 12:11).

A second puzzling theological idea in the Corinthian letters is the statement that, unlike other spiritual gifts, faith, hope, and love endure. In the famous thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians Paul stresses that other charisms pass away. Tongues will cease. Knowledge will become obsolete. However, faith, hope, and love abide. But how can Paul make this claim? Of course, our love for God and others will remain and even increase when all things are fulfilled. But what about faith and hope? Surely, hope passes away when we receive what we have hoped for. Paul himself wrote to the Romans, “Who hopes for what is seen?” (Rom 8:24). And faith is no longer necessary when our trust is fully and definitively vindicated. How can there be faith and hope after Christ has returned in glory and rewarded his followers? Then Christians will see Christ “face to face” (1 Cor 13:12) and possess all those unimaginable blessings that “God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2:16). What more could there be to hope for, and why would there be any need for faith?

A third strange idea in the Corinthians letters is the insistence that the law leads to death and yet in some instances people should follow the law. Thus, in both letters Paul insists that focusing on the law leads to destruction. In 1 Corinthians Paul makes the emphatic statement, “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law” (1 Cor 15:56). In 2 Corinthians Paul describes the Mosaic regulations as “the ministry of death, chiseled in letters on stone tablets,” and stresses that this “letter kills” (2 Cor 3:6). Yet, in 1 Corinthians Paul appeals to a Mosaic Law forbidding the muzzling of oxen which are treading out grain (1 Cor 9:9; Deut 25:4) to justify his right to be paid. And in 1 Corinthians Paul (alas) says that women are to be subordinate “as the law also says” (1 Cor 14:34). Some

scholars have found this last statement so strange and disturbing that they claim that Paul did not actually write it but that it was added later by another hand. But since the passage occurs in all surviving ancient copies of the letter, and Paul earlier appealed to the law to justify his right to be paid, we should assume that Paul did write it.

From the Corinthian letters we can see that many of Paul's intended readers thought that Paul was at best a second-rate Christian. 1 Corinthians tells us that some people felt that Apollos was a better pastor than Paul (1 Cor 1:12). 2 Corinthians makes it clear that the missionaries, whom Paul ridicules as the "super apostles," made a strong impression. Indeed, the Corinthians wrote for them letters of recommendation when they left (2 Cor 3:1). The enthusiasm that the Corinthians felt for the super apostles led to a diminished opinion of Paul. In 2 Corinthians Paul defensively insists, "I think that I am not in the least inferior to these super apostles" (2 Cor 11:5).

The Corinthians seem to have had many specific criticisms of Paul. First, the Corinthians apparently felt that Paul's bodily infirmity showed that he was not spiritual. The Corinthians noted that Paul's physical presence was "weak" (2 Cor 10:10). They concluded that this "thorn in the flesh," to use Paul's own metaphor" (2 Cor 12:7), showed that he was not in favor with God. Otherwise, God would have healed him. Another criticism that the Corinthians had of Paul was that he acted crazy. We do not know what it was about his behavior that made his mental balance suspect. Perhaps it was the fanaticism which manifested itself in Paul's refusal to accept money and in him constantly risking his life in his missionary work. In any case, Paul remarks defensively, "If we are beside ourselves, it is for God" (2 Cor 5:13). A third criticism was that Paul was a poor preacher, apparently because of a speech defect. Paul quotes the charge that "his speech is contemptible" (2 Cor 10:10) and admits that he is "untrained in speech" (2 Cor 11:6). A fourth criticism was that Paul's message was often difficult to grasp—a charge with which, as a modern reader of Paul, I partially agree! In 1 Corinthians Paul notes that his message was not "in plausible words of wisdom" (1 Cor 2:4). In 2 Corinthians he protests that his readers should be able to understand what he writes and expresses the hope that, since they only partially understand now, they will be able to understand fully later (2 Cor 1:13-14). Still another criticism of Paul was that he lorded over people even though he actually had no legitimate authority. He admits that

“others” did not consider him to be an apostle (1 Cor 9:2), and he further admits that he boasts somewhat excessively concerning his authority (2 Cor 10:8). The Corinthians also seem to have criticized Paul for not having glitzy spiritual gifts. Paul insists that he does have “visions and revelations of the Lord” (2 Cor 12:1), but the only example that he cites happened fourteen years before writing. In defending himself against the claim that he is inferior to the “super apostles,” Paul insists that he has performed “signs and wonders and mighty works” (2 Cor 12”). However, Paul provides no examples of these feats. Perhaps the most explosive criticism that the Corinthians made was that Paul was planning to embezzle money from the collection which he was claiming would go to the church in Jerusalem. Paul takes great pains in both 1 and 2 Corinthians to protect himself from the charge that he is going to steal from the offering. In 1 Corinthians he insists that people whom the *Corinthians* accredit in writing will take the money to Jerusalem and that he himself may not even go (1 Cor 16:3-4). In 2 Corinthians he writes, “We intend to do what is right not only in the Lord’s sight but also in the sight of others” (2 Cor 8:21). Despite such precautions Paul still has to note that the Corinthians thought that he had deceived them (2 Cor 12:16).

Paul’s basic reply to these criticisms was that they resulted from seeing things in a worldly way, rather than a Christian one. From a worldly perspective, physical infirmity is a defect. However, from a Christian perspective weakness can be a sign of holiness. Jesus was crucified in weakness (2 Cor 13:4), and Jesus revealed to Paul that strength can be made perfect in weakness (2 Cor 12:9). From a worldly perspective the willingness of Paul and other disciples to suffer is insane. Their sufferings are merely a spectacle, an epitome of foolishness (1 Cor 4:9-10). However, Paul insists that his alleged insanity is for God (2 Cor 5:13). From a worldly perspective Paul’s poor speaking crippled his ministry in Corinth. In reply, he insists that he deliberately chose not to be eloquent so that the faith of the Corinthians might not be based on human eloquence but on the power of God (1 Cor 2:2-5). If the Corinthians find Paul’s thoughts hard to comprehend, it is because the Corinthians are thinking in a worldly way. Paul has a message that only the spiritual can understand, a message which is foolishness from the perspective of anyone except mature Christians (1 Cor 2:13-3:1). The Corinthians are spiritually immature, mere infants who need milk, not solid food (1 Cor 3:1-2). Paul’s authority over the Corinthians does not come from human accreditation. He does not need

letters of recommendation. Paul received this apostleship when the risen Lord himself appeared to him (1 Cor 15:8). The proof of Paul's authority is the enormous fruits that through God's grace it has borne (1 Cor 15:9-10). The Corinthians themselves are his letter of recommendation (2 Cor 3:2). The Corinthians should realize that glitzy spiritual gifts without love are useless. The ability to speak in tongues, a knowledge of spiritual mysteries, even working a miracle which literally moves a mountain, are nothing without love (1 Cor 13:1-2). And Paul's extreme sacrifices for the Corinthians show how much he loves them (e.g., 2 Cor 11:11). The Corinthians are thinking in a worldly way when they suppose that Paul needs to pilfer from the collection. Paul as an apostle undeniably has the right to demand financial support from them. He does not do so because he is unwilling to put any obstacle in way of the gospel (1 Cor 9:12).

Paul sees himself and his readers as living during a period in which two ages overlap. The old age will continue until Christ's triumphant return to raise the dead and judge the world. Yet the new age has already begun. Jesus has already died for sinners and been raised. He now reigns in heaven and has already poured out his Spirit on Christians.

Because Christians live in both ages, their existence is paradoxical. Outwardly Christians are subject to all the political, social, spiritual, and even medical problems of this age. Paul notes that some in Corinth are sick or have recently died (1 Cor 11:30). And Paul refers to the sufferings of the Corinthians for the gospel (2 Cor 1:6). In this age Satan continues to be powerful. Paul expresses concern that a repentant Corinthian may be "overwhelmed by excessive sorrow" (2 Cor 3:8) and fall victim to the designs of Satan. Paul can even hand over an unrepentant perpetrator of incest "to Satan for the destruction of the flesh" (1 Cor 5:5). Yet Paul stresses that inwardly Christians already are (part of) a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). Indeed, as Christians contemplate the glory of the risen Lord, they are themselves being transformed into his image by the power of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 3:18). Although Paul does not emphasize this because the Corinthians are overly enthusiastic, he also acknowledges that because the new age has already begun Christians have, for lack of a better term, "supernatural gifts." Christians can speak in tongues, work miracles, and receive revelations from God. Paul stresses that outward decay and inward renewal are the characteristics of the Christian life in general. He writes in 2 Corinthians, "Our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed" (2 Cor 4:16).

In both 1 and 2 Corinthians Paul uses his own life as an illustration of the paradox of Christian existence in the present. Paul dwells on his own sufferings and struggles. He has been hungry and thirsty, is poorly clothed and is homeless (1 Cor 4:11). He has repeatedly been tortured and shipwrecked (2 Cor 11:24-25). He is afflicted with a physical infirmity ("thorn in the flesh;" 2 Cor 12:7). He has an embarrassing lack of certain gifts. "His bodily presence is weak and his speech is contemptible" (2 Cor 10:10). He has endless anxiety over his stormy relationship with the Corinthians (e.g., 2 Cor 7:5-8). Paul acknowledges that he is harassed by Satan (2 Cor 12:7). But inwardly he feels the support of the love and power of Christ's Spirit, and the Spirit is the "down payment" (2 Cor 1:22, 5:5) of the life to come. After he is crushed, he receives new power from the God who raises the dead (2 Cor 1:8-10). Paul claims that he himself exercises supernatural gifts. He speaks in tongues more than the Corinthians do (1 Cor 14:18). Once he was even "caught up to the third heaven" (2 Cor 12:2) where he received revelations too wonderful to be shared (2 Cor 12:4). Paul's own life illustrates the paradox of living both in this present broken age and in the glorious new age which has already begun.

Ultimately, the paradox of the Christian life will only be resolved when Christ will return and this present evil age will end. Then there will be no more suffering, and death will be swallowed up forever (1 Cor 15:54). Christians will have glorious new bodies resembling the body of the risen and glorified Jesus (1 Cor 15:49). Christians will know all things (1 Cor 13:12). Every hope will be fulfilled.

Therefore, for Paul the wisdom which makes sense of the paradox of Christian existence is the sure expectation of final resurrection, judgment, and salvation. Paul insists that the secret wisdom of Christianity is that "no eye has seen and no ear has heard and it has not entered into a human heart how much God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9). The glory that will be is so great that it makes even extreme suffering for Christ worthwhile. Therefore, Paul is not crazy when he willingly endures torture and shipwreck to serve Christ. The expectation of the glory which Christians will have transfigures all of Christian life and allows Paul and others to be joyful in the midst of sorrow. Moreover, even in the present the Holy Spirit gives a foretaste of the future fulfillment. Through the Spirit Christians inwardly experience something of the peace and love which will

be experienced totally in the age to come. The expectation of the glory that is to be explains how Paul can have nothing and yet possess all things. In his present life Paul is often “hungry and thirsty” and “poorly clothed and beaten and homeless” (1 Cor 4:11). He does in fact possess nothing. However, in the age to come he will reign with Christ and have all things. Even now in hope he looks forward to them, and the Holy Spirit gives him inwardly a taste of that awaited joy.

The basis of all this wisdom is the death and resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit. Christians know about the glory that is to come because Jesus has already been crucified and raised from the dead. His life, death, and resurrection are a pattern for our own. Those who live and die as Jesus did will also be raised like him and have glorious “spiritual” bodies like his (1 Cor 15:44-49). To use Paul’s own language, the risen Christ is the “first fruits” (2 Cor 1:22, 5:5) of those who have died (1 Cor 15:20). The risen Christ has become a life-giving Spirit (1 Cor 15:45), the source of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christians. And the Holy Spirit is the down payment of our own resurrection.

If there were no resurrection, Christians would be fools. Paul’s words to Christians who do not believe in the resurrection are harsh. If Christ has not been raised, then Christians will not be raised. If Christians are not going to be raised, then they are “of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor 15:19). It would be more sensible to follow the Pagan proverb, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (1 Cor 15:33 [Menander]). If Christ has not been raised, Paul is a fool to suffer daily for the gospel. Paul and other evangelists are also liars. They preach that Christ has been raised from the dead, and if in fact he has not been, that common Christian message is false. The paradoxical peace and joy that Christians experience in the midst of tribulation are not enough by themselves to justify the Christian proclamation. It is because the paradoxical peace and joy in the present point forward to a future consummation that Christianity is “good news.”

Consequently, the world which does not believe in the resurrection must dismiss Christianity as folly. The crucifixion of Jesus is a stumbling block to Jews and madness to Greeks (1 Cor 1:23). Without the resurrection, the crucifixion signals the triumph of the world over Jesus and his deluded followers.

Paul’s paradoxical statement that God made Christ to be sin (2 Cor 5:21) means that God allowed the world to view the crucified Jesus as a sinner.

