

BETH FELKER JONES

WHY I AM



PROTESTANT



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# ONE



## WHY I AM A CHRISTIAN



CHRISTIAN FAITH IS MY LIFE, my center, my everything. Jesus Christ is the one who animates my days, who gives me purpose and pulls me through, and who has shaped me, in big and small ways, for as long as I can remember. This is true professionally. My work is to teach and write about Christian theology, but it's also true in every aspect of my life.

This makes the task of writing about why I am a Christian feel quite weighty. The personal stakes are high. What if I can't articulate my answer well enough? (I won't; there's no "enough" to describe Jesus.) What if what I write is unpersuasive? (It cannot be, for it is the Spirit who persuades.) What if I don't have anything new to say? (I won't; I'm speaking of a faith with a long history and of a God who does not change.)

The parentheticals are my courage to keep writing. I don't expect to offer an account of my faith that somehow surpasses other accounts. While I have personal things to say, I won't have anything radically new to say, because who Jesus is and what he has done are not new. I write, then, vulnerably, to place my story in the context of my larger narrative in



this book. I write to help you, my reader, understand why I am Protestant.

This chapter locates Protestant faith in its context: the context of the Christian faith as a whole. Protestant faith is first and foremost Christian faith, and the Protestant distinctives I'll spend much of this book talking about matter far less than does that shared faith. The shared faith of Christians across traditions—including Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant—is far and away more significant than the matters separating those traditions. I remain convinced that Christians across traditions share the deposit of faith, which fits the rule of Vincent of Lerins; we believe that which Christians “everywhere, always, and all” (*ubique, semper et ab omnibus*) have embraced.<sup>1</sup> If I can't make that clear here, at the outset, I don't want to write the rest of this book, because I'll be talking about secondary matters split off from what comes first. In this chapter, I speak of why I am Christian in three ways. First, I'll talk about my own story, then I'll step back to talk about the big picture of Christian faith, and finally, I'll ask us to think about what it means that God is the good God of good news.

## A LIFE

I could start by saying I-grew-up-in-a-Christian-home (uttered quickly, almost all-one-word). Many Christians who, like me,

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<sup>1</sup>“In the Catholic Church itself, every care should be taken to hold fast to what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all. This is truly and properly ‘Catholic,’ as indicated by the force and etymology of the name itself, which comprises everything truly universal.” Vincent of Lerins, “The Commonitories,” in *Writings; Commonitories; Grace and Free Will*, trans. Gerald G. Walsh, Bernard M. Peebles, Rudolph E. Morris, and J. Reginald O'Donnell (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1949), 270. For Roman Catholic reflection thereon, see Michael Seewald, *Theories of Doctrinal Development in the Catholic Church*, trans. David West (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 3.3.1.

don't have dramatic conversion stories use this formula to begin to narrate the work of God in their lives. In many Protestant circles, "I-grew-up-in-a-Christian-home" tends to be voiced as an apology, with sheepishness, as though the work of God were less than when it happens through childhood and home and being raised in the church.

Grace, though, works in domesticity and in community. Grace works in parents who nudge their kids out of bed every Sunday, despite the "I don't wanna go" and the "Church is boring." It works in mothers who teach the Lord's Prayer by bedsides and fathers who model giving and integrity. It works in local churches through Sunday school classes and youth groups and sermons and Bible studies. God does not eschew the domestic or the local. God does not disdain the quiet or the small.

God came to us to grow-up-in-a-Jewish-home, and that same God is happy to work in gentle and slow stories in other homes where God is honored. God also works in explosive and public ways. I love the dramatic conversion stories some of my friends can tell. But I am not a Christian because of my quiet story, and those friends aren't Christians because they met God in fire-works. We are Christians because of God. We are Christians because of who God is and what God is doing in our lives, in the church, and in all creation.

My personal narrative, if recounted as a timeline of life events, is a common one. In my Christian home and my local church, I was always looking for and meeting Jesus. I always wanted God. I sang my heart out with the taped praise songs we kept in our car. I made big plans for Bible reading, which I sometimes kept, and I prayed earnestly, if sporadically, on retreats

and at bedtimes. I resisted the kind of “getting saved” that involves responding to an altar call, partly because my parents had communicated their own distrust of accounts of God’s work that would disdain the small and slow and domestic, and partly because it felt disingenuous to make a decision for Jesus when I’d been wanting him for as long as I could recall.

Still, multiple times in multiple years at church camp I raised my hand when it was time to make that decision, checking off the box just in case I needed to do so to formalize Jesus’ presence in my life but also confirming and reaffirming my relationship with him. I’ve learned about Jesus by loving him, by teaching about him—from first efforts as a kindergarten Sunday school teacher and church camp counselor to my present job as a professor of theology—and in the experience of being sustained by him, through the power of the Spirit, through the good and the bad of an ordinary life.

I’ve known God as I’ve been fed at the Lord’s table, both when my hunger was met by weekly Communion and, during the Covid pandemic, through a long year of fasting. I’ve known God in weeping over injustice and in discovering God’s heart for justice and righteousness. I’ve known God in the mainline, Methodist church where I was baptized, in the kind of churches that claim nondenominationalism with praise bands and raised hands, in churches with haunting liturgies born in the English Reformation, and in churches in Kenya and Ethiopia where the singing lasts for hours and the many-tongued prayers go on even longer.

All that teaching about Jesus led to a sense that God was calling me, and I went to seminary, where the fuller riches of Christian doctrine and Christian tradition unfolded for me in

new ways. I was in love with the same God of my Christian home, whom I was now discovering as the God of Augustine and Aquinas and Julian and Luther, the God of Africa and Asia and my own Midwestern United States, the God of the ancient church and of the Middle Ages, of the Reformation and of the present. I've known God intimately, palpably, as mystic fire, and I've known God when I haven't felt an inkling of the