Throughout his letters Paul uses Jesus as the model and justification of his own behavior. Here is one example from 2 Corinthians, “He [Jesus] was crucified in weakness, but he lives by the power of God. For we are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God” (2 Cor 13:4). From the perspective of the world, Paul is a fool and a sinner. He is suffering for the insane delusion of a resurrection and final judgment which will vindicate him. The rulers of this world can make no sense of such conduct. To non-Christians the apostles are only a sad “spectacle” (1 Cor 4:9), “the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things” (1 Cor 4:13). Similarly, the rulers of this world could not understand Jesus. They could only regard him as a fool and a sinner. “None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord” (1 Cor 2:8). God allowed Jesus to appear to be a sinner to the world.

Christians who seek worldly honor are disregarding the resurrection and are acting foolishly. In the Corinthian letters Paul repeatedly reminds his readers of the coming resurrection and judgment and warns his readers to behave in the light of what is to occur. We may quickly glance at some passages from the first half of 1 Corinthians. Near the beginning of the letter Paul brings up the importance of being “blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:8). He then criticizes the Corinthians for arguing over which church leader is better, instead of focusing on Christ and his cross. Paul emphasizes that the leaders of the church will themselves face a fiery judgment (1 Cor 3:13-15). He stresses that his readers will also suffer if they destroy the church’s unity through their partiality for particular pastors. Those who destroy the church will themselves suffer destruction (1 Cor 3:17). When Paul goes on to discuss the sexual irresponsibility of the Corinthians, he stresses that sinners “will not inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 6:9). He then urges the Corinthians to live in an unworldly manner because the time remaining until the judgment had become short. Therefore, “those who buy should act as if they were not retaining possession and those who make use of the goods of this world, as though they were not making full use of them, for the form of this world is passing away” (1 Cor 7:30-31, my translation). Clearly then there is no time to pursue earthly prestige.

The difference between the world acting foolishly and Christians acting foolishly is that Christians should know that seeking worldly honors and pleasures is foolish. The world which does not believe in the coming resurrection and judgment cannot be expected to have the wisdom to

prepare. The world which has not received the Holy Spirit does not have the “mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16). By contrast, Christians have no excuse. They know about the resurrection of Jesus and their own coming resurrection; they have received the Holy Spirit. Consequently, Christians who are seeking worldly status are acting as “infants” who can only tolerate milk rather than solid food (1 Cor 3:1-2). All the leaders of the church preach the resurrection. The foundation of all Christianity is the cross, resurrection, and Spirit of Jesus. Christians know. How then can they disregard this knowledge and its wonderful implications for those who sacrifice to prepare for the resurrection and final judgment and the terrible implications for those who do not?

Therefore, the paradoxes of 1 & 2 Corinthians are meant to be read both on a worldly and a Christian level. The reader is supposed to realize, indeed, to experience, that much of what Paul says and does is a puzzle from a worldly perspective. But the reader is also supposed to realize that what Paul says and does makes perfect sense to a mature Christian. Consequently, Paul can write, “If we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you” (2 Cor 5:13). From a worldly perspective Paul’s words and behavior demonstrate that he is insane. But Paul is willing to be a “spectacle to the world” (1 Cor 4:9) for God sake. However, in fact Paul is in his right mind, and through his life and teaching he struggles to bring the Corinthians to “a sober and right mind” (1 Cor 15:34).

On which level readers choose to view the paradoxes in 1 and 2 Corinthians tells them who they are and how they will fare at the resurrection and last judgment. Readers who regard Paul’s behavior as foolish or immoral, who find his letters difficult to understand, who think that Paul is a second-rate Christian, are being worldly. And they face the threat of condemnation on the day of judgment. By contrast, readers who accept Paul’s defense of his life and teaching are mature Christians, and they can look forward to the unimaginable blessings which God has prepared for those who love him.

There is another irony: By trying to become spiritually superior, the Corinthians are becoming spiritually inferior, whereas Paul by renouncing the quest for spiritual superiority has obtained it. Paul notes that the Corinthians are “eager for spiritual gifts” (1 Cor 14:12). They want knowledge of spiritual things; they are proud that they can speak in tongues. They are eager to exercise their freedom as Christians who know that “all things are lawful” (1 Cor 6:12, 10:23). Indeed, the Corinthians are

proud to have in the congregation a man who is living with his father's wife (1 Cor 5:1-2)! It is probably their eagerness for spiritual glamour that has made the Corinthians so willing to follow the "super apostles." But in seeking to improve themselves, the Corinthians have become more self-centered and cut themselves off from the power of God. Consequently, they are damaging the church. Their knowledge has made them, to use Paul's expression, "inflated" (1 Cor 8:1). Their enthusiasm for tongues causes them to look down on others who do not have this gift. By approving of a man living in incest, the Corinthians are encouraging others to sin. "A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough" (1 Cor 5:6). Their spiritual freedom to eat meat sacrificed to idols endangers the spiritual welfare of those who are less theologically advanced. Paul, by contrast, is not selfishly seeking his own spiritual welfare; instead, he is eager to let God's grace work through him to help others. Paul is concerned for the welfare of the church as a whole. He is willing to sacrifice his own spiritual prestige in order to build up the Christian community. He can even write to the wayward Corinthians, "We rejoice when we are weak and you are strong" (2 Cor 13:9). This lack of self-concern has opened Paul to the power of the Spirit and made him more like Jesus who also sacrificed himself for others. Because Paul is so centered on serving in the power of the Spirit, Paul does not even take credit for his own good deeds. Instead, he attributes all the good that he does to the power and commission of God. After telling the Corinthians that he has labored more than any of the other apostles, Paul corrects himself, "It was not I, but the grace of God that is with me" (1 Cor 15:10). Similarly, Paul does not feel that he had any basis for boasting (unless he boasts as a "fool"). Paul is only fulfilling the commission which he received from Christ and cannot claim any credit for preaching the gospel (1 Cor 9:16). Although theoretically he is free, Paul has made himself a slave to everyone (1 Cor 9:19). Indeed, Paul has even become weak to "win the weak" (1 Cor 9:22). Paul is not attempting to become superior. Therefore, ironically, Paul has become spiritually superior.

The supreme gifts which allow one to become spiritually superior through selflessness are faith, hope, and love. In the famous thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians Paul insists that faith, hope, and, especially, love are the greatest spiritual gifts. Without them, no other gifts are constructive. Without love, all other gifts encourage us to be self-centered, and self-centeredness damages others. Without faith and hope, we are not even Christians. Christians are those who have faith in Christ and hope for the triumph of God. Faith, hope, and love also center us on God, thereby

making us less focused on ourselves. Hope focuses us on what God will do. Faith allows us to trust God. Love unites us with God.

As we have already noted, a paradox in 1 Corinthians 13 is the claim that unlike other gifts faith, hope, and love endure. One can readily see that love for God and one another will endure after the resurrection. In the next life Christians will love God and one another even more than now. However, how can faith and hope endure? Hope, by definition, is the expectation of receiving something in the future that one does not currently possess. But after Christ raises the dead, the saved will possess all things. How can there still be room for hope? As Paul wrote to the Romans, “Hope that is seen [i.e., realized] is not hope” (Rom 8:24). Similarly, by definition, faith is trust in what we cannot yet know empirically. In 2 Corinthians Paul explicitly says, “We walk by faith, not by sight” (5:7). But after Christ returns in triumph, raises the dead, and transforms the world, we will know all things by direct experience. Then we will know even as we are known by God (1 Cor 13:12). How then can there still be faith?

The solution to these riddles is that hope and faith, like love, bring us into the presence of a God who is too great for our minds to grasp in this broken age. Hence, these are the virtues which in this present life bring us most fully into God himself. The openness to God which faith, hope, and love make possible allow Christ’s Spirit to dwell in us and begin to make us a new creation. The virtues of faith and hope endure both because they come the closest to revealing to us now what we will possess more completely later and because they do the most to advance us spiritually toward that supreme goal.

The centrality of love explains how Paul can claim that the Law “kills” and yet Paul can on occasion appeal to legal regulations to justify behavior. The law kills when people use the fact that something is lawful to defend behavior that is unloving. The law should be followed when it mandates loving behavior. The Corinthians concluded that since for Christians “all things are lawful” (1 Cor 6:12, 10:23) there was no problem with a man living with his father’s wife and no problem with eating meat sacrificed to idols. Paul in response does not contest the claim that for Christians all things are lawful. Instead, Paul insists that doing some things is not loving, and whatever is unloving is sinful. It is outrageous that the congregation is tolerating incest, since this toleration is tempting the rest of the congregation to live immorally. “A little yeast leavens the whole batch of

dough” (1 Cor 5:6). It is sinful to eat meat sacrificed to an idol if such behavior tempts unsophisticated Christians to act against their own consciences. But when the law mandates behavior that is loving, then Christians should certainly follow the law. As Paul says in his letter to the Romans, “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom 13:10).

The Law also “kills” when it separates one Christian group from another, but the law properly understood does not do this. Thus, Paul insists that he does not let loyalty to a specific set of laws limit his Christian ministry to different groups. Instead, he adjusts his ministry to the culture of the people he is with. But Paul insists that in doing so he is obeying a higher law. Paul writes, “To those under the [Mosaic] law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law) so that I might win those outside the law” (1 Cor 9:20-21). Here Paul insists that there is a higher law which he variously describes as “God’s law” and “Christ’s law.” This higher law directs him to observe the ethnic customs of whatever group he is presently dealing with. The higher law allows him to respect and love different cultures. And Paul insists that Christianity should not be culturally uniform. His “rule in all of the churches” (1 Cor 7:17) is that people should keep the culture which they had before they joined the church. For example, Gentiles should not get circumcised after conversion, and Jews should not try to hide their circumcision. Therefore, each culture should follow its own “law,” but it must not impose that law on another Christian group. To do that would be to act contrary to the higher law of love. As Paul insists elsewhere in his correspondence, “the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Gal 5:14; Lev 19:18).

Love also explains the paradox that Paul himself seems to be crazy and yet is supremely sane. After noting that he is beside himself for God and yet in his right mind for the Corinthians, Paul continues, “for the love of Christ urges us on” (2 Cor 5:14). Paul’s experience of God’s love for him, and Paul’s love for God and for the Corinthians in response explain why Paul is willing to suffer persecution from the world and why he makes such sacrifices for the Corinthians. Since the world does not know God’s love, Paul appears to the world to be insane. But God’s love is the primary reality, and the duty to love is the primary obligation. Receiving and

passing on God's love bring joy and peace even in the midst of the sufferings of this life. And God's love points forward to the final resurrection where God will give to those who have loved him and loved others in his name those unimaginable joys that no eye has seen or ear heard (1 Cor 2:9). Despite appearances to the contrary, only those who know God's love and its ethical and eschatological implications are truly in their right minds.

Paul's approach to enigmatic sayings in 1 and 2 Corinthians is a step beyond Mark's approach in his gospel. The enigmas of Mark's Gospel are primarily about the fact that we cannot understand great suffering and death until we actually experience them. Mark focuses on the death of Jesus and on the sufferings that his original readers may soon have to endure. Consequently, the puzzles in Mark cannot be resolved in the present. The resolution must await the grace which Mark believes that God will give suffering Christians when they face the supreme test. By contrast, the puzzles of Paul are primarily about the coming resurrection and our present experience of the Holy Spirit, an experience which is itself a foretaste of our future resurrection. Christians simultaneously live in this age and the next. Because of Jesus's resurrection and the gift of the Spirit, mature Christians do know something about the coming consummation. Paul can write that what no eye has seen God has already revealed to Christians through the Spirit. It is only the world which does not believe in the resurrection and has not received the Spirit that finds Christianity incomprehensible. Consequently, Paul can claim that what are puzzles from the perspective of the world and even of immature Christians need not be puzzles for Christians who are mature. Through the presence of the Spirit and the hope that the resurrection of Jesus inspires, the path of suffering and humility that leads to glory makes sense already in the present. Consequently, Paul can write, "Among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age who are doomed to perish" (1 Cor 2:6).

In his treatment of the paradoxes in the Christian life, Paul in the Corinthians letters deliberately understates the glories of Christian experience in the present, because his readers are spiritually immature. Because of their immaturity, the Corinthians think that they are more advanced than Paul himself, and the Corinthians are too enamored of glitzy spiritual gifts, such as tongues, miracles, and visions. In response Paul stresses that the Corinthians are mere infants in the Christian life. The

glitzy spiritual gifts are of no use without Christian love. Christian love leads to suffering, a suffering that Paul's own life exemplifies. Therefore, the life of a mature Christian is characterized by struggle rather than triumph. The triumph will only occur when Christ returns.

It is John's Gospel that will explore the question of whether mature Christians who love deeply have a supreme glory even in this present difficult life and whether this glory has implications for understanding the puzzles and paradoxes of Christian existence now.

Chapter 5

The Puzzling Sayings in John's Gospel. Learning the paradox of Jesus's identity as we go through the stages of spiritual growth

This chapter will argue that John's Gospel completes the evolution of puzzling material in the New Testament by showing that Christians can presently experience the truth of enigmas which the world cannot fathom. As we have seen, Jesus spoke in riddles partly because no one could know in advance what God's future would be like. Mark wrote in riddles because even though his Christian readers knew about Jesus's own crucifixion and knew that they themselves might suffer martyrdom, they could not know in advance what experiencing their own suffering and death would be like. The Corinthian Letters contain material which is literally paradoxical but which the Christian reader is supposed to understand because of the presence of the Holy Spirit and the hope of future resurrection. The source of the paradoxes is the power and joy of the Holy Spirit in the midst of the sufferings of this age. The resolution of the paradoxes will occur with the coming of the new age in which suffering and death will be no more. I will now argue that John's Gospel teaches that even in this present life Christians can experience the fullness of union with God. Therefore, Christian life is puzzling only to outsiders. The Christian readers of John's Gospel can experience the truth of theological assertions which baffle the characters in the narrative.

I will develop the argument as follows. The first paragraphs will note that John's Gospel is later than Paul's Letters and Mark's Gospel and continues their tradition of puzzling language. We will then note some of the types of strange material in John's Gospel and, especially, the central paradox of the Gospel, namely Jesus's own identity as the human life of God. John's Gospel provides models to explain this paradox. Once readers have grasped Jesus's identity, we can understand the rest of the material in the gospel which baffles the characters in the narrative. John's Gospel even outlines the stages of Christian growth which enable readers to *experience* the enigmatic truths which it asserts.

John's Gospel is considerably later than Paul's letters to the Corinthians

and even later than Mark's Gospel. As we have seen, Paul wrote to the Corinthians in the decade of the fifties. Mark wrote around the year 70. We cannot date John's Gospel precisely. However, the gospel repeatedly mentions the expulsion of at least some Christians from the synagogues (9:22, 12:42, 16:2). The author and his original readers were deeply concerned about this expulsion, presumably because many of them had been victims of it. Clearly it was the Pharisees who insisted on driving Christians out of the Jewish community. John's Gospel focuses its wrath on them. Consequently, the expulsion could not have occurred while the temple was still standing. During that era the high priests had been the official leaders of the Jewish community, and the high priests and their supporters belonged to the Sadducees. It must have taken some time after the temple's destruction in the year 70 for the Pharisees to consolidate their leadership over the part of the Jewish community to which the original readers of John's Gospel had once belonged. It would then have taken the Pharisees at least a little longer to expel those who did not accept their decrees. Very probably John's Gospel comes from the nineties.

John's Gospel was primarily written for Christians who were familiar with the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures and the life of the early Church. The gospel frequently refers to material from the Bible without giving any background. For example, in the first chapter there are brief references to "Moses" (1:17), "Isaiah" (1:23), "Elijah" (1:25). Clearly the gospel assumes that its intended readers know who these luminaries were and are versed in the scriptures as a whole. The gospel also frequently refers to figures in early Church history. In the first chapter we have references to Andrew (1:40), Peter (1:40), Philip (1:43-44), and Nathaniel (1:45), and the gospel seems to presuppose that the reader knows who these individuals are. The gospel refers to Christian rituals without giving any details. For example, in 1:25, John the Baptist is asked why his is "baptizing" (1:25), and apparently the assumption is that the reader is familiar with "baptizing." The only people who would have such knowledge would be Christians.

John's Gospel is more a theological interpretation of the meaning of Jesus's life than an accurate account of what he literally said and did historically. In John's Gospel Jesus declares that he has many more things to tell the disciples but they are not ready for them now. The Holy Spirit will lead them into all truth (16:12-13). Near the end of the gospel, Jesus bestows the Holy Spirit (20:22). It seems logical to suppose that decades later the author of the gospel felt that the Holy Spirit had revealed to him things

about Jesus which the disciples could not have known at the time. At various points the gospel tells us that the actual meaning of an event only became clear subsequently. For example, in chapter 12 Jesus enters into Jerusalem on an ass's colt to the acclaim of the crowd. The gospel explicitly states that Jesus was acting to fulfill a prophecy that the Messiah would come on the foal of an ass (Zechariah 9:9). However, the gospel notes, "His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him" (12:16). Especially the speeches of Jesus in John's Gospel seem to be later theological reflections on what God had accomplished through Jesus and who Jesus was. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus rarely talks about himself. Instead, as we have already seen, he talks about the Kingdom of God. By contrast, in John's Gospel Jesus primarily talks about who he himself is. He is the bread of life (6:35); he is the light of the world (8:12); he is the good shepherd (10:14); he is "the way and the truth and the life" (14:6). Ancient historians customarily composed speeches for the figures in their accounts. John apparently followed this practice. We can see one indication that the speeches were composed after the lifetime of Jesus by a comment which Jesus makes in chapter 3. There Jesus speaking about himself says, "No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven" (3:13). However, at this point *in the narrative* Jesus has only descended from heaven. He will not return to his heavenly glory until he is crucified. Only in retrospect can the actual author of the speech reflect on the implications of Jesus being the one who both descended from heaven and has now returned there.

Despite not being an accurate record of what historically Jesus said, John's Gospel does retain much of the oral style of Jesus, including his use of enigmas. Many of the images that Jesus used, sheep and shepherds, bread and light also appear in John's Gospel. The historical Jesus attacked his opponents in the extreme language that was typical of the time, calling them, for example, "whitewashed tombs" (Matt 23:27) and a "brood of vipers" (Matt 23:33). Jesus in John's Gospel does no less, dismissing his critics as children of the devil (John 8:44). Like the rhetoric of Jesus, John's Gospel is full of puzzles, as we shall now see.

We can divide John's Gospel into three parts. There is the famous prologue (1:1-18). Here we have a definitive statement of the Gospel's theological theme. Jesus is the incarnation of the divine Word and has brought salvation to the world. "The Word was God" (1:1). "The Word became

flesh” (1:14). “To all who received him, he gave power to become children of God” (John 1:12).

After the prologue we have the actual narrative of Jesus’s ministry, death, and resurrection, and this narrative seems to conclude with chapter 20. At the end of chapter 20 the risen Jesus appears to Thomas and challenges him to touch the wounds of the crucifixion, and in response Thomas calls Jesus “Lord” and “God” (20:28). Here we clearly have both a reminder of the crucifixion and the resurrection and a summary of the gospel’s theme that Jesus is God and flesh. After this dramatic scene the author tells us that although Jesus did many other signs, the gospel will not narrate them. The purpose of what has been narrated is to get readers to believe that Jesus is God’s Son and through this belief “have life in his Name” (20:31).

Chapter 21 follows and forms a third section of the gospel. This section tells us about the risen Jesus working a fishing miracle, Peter jumping into the water, Jesus providing breakfast for the disciples, and Jesus having a final conversation with Peter and the “Disciple” whom Jesus loved. The gospel closes by revealing that this last disciple is the author and that Jesus did many other things which could be the subject of numerous other volumes.

It seems clear that a later editor added the final section. The statement in chapter 20 that the gospel will not discuss any more signs ought to preclude further narrative. Then the author turns to his readers and reminds us of the theme and purpose of the book. Surely, this must have been the original ending. Consequently, chapter 21 did not come from the author’s hand. Instead, a later figure added a literary appendix to an existing work. Indeed, this later editor explicitly separates himself from the main author. The editor writes in behalf of his Christian community, “We know that his [the author’s!] testimony is true” (21:25).

There are strange sayings throughout the gospel, but the nature of the difficulty is different in each of the sections. The prologue directly confronts the reader with contradictions. Verse 1 tells us, “The Word was with God, and the Word was God” (1:1). But if the Word was God, then logically it cannot also be “with” God. Verse 18 is even more jarringly inconsistent. The oldest and most reliable ancient copies of John have, “No one has ever seen God; the only God who is at the Father’s chest, he has made him known” (1:18, my translation). Here we are told that no one has seen God and yet Jesus, whom many people in the gospel’s own narrative

certainly do see, is the only God! This glaring contradiction was too much for some of the ancient scribes who copied the book. They changed the “only God” to “the only Son.” Although the latter reading is found in most surviving ancient copies of John, the “only God” is the original text. No scribe would have changed “the only Son” to the “only God” and produce a contradiction! By contrast, as we shall see, the author of the gospel was comfortable with paradox and enigma.

In the narrative section which follows the prologue, the characters struggle with riddles, but the reader, especially the first-century Christian reader for whom the evangelist primarily wrote, should have no difficulty understanding them. Here are three examples. In chapter 2 Jesus, who is in the courtyard of the temple in Jerusalem, says to his critics, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (2:19). Naturally, his hearers are puzzled. They remark that it has already taken forty-six years to construct the temple. However, then the evangelist informs the reader, “He was speaking of the temple of his body” (2:21), and that after his resurrection his disciples understood. Of course, after seeing this passage the reader surely has understood. In chapter 3, Nicodemus cannot comprehend what it is to be “born of water and Spirit” (3:5). How can one return to the womb and then be reborn? But the reader knows that Jesus is talking about spiritual rebirth in baptism. In the very next scene Jesus is baptizing (3:22). Similarly, in chapter 6 Jesus’s hearers are puzzled by his graphic statement that they must “munch” on his flesh and drink his “blood” (6:54), because his “flesh is true food” and his “blood is true drink” (6:55). However, the Christian reader should realize that Jesus is talking about the Eucharist in which the faithful eat bread and drink wine which in the sacramental setting are the body and blood of Jesus.

In the narrative section of the gospel, a recurring irony is that characters who reject Jesus express truths which the reader may notice but the characters themselves do not. For example, on two occasions Jesus announces that where he is going his hostile audience cannot come (7:33-35, 8:21-22). After the first of these announcements his audience responds by wondering whether he intends to preach overseas to the Greeks. After the second announcement the audience sarcastically asks whether Jesus plans to kill himself. The reader should recognize that these responses contain truth but not in the way that Jesus’s hearers in the narrative imagine. The preaching of Jesus will indeed reach the Greeks, but not because Jesus will go overseas but because he will rise from the dead and

send out his disciples. Jesus will indeed be killed, but not by his own hand but by the instigation of his enemies. Sometimes the reader should recognize that what the enemies of Jesus say is even literally true but in a different sense than they consciously intend. A statement in chapter 9 is one illustration. The Pharisees insist that they know that God has spoken to Moses, “but as for this man [Jesus], we do not know where he comes from” (9:29). The Pharisees intend this statement as a slight, since everyone knows that Jesus comes from Nazareth in Galilee (1:45-46, 7:41-42, 7:52). His name is “Jesus of Nazareth” (e.g., 18:5). The Pharisees are implying that Nazareth is too humble to be worth noticing. However, the reader can realize that in fact the Pharisees do not know where Jesus comes from. The prologue of the gospel has already informed the reader that Jesus as the incarnate Word of God comes from the Father. Later Jesus himself has insisted that his critics do not know where he comes from, since they do not know who sent him [i.e., God] (7:28).

Chapter 21, the final section of the gospel, is strange both as a whole and in detail. As we have already noted, the entire chapter is unexpected, since the end of the previous chapter sounds like the conclusion of the book. The story in chapter 21 is filled with weird particulars. When the narrative begins the disciples are fishing in Galilee, and when Jesus appears, they initially do not recognize him. In the previous chapter Jesus appeared to them twice and gave them the Holy Spirit and sent them out to do his work (20:21). Why are the disciples back home doing their old jobs? How can they fail to recognize him? After Jesus works a miracle and the disciples do recognize him, we read that Peter is naked, ties on his coat, and jumps into the water. Surely, one might expect the reverse. Peter ought to have been wearing something as he fished all night! One assumes that the other disciples who were fishing with him were clothed. Of course, one could imagine that Peter might have taken off his clothes before jumping into the water. The story of Jesus working a miracle thanks to which the disciples have an amazingly large catch does not fit together well with the subsequent scene in which Jesus cooks breakfast for them. In that later scene Jesus is already cooking (a?) fish and yet tells the disciples to bring fish. Later in the chapter Jesus says that the Beloved disciple must remain until Jesus returns, but the text assures us that Jesus did not mean that the disciple would live until the second coming. What then did Jesus mean, and why does the text not explain this meaning more plainly?

The prologue makes it clear that Jesus’s identity is a paradox and the reader

must accept the paradox as it is. There is only One God. Yet the Eternal Word and the Father are both divine, and the Father and the Word are distinct, and the eternal Word became a human being. Logically, if the Father and the Word are distinct and both God, there must be at least two gods. Nevertheless, the gospel insists that there is only one. Normally, we assume that God and a human being are totally different and incompatible. God is all knowing, all powerful, and lives forever. Human beings are ignorant, weak, and mortal. Yet Jesus is a human being who is the incarnation of the Eternal Word who is divine.

Even though the prologue tells us that we must accept the paradox that Jesus is distinct from God and yet is God, the gospel does give various explanatory models. Of course, saying that Jesus is the incarnation of the Divine Word is one such model. Someone's words are logically distinct from that person. However, the way we that know someone is through that person's words. Jesus can be one with God and yet distinct, because Jesus is the self-expression of God through a human life. We come to know God fully through Jesus. "Whoever has seen me, has seen the Father" (14:9), Jesus says in response to the disciples' request to show them the Father. Another model for how Jesus and the Father can be distinct and yet one is that they know each other perfectly. In John's Gospel Jesus says, "The Father knows me and I know the Father" (10:15). They are distinct because they know each other as separate, but they are one because they comprehend each other completely. A third model for the unity and distinction of Jesus and the Father is that they give themselves fully to each other in order to honor one another completely. For example, in 5:22 Jesus says, "The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son, so that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father." The Father and the Son are also distinct and yet one because Jesus imitates the Father perfectly. "The Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise" (5:19). Perhaps the most important model that John's Gospel gives to explain how the Father and Jesus can be distinct and yet one is mutual indwelling. The Father and the Son live within each other. The Father dwells in the Son and Son dwells in the Father. Consequently, the Father speaks and works through Jesus. In 14:10 Jesus explains, "The Father who dwells in me does his works." Of course, the very terms "Father" and "Son" suggest how Jesus can be God. He derives his being from the one divine "nature" and shares in an intimate personal relationship with his "parent."

These various models for the unity and diversity of Jesus and the Father are aspects of the perfect love which they have for each other. Love unifies and diversifies at the same time. When we love others in a healthy way, we give them power and permission to be who they need to be rather than who we would prefer them to be. However, the same love which knows and affirms the “other,” unites lovers intimately and profoundly. John’s Gospel never tires of emphasizing that the Father and Jesus love each other fully and perfectly. Jesus gives up his life so that the world will know that he loves the Father (14:31), and the Father “loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing” (5:20). Because the Father and the Son love each other fully, they know each other, honor one another, and dwell in each other.

With the knowledge gained from the prologue that Jesus is the human incarnation of the Divine Word, the Christian reader is able to decode the sayings or events in the narrative which confuse the characters or which otherwise would be totally weird. We have already noted some examples. Here are four more.

In chapter 1 the Christian reader who has absorbed the prologue should be able to make sense of Jesus’s puzzling statement to Nathaniel, “You will see the heavens opened and the angels of God going up and coming down on the Son of Humanity” (1:51, my translation). At first glance this prophecy is incomprehensible, and there is no subsequent scene in the gospel in which angels go up and come down. However, the gospel presupposes that the reader knows about Jacob. Indeed, in chapter 4 the gospel refers to Jacob’s well (4:6) and to Jacob himself (4:12) without giving any explanation other than that Jacob was an important ancestor who provided the well. It is assumed that we know the rest of Jacob’s story. The Christian reader for whom John wrote should realize that Jesus’s statement about angels going up and coming down alludes to Jacob’s dream in Genesis 28. Jacob dreamed of a ladder which reached from earth to heaven. Angels were going up and coming down on it. When Jacob awoke, he said that God had been present, even though Jacob had not been aware of him and that the place in which Jacob had slept was “the gate of heaven” (Gen 39:17). John’s Gospel implies that Jesus replaces Jacob’s ladder. Jesus is the point of contact between heaven and earth. He is “the Son of Humanity,” that is a human being who is also the model for the ideal human being. Jesus is the gate of heaven, that is, the way by which people enter into the presence of God and gain eternal life. The reader should realize all this, because these theological ideas already appear in the Gospel’s prologue. There we learn

that Jesus is both divine and human. However, in Jesus the divine is hidden. “The world did not know him” (1:10). Through Jesus those who believe in him come to know God and become God’s children.

A second illustration of something that only the reader can understand is what Jesus is actually talking about in his conversation with the woman at the well. In chapter 4 the woman inquires why he, a Jewish male, is asking for a drink from her, a Samaritan woman. In response, Jesus says that if she knew to whom she was speaking she would have asked him, and he would have given her “living water” (4:10). The woman can make no sense of this statement, since, as she points out, Jesus does not even have a bucket. She incredulously asks Jesus whether he thinks he is greater than the patriarch Jacob who provided the well. Although the woman is confused, the Christian readers for whom John wrote should understand. They know that Jesus is indeed greater even than the patriarch Jacob, since the Gospel’s prologue states that Jesus is the incarnation of the Divine Word. And Christian readers know that the living (i.e., life-giving) water that Jesus can provide at least includes the water of baptism. The preface to the story explicitly mentions baptism, “Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, ‘Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John’” (4:1).

Thanks to the knowledge given in the prologue, it is possible to make sense of an anomaly in chapter 9 which even puzzled ancient Christian scribes who copied the book. In chapter 9 the man born blind gradually perceives the true identity of the person who healed him. The man born blind first says that Jesus is a “prophet” (9:17). Then he says that Jesus is “from God” (9:33), and, as a result, the Pharisees “drove him out” (9:34). At this point Jesus finds the man and asks if he believes in “the Son of Humanity” (9:35). The man replies, “I believe” (9:38) and worships Jesus. Many of the scribes who made copies of John’s Gospel were puzzled by why Jesus asks the man whether he believes in “the Son of Humanity.” Surely, anyone could have seen that Jesus was a human being. Consequently, some scribes changed “Son of Humanity” to “Son of God.” This latter reading is in most of the surviving ancient manuscripts, but not the earliest and best. However, there actually is no difficulty with the original reading. Jesus is testing the man’s faith by not giving him the answer. The fact that the man subsequently *worships* Jesus is symbolically a confession of the Gospel’s proclamation that Jesus is divine. And taken together the man’s belief in the “Son of Humanity” and his worshipping of Jesus *summarize for the reader the Gospel’s theme that Jesus is the incarnation of the divine Word.*

The Christian reader should also understand a scene in chapter 18 which superficially seems bizarre. When soldiers come to arrest Jesus, he inquires whom they are seeking, and, not surprisingly, they respond, “Jesus of Nazareth.” He answers, “I am he,” which in Greek is simply, “I am” (18:5). Then something extraordinary happens. The soldiers stagger backward and fall on the ground. Ordinarily, one could not explain such a collapse. However, the Christian reader for whom John wrote should know that by saying, “I am,” Jesus has revealed his Divine Nature, just as God did to Moses in Exodus when God declared “I am who I am” (Exod 3:14; cf. e.g., Isa 43:10). The soldiers stagger and collapse because Jesus has just revealed his Divinity. No one who is hostile to God can stand when he reveals his presence.

We can now see why the enemies of Jesus often express more truth than they intend: As creations of God they know the truth, but as sinners they flee from it. Thus, the prologue insists that all things were made through the eternal Word and that all life comes from him. This light is the light that everyone has (1:3-4, 9). In chapter 3 we read that “all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light” (3:18). Since human beings—all human beings—exist through the Word and its light, everyone knows the truth. Therefore, everyone who encounters Jesus who is himself the truth (14:6) reacts to him strongly. However, those who flee from the truth because their evil deeds are evil (3:19) cannot acknowledge what they know. Consequently, when they speak about Jesus they say things which contain ironic fragments of truth. Two millennia before Freud, John’s Gospel suggested that what appear to be unintentional remarks are in fact clues to what someone actually knows but cannot admit.

As I have argued at length elsewhere (see bibliography), we can make sense of all of the puzzles in chapter 21 if we see the chapter as a symbolic review of the steps of the ideal Christian life. The ideal Christian life begins with conversion. That is also how chapter 21 begins. The disciples are back in Galilee fishing, which is where they first meet Jesus in Matthew, Mark, and Luke and are converted. The disciples toil fruitlessly at night, because, as John’s Gospel says elsewhere, without knowing Jesus people are in darkness (e.g., 8:12) and can accomplish nothing (15:4-5). Jesus appears to them at dawn, when the light is returning. The disciples do not recognize him. Then he works a miraculous sign. He tells them to cast the net on the right side of the boat, and they catch an incredible number of fish. The

disciples realize it is the risen Jesus. Symbolically, they are converted. At this point Peter who is naked (!) ties on a coat and jumps into the water. Here we symbolically have baptism, the next step in the ideal Christian life after conversion. In the first century baptism was ideally by immersion. The verb to baptize literally means to immerse. The Didache, the earliest surviving liturgical manual, only allows for pouring water on the head when more water is not available (Didache 7:2-3). Candidates surely took off their regular clothes prior to immersion. We cannot know for certain, but it seems likely that in this early period people tied on a temporary covering. Public nakedness was an extreme disgrace in ancient Jewish culture. Later when most Christians were Gentiles, people were baptized naked. The foot washing scene in John seems to reflect the baptismal practice in the earliest period. Jesus takes off his clothes, ties on a towel, and then washes. Originally the scene symbolized baptism. Since being naked, tying on a temporary covering, and immersing oneself in water corresponds to baptismal practice in first-century Christianity, Peter being naked, tying on a coat, and jumping into the water would surely have reminded John's original Christian readers of baptism.

In the following scene we have the next step in the ideal Christian life which is receiving the Eucharist. The Didache mandates that people cannot receive the Eucharist until they are first baptized (9:5). We know from the Acts of the Apostles that there was a resurrection story in which Jesus ate with his disciples. In Acts 10 Peter declares that he and others "ate and drank with him [Jesus] after he rose from the dead" (Acts 10:41). The editor of John's Gospel took this story and placed it next to the story of the fishing miracle, even though the details about fish did not precisely match. As result, we have the oddity of Jesus cooking fish and asking the disciples to bring fish. The story of the meal has Eucharistic symbolism, since Jesus takes bread and gives it to the disciples.

After one has begun receiving the Eucharist, the next step in the ideal Christian life is committed discipleship, and in chapter 21 Jesus now challenges Peter to be a committed disciple. Earlier in John's Gospel under questioning by the servants of the high priest, Peter denied three times that he was a "disciple" (18:17, 25-27). Now Jesus asks Peter three times if Peter loves him. Peter insists that he does, and Jesus tells him to exercise the role that historically Peter played during his committed discipleship: Peter is to be a pastor to Jesus's sheep.

Finally, chapter 21 symbolically presents the two possible conclusions to the ideal Christian life. First, Jesus predicts that Peter will suffer martyrdom. Of course, dying for the Faith is one ideal conclusion to the Christian life. Not everyone, however, is called to be a martyr. For those who are not, the ideal conclusion of the Christian life is to become so much like Jesus that in effect one takes his place in this world now that Jesus himself has returned to the Father. Taking his place in this world is what Jesus near the end of chapter 21 invites the Beloved Disciple, the author of the gospel, to do. The Beloved Disciple must remain until Christ returns, and chapter 21 explicitly reminds us that the Beloved Disciple was at the chest of Jesus at the Last Supper (21:20). He was literally and symbolically the disciple who was closest to Jesus. Chapter 21 implicitly admits that the Beloved Disciple has now died, and Jesus did not promise that he was to live forever. A rumor to that effect was unfounded. However, the testimony of the Beloved Disciple remains in the gospel which he wrote. And by this testimony Jesus continues to be present through the Beloved Disciple.

To sum up, in chapter 21 the editor symbolically describes the stages of the ideal Christian life. If we pay attention to the symbolism, we can account for all of the otherwise puzzling features in the text. These puzzles invite the reader to question what the writer intends, and the structure of the chapter answers the question by making it clear that the writer is describing the stages of the ideal Christian life.

Elsewhere I have also argued at length that the editor rearranged the rest of the gospel so it would correspond to the stages of the Christian life, and by this cut and paste produced many anomalies. Here are three illustrations. The first anomaly which we will consider is that John's Gospel narrates the scene in which the Holy Spirit like a dove descends on Jesus, but does not mention the actual baptism of Jesus which is surely when the Spirit descended. All the other gospels state that it was in connection with his own baptism that the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus (Matt 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11, Luke 3:21-22). Even in John's Gospel, John the Baptist testifies that he saw the descent take place. It seems logical to suppose that John *the Baptist* might have witnessed this while baptizing Jesus, especially, since this very passage emphasizes John's baptismal ministry (1:31-33). But no baptism of Jesus is mentioned. A second anomaly in John's Gospel is that, contrary to all of the other gospels (and Paul's account in 1 Corinthians 10-11), John makes no mention of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. Instead,

we read about Jesus washing his disciples' feet. However, in chapter 6, contrary to the other gospels, John's Gospel has a long Eucharistic speech in which Jesus insists that his flesh and blood are real food and drink and that it is by consuming him that people will have lasting life. Still another anomaly is that at the Last Supper in John we have two different explanations of the significance of the foot washing. The first explanation is that Jesus is symbolically distinguishing between Judas who is about to betray him and the other disciples. Jesus comments that those who have bathed only need to wash their feet to be entirely clean. The disciples are clean, but not every one of them. The Gospel explains, "He [Jesus] knew who was to betray him" (13:11). The Gospel then offers a very different explanation of the foot washing. Jesus washed feet in order to teach his disciples that they must wash each other's feet (13:14-15).

On the basis of such anomalies, it is clear that an editor rearranged the gospel to echo the stages of the ideal Christian life. L. William Countryman in a pioneering work argued that the first twenty chapters of John's Gospel follow the progression of the ideal Christian life beginning with conversion, going on to baptism, then Eucharist, and then to more advanced stages (Countryman, *Mystical Way*). To make this progression, the baptism of Jesus himself had to be omitted and Eucharistic material had to be taken out of the Last Supper and put in a much earlier section of the gospel. In response, I argued that Countryman's theory is correct, but that it was the later editor who imposed this arrangement on a preexisting gospel. The stages of the Christian life appear most clearly in chapter 21 which the editor added. And only the intervention of a later editor can explain many of the anomalies in chapters 1-20. We have just seen an example. There is no reason why the evangelist should have given two conflicting explanations of the meaning of the foot washing. However, the editor had good reason to do so. Originally, the scene had obvious baptismal symbolism. As we saw above, taking off one's clothes, tying on a temporary covering, and washing were parts of the earliest baptismal practice. To make the order of the gospel correspond to the order of the ideal Christian life, the editor needed to restrict baptism to a previous section of the book. To eclipse the baptismal symbolism in the foot washing, the editor added a new explanation of what Jesus was teaching. In the edited gospel, the foot washing is an example for the disciples to imitate and illustrates the highest stage of Christian life in which one takes Jesus's place in this world. Jesus washed his disciples feet; now they must take his place by washing one another's feet. In this culminating section (chapters 13-20), we have other

passages which urge us to replace Jesus in this world now that he is returning to the Father. For example in chapter 13 Jesus says, "Where I am going you cannot come. I give you a new commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you" (13:34). In a climactic scene during the crucifixion Jesus challenges his mother and "the disciple whom he loved" to replace him in each other's lives, now that Jesus is about to die. Jesus tells that Beloved Disciple that Mary is now his mother. The Beloved Disciple responds by taking her into his own home (19:26-27). Then Jesus "hands over the Spirit" (19:30) which is not the normal way of saying "died" in the original Greek. We may note in passing, that the hand of the editor is visible in this scene too. In 19:25 the gospel lists the names of those who were standing beside the cross, and there is no mention of the Beloved Disciple. He pops up without introduction in verse 26. The editor must have inserted him.

One reason that the editor intervened was to defend the truth of the gospel. In the gospel narrative various characters dispute the truth of what Jesus claims. For example, in chapter 8 people insist that Jesus could not have known Abraham, since Abraham died long before Jesus was born. In chapter 10 the enemies of Jesus protest that Jesus is only a human being who is making the absurd claim to be divine. Presumably, these attacks on the claims of Jesus in the narrative reflect historical attacks on the gospel's claims about Jesus when the evangelist wrote. After the evangelist's death, it was up to the editor to defend the book's veracity. Clearly the editor attempted to do so, since in behalf of his community he added at the end of the edited gospel the attestation "we know that his [the author's] testimony is true" (21:25).

John's Gospel makes it clear that the paradoxical sayings are only temporary. Jesus in his last discourses emphasizes that in the past he has talked to the disciples in "figures." However, from now on he will speak to them plainly (16:25). Through the Holy Spirit Jesus will lead them into all truth. The Spirit will even explain things which are so difficult that Jesus did not attempt to tell them to the disciples during his earthly ministry. The disciples could not bear them yet (16:12-13).

Here John's Gospel honors the fact that the historical Jesus did talk in "figures" (puzzling sayings) but also predicted the coming of a new era when everything would become clear. As we saw above, Jesus's hard sayings point in a certain direction but make no sense if taken literally. One

reason for this ambiguity was that Jesus was convinced that God would do something dramatic but also partially unpredictable. Jesus knew that God would vindicate his teaching, but Jesus did not know in detail how God would do so. The details would only become clear when God acted.

In John's Gospel the new era in which Jesus will explain everything clearly has two different aspects. On the one hand, it is the historical era after the crucifixion and the resurrection and the gift of the Spirit. In this era the full truth is available and can be expressed simply and directly. Therefore, puzzling sayings, or to use John's terminology, "figures," are no longer needed. Christians know that Jesus is the incarnation of God, and the prologue of John's Gospel can say this plainly. And the Christian reader can understand the "figures" which Jesus uses in the narrative even though these baffle the characters. But thanks to the editor the new era in which Jesus explains everything is each new stage of growth in every individual reader's Christian life.

The edited gospel suggests that at each stage of spiritual growth Christians experience a new truth. In the earlier stages, Christians experience that Jesus is a remarkable human being and has sacramental water and bread to give. In the gospel narrative, Nicodemus is impressed by Jesus's miraculous signs and knows that Jesus is "a teacher who has come from God" (3:2). Nicodemus at least hears that he must be born again by water and the Spirit. The woman at the well hears that Jesus has living water. She is impressed that Jesus knows about her personal life and acknowledges him as a "prophet" (4:19). She even wonders whether he might be the Messiah. Later the crowds hear Jesus's claim to be "the bread of life" (6:35) and his challenge to munch on him.

However, at this immature stage of the spiritual life, people cannot make sense of the paradoxes of the sacraments or of the divine identity of Jesus. Nicodemus cannot figure out how he can be born again by water and the Spirit. The woman at the well never understands how the living water which Jesus claims to have can spring up forever. Certainly, it never occurs either to Nicodemus or the woman that Jesus is Divine. Similarly, the crowds reject Jesus's invitation to munch on him as a teaching which is too difficult to accept. Of course, the Christian reader should understand the sacramental symbolism. Nevertheless, the incomprehension of the characters in the narrative reminds Christian readers who have not yet reached spiritual maturity that there is more to come. To them the edited

gospel proclaims, as Jesus proclaims to Nathanael after the latter has just confessed that Jesus is the “King of Israel” (1:49), “You will see greater things” (1:50).

By contrast, in the stage of committed discipleship Christians can learn by experience that Jesus is God. At the beginning of chapter 7 Jesus’s brothers challenge him to reveal himself both to his disciples and to the world (7:3-4). In the following three chapters Jesus for the first time in the gospel aggressively proclaims his divinity publicly. In chapter 8 he declares, “Before Abraham was, I AM” (8:58), and in chapter 10 he exclaims, “The Father and I are one” (10:30). Of course, the characters in the story reject this claim. The audience attempts to stone Jesus for blasphemy and dismisses him as a lunatic. “He has a demon and is out of his mind” (10:20). People who have not reached the stage of committed discipleship cannot make sense of the truth that Jesus is divine. However, the section on committed discipleship does make it clear that those who do reach this stage can know the divinity of Jesus. In chapter 8 Jesus declares, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (8:31-32). Not surprisingly, the people do not understand, since they immediately protest that they have never been anyone’s slaves. But the reader should understand. Until one reaches committed discipleship, one is still a slave to ignorance and sin. But committed disciples can become free of them and can learn by experience that Jesus is divine. Later in the section on committed discipleship we read that Jesus’s sheep follow him, recognize his voice, and know him (10:4, 14).

In the final stage of the ideal Christian life, disciples experience the entire truth. In chapters 13-20, the section describing the highest stage, Jesus makes astounding statements to his disciples. “I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father” (15:15). “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (14:23). “On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you” (14:20). In the highest stage of Christian maturity, disciples not only have the intellectual knowledge that the Father and Jesus are paradoxically both distinct and divine and yet one. The disciples directly experience this reality in their own spiritual lives.

Those who reach the highest stage also know that they especially must

serve. Spiritual maturity does not bring social privilege. On the contrary, those who have become most like Jesus and take his place in this world must imitate his self-sacrificing humility. In the section of John's Gospel which deals with the highest stage of Christian maturity, Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. And he commands his disciples to wash each other's feet.

John's Gospel stresses that eternal life and eternal death already begin in the present. Those who follow Jesus have started a relationship which will last forever. God is eternal, and those who have God's Spirit participate in that eternal reality and, therefore, are themselves eternal. In chapter 17 Jesus prays, "This is eternal life, to know you the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you sent" (17:3, my translation). By contrast, those who reject Jesus already have been judged (3:18) and abide in death. It is true, that in a couple of places John's Gospel still looks forward to resurrection and judgment "on the last day" (e.g., 6:54). There will come an hour when those in the tombs will hear Jesus's voice and come out, and the righteous will have "life" and the wicked will face judgment (5:28-29). However, more frequently the Gospel emphasizes that those who believe in Jesus have "passed from death to life" (5:24) and will never die (11:26). Those who reject Jesus are spiritually dead already.

By following Jesus people can enjoy the blessings of eternal life even in this present earthly life. Jesus will bestow on them a peace which the world cannot give (14:27), and they will have the fullness of joy (15:11), a joy that no one can ever take away (16:22). There will, of course, be persecution from the "world," but Jesus tells his disciples, "Take courage; I have conquered the world!" (16:33).

Although only the spiritually advanced can experience the fullness of salvation in this life, the blessings of eternal life are available to some extent to any Christian who lives after the resurrection. In one sense, every Christian knows the truth about Jesus thanks to the crucifixion and the resurrection and subsequent revelation. Jesus has died and triumphed over death. The Holy Spirit has led the Church into all truth. The Church teaches all of its members the paradox that Jesus is the incarnation of God. The Beloved Disciple wrote the Gospel which emphasizes this paradox, and the Church can proclaim in that gospel, "We know that his testimony is true" (21:24). Similarly, to some extent every Christian participates in the joy and peace of Jesus. That joy and that peace are in the Church as a

community, and every member experiences them in the Church's common life. All who have been baptized have been reborn in the Spirit who is present in the Church.

In its treatment of the enigmatic John's Gospel goes beyond the Corinthian letters, because in John the seeming puzzles of the Christian life can be resolved already in present experience. In the Corinthian letters, the puzzles of Christian existence will only be resolved when Jesus returns and raises the dead and rewards the faithful. At present Christians live in two ages simultaneously. Christians live in the present age and suffer. They also have the "first fruits" of the age to come, because the Holy Spirit is already available. But the Holy Spirit is only the down payment of the blessings which Jesus will give when he returns. In the meantime, Christians primarily live by hope in the resurrection on the last day. In the Corinthian letters Paul can declare that without faith in the future resurrection Christians are the most miserable of all human beings. Even those who have this faith continually struggle with the realities of life in this world. By contrast, in John's Gospel Christians can presently resolve the puzzles of life. Of course, non-Christians cannot do this. The characters in the gospel narrative cannot understand how someone can be born again or how Jesus can be divine. However, the gospel tells us that in principle all who believe in Jesus know that he has risen from the dead and is the Divine Word. And Christians who have reached the highest stage of spiritual maturity can even experience the paradoxical realities that Jesus and the Father are both distinct and yet are one. Christians experience this paradox because through the Spirit, the Father and the Son dwell in mature believers. As a result, these Christians have a knowledge and a joy which the world cannot give. In the Corinthians letters Paul can write, "Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Cor 13:12). But in John Jesus can say, "I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father" (15:15). Paul can write that he is "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Cor 6:10). But Jesus in John's Gospel says that even in this life Christians can have a joy that is "full" (John 16:24).

Chapter 6

Tracing the Evolution of the Paradox of the Eucharist

Earlier in this book we noted that many of the most familiar sayings of Jesus were originally puzzling or shocking but subsequently the Church domesticated them. Let us return to the Parable of the Lost Sheep as an example. Originally, the Parable of the Lost Sheep sounded crazy. A shepherd abandons ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness where they will scatter and become vulnerable to predators to search for only one. Yet, already Matthew and Luke saw no difficulty with the parable. And John's Gospel probably used the parable as the basis for Jesus's famous sermon on himself as the Good Shepherd. In subsequent Christian piety Jesus finding and embracing his lost sheep became one of the most frequent and beloved images of him.

Perhaps the most familiar sayings attributed to Jesus are the words of institution, and to us who are so used to them, they seem unobjectionable. In many denominations, including my own Episcopal Church, at every Eucharist we hear the words, "This is my body," and, "This is my blood." Because we hear these words so often, they do not strike us as problematic.

However, the words, "this is my body," were originally shocking. It sounded like Christians were practicing cannibalism when they celebrated the Eucharist! Evans rightly notes, "Such cannibalistic symbolism as this would have been wholly unacceptable in a Jewish context" (p. 391). In John's Gospel when Jesus declares that people must "eat his flesh" (6:53), his disciples respond, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" (6:60), and many disciples abandon Jesus. The words, "this is my body" did not turn out to be acceptable to ancient Pagan culture either. Apparently, the first Pagans who heard these words sometimes concluded that Christians were in fact practicing cannibalism during the Eucharist. In one of the earliest surviving Pagan documents about Christians, Pliny, a Roman governor, shares with the Emperor the results of his criminal investigation of this suspect group. He takes pains to record that at their meetings Christians eat only "ordinary and harmless food" (Pliny the Younger, Epp. 96.7). There must have been at least rumors to the contrary! Such rumors

would continue to be a major problem for the Church long afterward (Keener: 632). We may also note that the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures condemn human sacrifice as an abomination to God (e.g., Ezekiel 20:30-31). Yet, the command to eat Jesus's body sounds like part of a rite involving human sacrifice.

There is a variation between the accounts over the exact words which Jesus spoke about the wine at the Last Supper. According to Luke and Paul, Jesus said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20, 1 Cor 11:25). By contrast, according to Mark and Matthew, Jesus said, "This is my blood of the covenant" (Matt 26:28, Mark 14:24).

I think that it is more likely that historically Jesus said, "This is my blood." One could argue that Luke and Paul are correct and Jesus said, "This cup is the new covenant." Paul is our earliest written source, and he and Luke probably wrote independently. By contrast, Mark is later than Paul, and Matthew made use of Mark. It certainly is possible that later the words, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood," were altered to, "This is my blood of the covenant," to make a closer verbal parallel to, "This is my body." Nevertheless, as we have seen, there was a tendency in the tradition to soften offensive and puzzling material. The words, "This cup is the new covenant," are surely less jarring than, "This is my blood." Consequently, I think that Jesus actually told his disciples to drink his blood.

If Jesus actually did tell his disciples to drink his blood, he was being extraordinarily offensive to his Jewish hearers. The Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures explicitly (and often) strictly forbid the consumption of blood (already Gen 9:4; e.g., Lev 17:10-14, Deut 12:23-25). To this present day, observant Jews do not drink animal blood. The theology underlying the prohibition of consuming blood is that life resides in the blood, and life, whether human or animal, belongs solely to God. From the perspective of ancient Judaism, Jesus's command to drink his blood reeked of apostasy and murder.

All of the blocks of material from the New Testament that we have been examining have Jesus tell his disciples to eat his body, and historically it is nearly certain that he gave this command. The Corinthians Letters attest that Jesus "took a loaf of bread" and said, "This is my body" (1 Cor 11:23-24); Mark independently attests the same (Mark 14:22). John's Gospel has a long meditation in chapter 6 on Jesus's command to eat his body. There

we read, for example, “Those who munch my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life” (John 6:54, my translation). Since the command to eat Jesus’s body was so offensive (as John’s meditation emphasizes!), it is most unlikely that later tradition would have invented the words, “This is my body.” In my opinion, it is beyond reasonable doubt that Jesus said them.

Consequently, we can test our general conclusions about the evolution of puzzling sayings in the New Testament by looking in detail at what Jesus intended by using the graphic language about eating his body and drinking his blood and how Mark, Paul, and John dealt with that deliberately offensive material. Earlier I tried to show that Jesus used puzzling language to challenge his disciples look into their own hearts, realize their equality with one another, and trust God in the face of an unknown future. Now we can see whether Jesus’s invitation to eat his body and drink his blood had the same purpose. Earlier I argued that Mark used puzzling language to focus attention on the cross and help his readers face their own coming suffering, the experience of which could not be known in advance. Did the words of institution invite Mark’s readers to realize the cost of following Jesus? Earlier I contended that the paradoxes in Paul’s letters to the Corinthians reflect his theology that Christians simultaneously live in two different ages and Christians become superior by becoming selfless. Did Paul understand the words, “This is my body,” as appropriate for life when two ages overlapped? Did he think that these words were an invitation to selflessness? Finally, I suggested that the various puzzles in John’s Gospel are tied to the paradox of the incarnation and that spiritual growth allows people to make sense of the puzzles by experiencing their truth. Does John’s Gospel tie the consumption of Christ’s body and blood in the Eucharist to the incarnation? Does the gospel suggest that spiritual growth allows people to make sense of the challenging sacramental words about eating Christ’s body and drinking his blood?

By the time of the Last Supper, it was clear that Jesus would soon be killed. The gospels record that previously Jesus had repeatedly predicted his death while he and his disciples were still on the way to Jerusalem. Whether or not historically these predictions actually came from Jesus or are only a literary device to prepare the reader for the crucifixion, it should have been obvious after Jesus arrived in Jerusalem and staged his demonstration in the temple that his death was imminent. According to the gospels, John the Baptist had suffered execution only for criticizing a ruler’s marriage (e.g., Mark 6:17-28). The Jewish historian Josephus records that John the

Baptist died because he was becoming popular and the ruler was afraid that John might be a threat (Josephus, *Antiquities* XVIII.v.2). Jesus had gone much farther. He had staged a semi-violent demonstration in the Temple courtyard during the period of preparation for the Passover celebration. His arrest and execution were only a matter of time. The gospels make the surely historical observation that the authorities were just waiting for an opportunity to seize Jesus when he was not surrounded by a crowd and there might be a riot.

It would appear that at the Last Supper Jesus was deliberately instituting a ceremony to help the disciples continue his work in the difficult period after his own death. Matthew, Mark, and Luke record that Jesus solemnly stated that he would not drink wine with them again until the triumph of the Kingdom (Matt 26:29, Mark 14:25, Luke 22:18). The ritual that Jesus was inaugurating at the Last Supper was a preparation for an interim period in which Jesus would no longer be with them in person. Paul and Luke tell us that Jesus said that his disciples were to consume his body and blood *to remember him* (Luke 22:19, 1 Cor 11:24-25). Since these words do not occur in Matthew and Mark, we may question whether Jesus actually said them. However, in the context of a solemn farewell dinner, it was probably clear that Jesus at least *meant* to inaugurate a ritual which would help his followers in the daunting task of proclaiming the Kingdom after its founder had been executed.

Since Jesus's puzzling sayings point in a certain direction but are not to be taken literally, it would appear that Jesus was saying several symbolic things by indicating that bread and wine were his body and blood. Each of these dimensions of meaning would strengthen the disciples to continue his work. To begin with, blessed bread and wine would be his continuing tangible presence in the community after his death. Indeed, through the consumption of the bread and wine, Christ would be inside them. Through these symbolic elements his very life, which according to biblical thought resides in the blood (e.g., Gen 9:4), would be in them. A second thing that Jesus was implying was that by partaking of his "body" and "blood" the disciples would be renewing a "new covenant." All of the versions of the words of institution mention a new covenant in Christ's blood. In the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures the covenant between God and Israel was made through a ceremony in which the people and an altar, representing God, were symbolically united by being dashed with the blood of an animal sacrifice (Exod 24:6-8). The covenant was then confirmed by the leaders of

Israel eating and drinking in the presence of God (Exod 24:9-11). In biblical tradition a “covenant” is a sacred commitment which is the basis for a relationship. Therefore, by partaking of the Eucharist the disciples would be symbolically renewing their commitment to Jesus and his vision. By partaking of the Eucharist, the disciples would also become the continuing body of Christ in this world. As the popular contemporary slogan insists, “You are what you eat.” By eating Christ’s “body” and drinking his “blood,” the disciples would become his body. That is, the disciples would be the place where the spirit of Jesus would continue to act. They would be the ones through whom Jesus would still perform his ministry. Therefore, the Eucharist would be a continuing sign and means for the disciples to realize the vision of Jesus that other human beings would become like him and be part of a new Israel.

I strongly suspect that Jesus intended that the “celebration of the Eucharist,” to use later language, would be a means to change the disciples’ hearts so that they could be at peace with his murder. Jesus had insisted that his followers must love even their enemies (e.g., Matt 5:44). He had also insisted that it was absolutely essential to forgive others. Those who refused to forgive would not themselves benefit from God’s forgiveness. As Jesus faced his own execution, he would have been concerned that his disciples would not be able to forgive those who killed him. By inaugurating a ceremony which celebrated the continuing presence of Jesus in this world, Jesus was giving his disciples a ritual to be at peace with his death rather than being consumed with hatred toward those who brought it about.

The paradoxical words of institution also suggest that the ceremony which Jesus was inaugurating was to be a sign of the equality of his disciples. As we have seen, a purpose of Jesus’s paradoxical sayings in general is to emphasize equality. In the eyes of God everyone who becomes a follower of Jesus is imperfect and accepted. God invites everyone to enter the kingdom and be transformed. The test for those who are already (relatively) virtuous is whether they are willing to be part of a community that includes those who in the past have been sinful but who now have decided to follow Jesus. First-century Jewish Palestine maintained social and religious hierarchies by limiting fellowship at meals. Observant Jews in particular would not eat with people who were “impure.” Jesus himself suffered criticism for eating with “tax collectors and sinners” (Mark 2:16). In the Qumran Community from which we get the famous Dead Sea Scrolls, people who were applying

to enter the order could not share in the common meal until they had proved their righteousness for two years (Community Rule VI). By contrast, at the meals which Jesus attended, everyone was welcome. These meals were signs that the Kingdom was open to all. By instituting a ritual meal at his farewell “supper,” Jesus was inviting his disciples to recall ceremonially his other meals and the fact that they did not exclude people who were impure. The offensiveness of the words that Jesus used at the Last Supper made it clear that the ritual that he was inaugurating would not distinguish between the pure and the impure. Nothing could be more impure than eating a human body and drinking human blood. Therefore, all who participated in the meal would have a common impurity.

Like other paradoxical sayings of Jesus, the words of institution also pointed forward to a blessed but still largely unknown future. Somehow Christ’s body and blood would continue to be present through a ceremony. Somehow despite his death the Kingdom would arrive. At the Last Supper Jesus looked forward to drinking wine again with his disciples. But there was no explanation of how or when. God would do what was necessary, but there was no way to know the details until God acted.

In my opinion the Gospel of Mark does not have much material about the Eucharist. It is true that the feeding miracles earlier in the narrative have Eucharistic symbolism. In these stories the actions of Jesus are liturgical. Jesus takes the bread, looks up into heaven, blesses the bread, breaks it, and gives it to the disciples (6:41; cf. 8:6). However, I suspect that the liturgical elements were only taken over by Mark. They existed in the story which Mark received and he retained them. As we have seen, Mark himself uses the two feedings not to comment on the Eucharist but to emphasize that the miracles of Jesus are decreasing (Countryman, “Baskets”). In the second feeding Jesus starts with more bread, feeds fewer people, and less is left over. Outside of the feeding stories the only place in Mark which has Eucharistic material is the Last Supper. Even when Mark actually describes the Last Supper and gives us the words of institution, Mark focuses at least as much on the announcement of the betrayal as on the Eucharist.

Because there is so little material to work with, any conclusions about how Mark interpreted the startling words of institution must remain tentative, but I will offer a possibility. One cannot confidently state what Mark historically thought Jesus’s words, “this is my body,” “this is my blood,” meant. One cannot even be certain what these words mean in the literary

context of the book. Nevertheless, on the basis of the evidence that exists, I will offer a hypothesis.

Mark emphasizes that the Last Supper was a Passover meal. The account of the Last Supper begins by notifying the reader that it was the first day of the festival. Then the disciples ask Jesus where they are to prepare for the Passover celebration. Jesus replies by telling them to go to a certain house and ask where he can eat the “Passover” (14:14) with his disciples. After the disciples arrive, “they prepared the Passover meal” (14:16).

Mark’s emphasis that the Last Supper was a Passover meal is striking, because it was possible to interpret the Last Supper differently. Paul’s account of the Last Supper does not mention the Passover, and John’s Gospel explicitly tells us that the Last Supper took place on the day before the Passover (John 18:28, 19:31). It is true that Matthew and Luke both record that the Last Supper was a Passover celebration. However, Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source, and they may have gotten the idea that the Last Supper was a Passover meal from him. In my opinion, John’s Gospel is historically correct that the Last Supper was not a Passover celebration. It would not have been possible to have legal proceedings, especially ones in which the high priests participated, on the holiday. It would also have been extraordinarily insensitive, even for the Romans, to have an execution on that day. The Acts of the Apostles tells us that Herod Agrippa I planned to wait until *after* the Passover to put Peter on trial (Acts 12:4). Surely, if the Last Supper had been a Passover meal, the Eucharist would subsequently have been celebrated only in the context of the Passover festivities. However, as far as we know, the Eucharist was always celebrated separately from Passover and much more frequently. Mark is the earliest source that claims that the Last Supper was a Passover meal. Consequently, I would argue either that Mark himself chose to place the words of institution in the context of the Passover festival or more likely that Mark chose to use the tradition that held that the Last Supper occurred on Passover rather than the alternative tradition that correctly remembered that the Last Supper actually occurred earlier. Even though Luke following Mark insists that the Last Supper was a Passover observance, Luke retains what appears to be an earlier tradition that Jesus was not able to eat the Passover with his disciples (Evans). In Luke 22:16-17 Jesus says that although he wanted to eat the Passover with his disciples before he suffered, he will not be able to do so. Instead, he will eat the Passover with them when the Kingdom arrives.

Mark invites the reader to see the Eucharistic words as an affirmation that Jesus's death was an atoning sacrifice. In chapter 10 Jesus declares that he is giving his life as a "ransom for many" (10:45). The same theme occurs immediately after Jesus declares that the wine of the Last Supper is his blood. Jesus goes on to say that this blood is "poured out for many" (14:24).

For Mark an important dimension of the meaning of the words of institution is that Jesus had to suffer, and by implication his followers will have to suffer also. The bread of the Last Supper is the Passover bread. According to the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures, this bread is the "bread of affliction" (Deut 16:3). The wine of the Last Supper is the blood of Jesus that is about to be poured out. Therefore, the paradoxical sayings that the bread is Christ's body and the wine his blood mean in this context that the Eucharist memorializes that Christ's body was broken and his blood was shed. Whenever Christians receive the Eucharist, they confess this challenging fact and its implications for them as followers of Jesus. Mark tells us that at the Last Supper Jesus took a "cup" (14:23). Earlier in the gospel Jesus responded to the selfish request of James and John to have the best seats in the Kingdom by asking if they could drink the "cup" that he was to drink and by predicting that they would have to drink it (10:38-39). The cup in question is, as in so many passages of the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures (e.g., Isa 51:17, Jer 25:15), the cup of devastating suffering.

Of course, as we have discussed above, immediately after the Last Supper, Mark dramatically emphasizes the theme that the followers of Jesus must have the humility to realize that they cannot know in advance the crushing power of suffering. Peter and the others boast that they are willing even to die for Jesus. However, when the test comes, the disciples all flee, and Peter denies that he even knows Jesus. Like the seed that fell on the rock in the Parable of the Sower, the disciples withered when the heat was on (Mark 4:5-6, 16-17). Mark's Christian readers should learn from the failure of the disciples and realize that we cannot appreciate beforehand what devastating suffering will be like.

However, through the Eucharist we can remember that God is faithful. That knowledge we affirm when we receive the cup which Mark records is, "the blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many" (Mark 14:24).

In 1 Corinthians Paul discusses the Eucharist in response to two pastoral problems. In chapter 10 he mentions the Eucharist in response to the possibility that members of the Corinthian church might participate in idolatrous worship. Paul insists that Christians cannot share in the “table of the Lord” and the “table of demons [i.e., idols]” (10:21). In chapter 11 Paul discusses the Eucharist in response to grave inequalities when the Corinthians gathered to celebrate the liturgy. The members of the church who belonged to higher social classes arrived earlier and had a party before the actual liturgy. By contrast, those who belonged to the lower classes, probably especially slaves, only arrived much later. Paul complains that as a result “one goes hungry and another becomes drunk” (11:21), and the poor have been put to shame.

It would appear that the Corinthians took the words of institution literally and believed that the Eucharist worked by magic. Here I am defining “magic” as ritual actions which automatically give the practitioner spiritual power. It is clear that the Corinthians had no fear of coming into contact with Pagan worship. Paul has to warn them against idolatry in the strongest terms. It is also clear that the Corinthians who belonged to the higher classes had little concern for the social wellbeing of the rest of the congregation at least during church meetings. The reason for these attitudes was probably that the Corinthians thought that the Eucharist automatically protected them from evil even if they participated in Pagan ceremonies or disregarded the needs of other Christians. Presumably, the reason that the Corinthians thought that the Eucharist worked automatically is that they assumed that the words, “This is my body” produced a magical change in the bread. Anyone who received this new supernatural substance was safe from spiritual harm. Magic was widely practiced in antiquity, and the Corinthians were certainly familiar with it. It was easy for them to conclude that Christianity had magical rites.

In contrast to this magical interpretation, Paul sees the Eucharistic bread and wine as signs inaugurating a new covenant. In the Bible a covenant is a solemn commitment, particularly one that establishes a new relationship between God and a community. Normally, there is some sign or ceremony that accompanies this commitment. For example, at the conclusion of the great flood, God makes a covenant with Noah and his descendants that God will never again destroy the world. He gives the rainbow as a sign (Gen 9:8-17). Later God makes a covenant with Abraham and his descendants.

Abraham's descendants will be numerous, and they will inherit the land of Canaan. As a sign of that covenant Abraham and his male descendants are to be circumcised (Gen 17). In 1 Corinthians Paul quotes Jesus as saying that the Eucharistic "cup is the new covenant in my blood" (11:25). Clearly then Paul views the Eucharist as a "new covenant" ceremony linking God and his people. The bread and wine are signs of a solemn commitment between God and the followers of Jesus that produces a new relationship.

In the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures the basic covenant is the one that God makes with the Israelites at Mount Sinai, and this covenant was solemnized through sharing in blood and a meal. It is this covenant that seals the bond between the LORD and the Israelites. He will be their God, and they will be "a priestly kingdom and a holy nation," God's "treasured possession out of all the peoples" (Exod 19:5-6). As we noted above, the ceremony for inaugurating the covenant included dashing blood from an animal sacrifice on an altar representing God and on the people. Immediately thereafter the leaders of Israel ate and drank in the presence of God (Exod 24:6-11).

The covenant at Sinai places three basic conditions on the Israelites. First, the Israelites will worship no other God. The first of the ten great commandments which come with the covenant is, "You shall have no other gods besides me" (Exod 20:2). Second, the Israelites will treat each other justly and compassionately. There shall be no murder, adultery, stealing, and bearing false witness against one's neighbor. Legal decisions must be impartial. All Israelites are equal in God's eyes. "You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great" (Lev 19:15). Nevertheless, since the poor and the weak are much more likely to suffer than the rich and the powerful, the covenantal laws contain special provisions to protect the marginal. For example, there are agricultural regulations which guarantee that the needy can glean in land belonging to others and that there will be something left there to be had (Leviticus 19:9-10). The final condition for the covenant at Sinai was the observance of religious rituals according to specific guidelines. In the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures God gives minute regulations about the sacred Ark and the Tent and how sacrifices are to be performed.

The covenant at Sinai promises manifold blessings to Israel if the nation keeps the conditions and threatens manifold calamities if the nation does not. In Deuteronomy God assures the Israelites that if they keep his

commandments, they will have many children, bountiful harvests, wealth, and victory over their enemies. If they fail to keep the conditions of the covenant, the Israelites will suffer every ill including wasting disease, insanity, drought, defeat, and exile (Deut 28).

However, if the Israelites repent after they disobey God and suffer the calamities, God will again give his blessing. God will bring the Israelites back to their homeland, and they will prosper anew.

We can confirm that Paul thinks of the Eucharist as a ceremony renewing a new covenant because he insists on the same three conditions that God mandated for the Sinai covenant. First Paul insists that the Corinthians cannot worship any other god. The Corinthians must “flee from the worship of idols” (1 Cor 10:14). Second, the Corinthians must have special concern for the needy members of the congregation. The wealthy and the powerful must not humiliate the poor by feasting at church gatherings when other Christians are hungry. Finally, in various places in 1 Corinthians Paul gives detailed directions about how to worship. For example, he limits glossolalia during liturgy. Only two or three people are to speak in tongues and only if there is someone to interpret so that the rest of the congregation will understand the message (1 Cor 14:27).

Paul also assumes that God will severely punish violations of the new covenant but will relent if Christians change their ways. In 1 Corinthians Paul reminds the Corinthians of how severely God punished the Israelites for sinning. For example, God killed “twenty-three thousand in a single day” (1 Cor 10:8; Num 25:9). Paul then claims that it is because the Corinthians have been celebrating the Eucharist without “discerning the body” that many in the congregation have become sick and some have even died (11:29-30). However, Paul insists that this dire divine punishment is so the Corinthians will repent and “not be condemned along with the world” (1 Cor 11:32).

As we would expect, Paul explains the Eucharist by emphasizing that Christians live simultaneously in two ages and that in this life Christians suffer and live in hope of a new order of existence. Paul writes, “As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until his comes” (11:26). The Eucharist does not protect the Corinthians from the problems of this age, as the Corinthians themselves superstitiously imagined. The Eucharist is not magic. The “body” and “blood” of Jesus are

not talismans that automatically ward off every evil. Instead, the Eucharist proclaims that Jesus suffered and died. When Christians receive the Eucharist, they are pledging to be willing to suffer for Jesus in this present age. However, the Eucharist is also a sign that Christ will return, and there will be a blessed new age. Then Christians will receive all the good things that God has prepared for those who love him.

As we would also expect, the Eucharist is the sign of the paradox that Christians become superior by becoming selfless. Immediately after discussing the Eucharist in chapter 10, Paul tells the more sophisticated Corinthians that they are theoretically correct that it is permissible to eat meat sacrificed to an idol. However, in practice, the sophisticated should defer to the consciences of the weak. If someone protests that the meat being served was sacrificed to an idol, even the sophisticated should not eat it. Paul then insists that he himself puts the needs of others before his own, and he invites his readers to do the same. “I try to please everyone . . . , not seeking my own advantage, but that of many.” “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (10:33-11:1). Christians become great by disregarding themselves and imitating the self-sacrifice of Jesus. The Eucharist makes Christians selfless by symbolically uniting them with each other and with Christ. Paul emphasizes that in the Eucharist all share in the same bread and cup, and, therefore, all belong to a single “body.” Christians are one body with Christ. “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, it is not a sharing in the body of Christ?” (10:16). Christians are also one body with each other. “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body” (1 Cor 10:17).

For Paul the saying that the Eucharistic bread is Christ’s body means that the bread is the way that the Church becomes Christ’s body in this world. In 1 Corinthians Paul uses Christ’s “body” to refer to different things. Christ’s body is the Eucharistic bread, and Christ’s body is the Church. Paul quotes Jesus’s words over the bread, “This is my body” (1 Cor 11:24). He also writes to the Corinthian community, “You are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (12:27). In the statement warning about the dire consequences of not “discerning the body” during the Eucharist (11:29), the “body” seems to refer both to the Eucharistic bread and to the Church. By receiving Christ’s body in the Eucharist, Christians are affirming the new Covenant. They are Christ’s body in this world. Jesus’s Spirit lives in them and works through them. Therefore, all Christians are sacramentally one, and the Church is the continuing presence of Christ in

the world.

For Paul the Eucharist is also the guarantee that Christians will have bodies like Christ when he returns. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul talks at length about Christ's risen and glorified body which is the pattern for our own risen bodies (1 Cor 15:35-55). Christ has become a life-giving Spirit, and we will have spiritual bodies. And by receiving Christ's body in the Eucharist Christians are affirming the hope that just as God transformed Jesus's earthly body into a glorious risen body, so when Christ returns, God will wonderfully transform the bodies of all those who have served Jesus. Just before the end of 1 Corinthians Paul prays, "Maranatha," (16:22) which means "Our Lord, come!" According to the Didache, which is the earliest surviving Christian liturgical guide, the Eucharist ended, "Maranatha, amen" (Didache IX:6). The Eucharist, as Paul and the early church in general understood it, pointed forward to the final triumph of Christ. In that triumph the bodies of the faithful, which had already fed on the sacramental body of Christ in the liturgy, would be conformed to his glorious risen body.

In at least two respects John's Gospel presents the Eucharist very differently than the sources we have already considered. First, John's Gospel makes Jesus's language even more offensive than historically it was. Historically, Jesus told his disciples to eat his body and drink his blood. As we have seen, this language was shocking. One branch of tradition softened the words about blood. Jesus no longer says, "This is my blood," but instead says, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" (1 Cor. 11:25, Luke 22:20). By contrast, John makes the command to eat Christ's body more offensive. In some passages which probably the editor added, Jesus does not say to "eat" his body, but to "munch" his "flesh." For example, we read, "those who munch my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them" (6:56, my translation). "Munch" and "flesh" are graphic in the extreme. It is no wonder that in the subsequent narrative, people remark, "This saying is hard!" (6:60, my translation).

A second way that John's Gospel presents the Eucharist differently than our other sources do is that John omits the Eucharist from the Last Supper and deals with the Eucharist much earlier in chapter 6. At the Last Supper in John's Gospel Jesus says nothing about bread and wine being his body and blood. Instead, Jesus washes his disciples' feet and says that in the future the disciples must wash each other's feet. By contrast, it is in chapter 6 that

we have a long speech in which Jesus insists that he is “the bread of life” (6:35) and declares that people must munch his flesh and drink his blood.

The graphic language of munching Christ’s flesh makes it clear that the Eucharist is the continuing “sign” of the incarnation and participates in the paradox. As we have seen, the central message—and the central paradox—of John’s Gospel is that the Eternal Divine Word became “flesh” in the human being, Jesus of Nazareth. The Gospel begins by telling us that the “Word was God” (1:1) “and the Word became flesh” (1:14) in Jesus. If the Word became flesh in Jesus, the flesh of Jesus now enters Christians when they receive the Eucharist. Therefore, for John receiving the Eucharist is a sacramental confession of the incarnation.

Because symbolically the flesh of Jesus enters them in the Eucharist, the Eucharist is also a sign that Christians have eternal life and will rise from the dead. In John’s Gospel God is the one who has eternal life, and humans gain eternal life only by participating in him. Since Jesus is the Divine Word, he gives life. Already in the opening verses of the Gospel, we read, “In him was life” (1:4). Therefore, those who eat Christ’s body and drink his blood have eternal life already and can look forward to being raised from the grave on the last day. Thus, Jesus tells us in his sermon on the bread of life both “whoever believe have eternal life” (6:47, my translation), and “I will raise them up on the last day” (6:40, 44, 54).

The present location of Jesus’s discourse on the Eucharist makes it clear that receiving the Eucharist is the next step after baptism. As I have argued at length elsewhere and summarized above, a later editor rearranged the gospel so that it would correspond to the stages of the ideal Christian life. The Christian life begins with conversion, goes on to baptism, and then on to one’s first Eucharist. Consequently, in the edited gospel there is a section in which the dominant theme is the conversion of the first disciples, then a section in which the dominant theme is baptism, and then in chapter 6 we have Jesus speaking about the need to munch on his flesh and drink his blood.

As the next step after baptism, the Eucharist is a necessary but elementary stage. Chapter 6 stresses that all of Jesus’s followers must receive the Eucharist. Only those who eat this bread will have eternal life. Jesus solemnly tells his listeners, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Humanity and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (6:53). However,

the gospel emphasizes that people who only get to the stage of receiving the Eucharist remain at a low spiritual level. When Jesus says that people must munch on his flesh and drink his blood and his hearers object, Jesus insists so far he has only been discussing the basics. How would they respond if they saw him ascending to heaven where he was before (6:61-62)?

At this early stage the Eucharist is a paradox. Just as Christians cannot experience that Jesus is divine until they are at a much more advanced stage, so Christians cannot make sense of the paradox of the Eucharist when they first start eating Christ's flesh and drinking his blood.

However, when Christians reach the highest stage, they will see the Eucharist as the sacramental sign of the paradox that Jesus is one with the Father and yet distinct and that Christians are one with God and yet distinct. In chapter 6 Jesus insists that those who receive the Eucharist abide in him and he abides in them. But his audience does not understand. Later in the gospel Jesus insists that the Holy Spirit will lead his disciples into all truth (16:13), and in that day they will know that they are in him and he is in them (14:20). Indeed, the disciples will experience that through the Holy Spirit both the Father and the Son dwell in the mature Christian. "We [Jesus and the Father] will come to them and make our home with them" (14:23). At the highest stage of Christian life, Christians experience directly the paradoxical truth that Jesus is one with the Father and yet distinct. And Christians experience directly that the Eucharist is the paradoxical sign of that supreme paradox.

All the material we have been studying, beginning with the historical Jesus and ending with John's Gospel, at least implies that the Eucharist is especially a sign of God's love and a demand that Christians love. The Eucharist makes Christians one body with Christ and with each other. Physical love is expressed through the union of bodies whether through intercourse or through an embrace. Spiritual love involves the union of minds and hearts. The Eucharist is the sacrament of loving union. The Eucharist also involves the renewal of the covenant. A covenant is a solemn commitment to a relationship with God. It presupposes God's love for us, and it commits us to love him. As part of the covenant, Moses told the Israelites that they were to love God with all of their hearts and souls and might (Deut 6:4), and Jesus declared this was the primary commandment. Because God cares about every person, the commandment to love God leads to the commandment to love one's neighbor, and Jesus declared that

this was the second most important commandment. When Christians become one sacramental body with Christ in the Eucharist, they are pledging to fulfill Christ's two great commandments and to be instruments of his love in this world.

We conclude then that a study of the strange and offensive words of institution confirms what we have seen in general about the tradition of puzzling rhetoric. Jesus's words about eating his body and drinking his blood do point to the equality of all in God's Kingdom, the need to examine one's own heart, and the reality that God's future is still largely unknown. Mark sees the Eucharist as a sign of Jesus's own suffering and death and as a sign that we must prepare to suffer, even though we cannot know in advance what our own passion will be like. For Paul, the Eucharistic words are a reminder that Christians simultaneously live in this broken age and, by expectation, also in the glorious age to come. And the Eucharist enables us to become greater by becoming Christ's body, rather than seeking our own advancement. In the Eucharist we renew our covenantal commitment to be faithful to Christ's sacrificial death as we await his triumphant return. In John's Gospel the Eucharist is a sign of the mystery that the divine Word became flesh. Receiving one's first Eucharist is a stage in Christian growth. The continuing reception of the sacrament is an invitation to reach the highest stage of all, becoming Christ for others.

Chapter 7

Some General Conclusions about the Deliberately Puzzling Material of the New Testament

Puzzling sayings challenge the world's normal way of thinking. By definition, puzzling sayings do not make sense, at least initially, because they are inconsistent, enigmatic, or insane. Therefore, they call into question conventional notions of what is reasonable.

A basic part of the message of Jesus and the early Church (and perhaps all of Christianity) is that normal reality and the thinking that makes sense of it are less important than God's future and the hidden depths of our own beings whether as individuals or as communities. God's future will reverse the structures of this world. Those who are poor will become rich, and the rich will become poor. The powerful will be humbled, and the humble will be exalted. Those who are truly wise recognize that present reality is passing, whereas God's future will endure. Therefore, the wise focus on what will happen to them after death or what the world will be like when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. The truly wise prepare for what is to come. Even in this present world what is truly important is what is in our core, the "heart" of our individual lives and our collective experience. The superficial moods that we call being happy or unhappy tell us little about what is fundamental in us as individuals or as communities. These moods do not normally lead us to recognize the hidden sinfulness and brokenness which distort our existence. Nor do these moods normally lead us to discern where we can find peace and fulfillment. If we do not look deeper, we will not find lasting joy, and if we do not deal with our hidden sinfulness, we will suffer condemnation at the last judgment.

To some extent one can get people to change their basic ways of thinking by using reasonable discourse. One can point out that the present situation cannot last, that the present way of doing things is unjust, that at present, even though we pretend to be tranquil and fulfilled, we are in fact agitated and empty. One can use evidence and logic to challenge the status quo. And people may actually listen.

It is noteworthy that all of the individuals whom we have studied, Jesus, Mark, Paul, and John often did speak rationally. In this book we have repeatedly turned to their clear teachings in order to explain the puzzling statements. Indeed, without the clear teachings the enigmas themselves would be inscrutable. If we did not know that Jesus clearly taught that love is crucial, we might have concluded that when Jesus said that his disciples must hate their parents he meant to be taken literally. If we did not know that Mark clearly taught that Christians are to proclaim that the crucified Jesus is the Messiah, God's Son, we might wrongly conclude that when Jesus tries to discourage people from publicizing his exalted identity Mark is implicitly condemning evangelism. If Paul did not so often speak clearly and sensibly, we might assume that when he tells us that he is beside himself that he actually is insane. If John's Gospel did not provide us with many rational models to explain how the Father and the Son are distinct and yet one, we might conclude that the Gospel's prologue is simply incoherent when it proclaims that "the Word was with God," yet "the Word was God" (John 1:1).

Nevertheless, it is hard to get people to change their basic ways of thinking by only using reasonable arguments or direct exhortation. Human beings find it difficult to imagine something radically different from what they presently understand and experience. We tend to reject anything that is foreign as either unreal or, at least, unrealistic. Human beings find it especially difficult to see and acknowledge their own faults whether individual or collective. It is too easy to rationalize, to blame others when it is in our selfish interest to do so. Most difficult of all is to get people to see that the very structures of reality in the present may be transitory, and that we must prepare for a future which will not merely be different in degree but in kind. Even when rational arguments have convinced people that they need to change their basic way of thinking and people are convinced that they have, often the change is superficial. The core of their ideas and the resulting behavior remains stuck in the past. After listening to Jesus preach about servanthood and self-sacrifice, Peter in Mark's Gospel imagines that he is prepared to suffer and die with Jesus. However, in reality Peter is not. To save himself he almost immediately denies even knowing Jesus. The Corinthians thought that they were spiritually mature despite their boastful self-centeredness and lack of concern for others. Paul had to insist that in reality the Corinthians were still thinking and acting in a worldly way. Similarly, many Christians in all times and places have

thought that they understood and were living the Gospel when in actuality they continued mostly thinking and acting in conventional unchristian ways.

Consequently, it is sometimes necessary to use extreme or enigmatic or paradoxical sayings when presenting the Christian message. Such rhetoric at least shakes up people and may make them think. It may trick them into seeing something about themselves or their culture or the future that they would ordinarily ignore. Puzzling rhetoric can get beneath people's defenses and reveal to them the truth. The puzzling penetrates.

The price one pays for using such rhetoric is the accusation of madness. People may not welcome reasonable arguments and direct exhortation, especially on sensitive issues. However, at least people do not question the sanity of those who make a case logically and plainly. By contrast, anyone who resorts to using puzzling discourse to get people to see the truth risks being dismissed as crazy.

In all of the material that we have been studying, people dismiss Jesus or Paul as insane. Mark's Gospel records that the enemies of Jesus accused him of being possessed. He was under the power of the prince of demons. Even Jesus's own kin apparently thought that he had "gone out of his mind" (Mark 3:21). Since the Church would never have made up this charge, it must be what people were actually saying. Paul in his letters to the Corinthians feels compelled to write, "If we are beside ourselves, it is for God" (2 Cor 5:13). In John's Gospel "many" say about Jesus, "He has a demon and is out of his mind" (John 10:21).

All of the materials we have looked at agree that we cannot understand God's plan for humanity without knowing about the death and resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit. Prior to his crucifixion, Jesus talked about the future coming of the Kingdom of God but did not provide details. He was sure that God would do something dramatic. There would be a new Israel which would convert the world. But how God would bring the Kingdom in power was a mystery that Jesus did not reveal. Presumably, Jesus did not think that he knew. By contrast, after the resurrection, Mark and Paul and John could proclaim that Jesus's crucifixion and subsequent triumph over death and the gift of the Spirit were the key both to understanding God's plan and the centrality of Jesus in that plan. The past history of Israel had prepared for Jesus's life, death, and resurrection and

the coming of the Spirit. Indeed, the prophets had foretold everything. The suffering of Jesus had shown God's love for a sinful world and broken the hold of sin and evil. The resurrection of Jesus had revealed that God was more powerful even than death. The Spirit gives to those who follow Jesus the strength to endure and a peace and joy which the world cannot take away. The disciples could go out and proclaim that Jesus was Lord and that his Kingdom would triumph.

Consequently, the most paradoxical sayings in the New Testament come from Jesus himself, as he looked forward to the unknown apocalyptic events to come and urged people to prepare. Jesus made outrageous or ambiguous statements that pointed in a certain direction but provided no rational details, because he did not know the details about how the Kingdom would come or what life then would be like. To help people get ready for the coming of the Kingdom in power, Jesus could challenge people to see what was in their hearts and to acknowledge that everyone is equally welcome in the Kingdom. However, Jesus could only declare that those who were prepared for the advent of the Kingdom would be blessed, and those who were not, would suffer. Jesus did not give details about what the blessings and the sufferings would be.

By contrast, Paul and John assume that since Christians at least nominally know about the death and resurrection of Jesus and have received the Spirit, Christians should be able to make basic sense of the paradoxes of Christian faith. Paul could write to the Corinthians that the cross was a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles but to Christians it was the power and wisdom of God. The crucifixion points forward to the resurrection. Consequently, Christians know something about the glories that God will give to those who are faithful to the way of the cross. "What God has prepared for those who love him, these things God has revealed to us" (1 Cor 2:9-10). Therefore, in the light of the cross and resurrection, Christians can understand the paradox of finding one's life by losing it. Because Christians know about the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus and have received the Spirit, they should be able to understand what Paul means when he writes, "Whenever I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:10), for Jesus "was crucified in weakness, but he lives by the power of God" (13:4). In John's Gospel the characters in the narrative cannot make sense of Jesus's statements that he must be lifted up (John 12:32-34) and where he is going they cannot come (7:33-36, 8:21-22). The Christian reader should know that Jesus is speaking of his death, resurrection, and

return to heavenly glory. And Christian readers also know that even though they cannot yet go to where Jesus has gone, they already have the Spirit, and the Spirit is leading them into all truth.

Nevertheless, since Christians simultaneously live in two realities--this present broken sinful world and the new creation in the spirit-filled Church--the paradoxical sayings are still at least a challenge to focus on the life to come. Of course, Christians must continue to live in this world, and it can often seem even to Christians that this present life is more important or, at least, more pressing than the life to come. However, the puzzling sayings always invite, even force, Christians to question the assumptions and structures of this present world and to focus on God's future when the enigmas will be definitively resolved.

In this present world the best way to resolve the puzzles is through spiritual growth. Spiritual growth increasingly allows us to experience the reality of the new creation and to grow in hope for our individual transformation after death and God's ultimate transformation of this world. Indeed, John's Gospel assures us that at the highest stage of spiritual growth Christians already experience eternal life and even the supreme paradox that Jesus and the Father and we are distinct and yet are one.

Although in many respects the paradoxes of the New Testament evolve, the paradox that in Christian communities leaders must be servants remains constant from the teaching of Jesus right through John's Gospel. Jesus insisted on the paradox that the first would be last. Those who have power in his movement must not have privileges but act as slaves of all. And Jesus lived this paradox in accepting his own death "as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Mark's Gospel in portraying the life of Jesus emphasizes the theme of servant leadership. The disciples of Jesus argue about who among themselves is the greatest and vie for the best seats in the coming Kingdom. Jesus rebukes them. He himself is following the way of humility and suffering. They must follow him. It is Pagan leaders who tyrannize those beneath them. In the community that Jesus is founding, "Whoever wants to be first among you will be slave of all" (Mark 10:40). Paul in his letters to the Corinthians stresses that he has willingly given up the privileges that conventionally accompany leadership. Although he has the right to ask for financial support as an apostle, he has not done so. He suffers for the gospel, and he is a servant of the Corinthians. And it is at least in part his suffering for them which gives him his authority. And Paul urges the

leading Corinthians to imitate his example. The wealthy and the theologically advanced must defer to the needs of the poor and to the ignorance of the unsophisticated. The elite in the church must not humiliate those who have no food or cause those who have unjustified scruples to act against their consciences. In John's Gospel Jesus washes the feet of his disciples, and he tells them that they must wash each other's feet. And this directive is especially for those who have reached the highest spiritual level.

Finally, the source and the explanation of all the paradoxes of Christianity is love. When Jesus prepared people for an unknown future, that future turned out to be the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. The crucifixion was the supreme expression of Jesus's love for the world, and the resurrection, the supreme expression of God's love for Jesus. In Mark's Gospel the suffering and death of Jesus and his disciples convert the world because they express love. Paul can be crazy from the world's perspective and supremely sane from the perspective of a mature Christian, because the love of God controls him. In John's Gospel it is the love of the Father and Jesus for one another which explains how Jesus and the Father are distinct and yet utterly one. And it is love, love for God and love for one another, that the Eucharist presupposes and expresses.

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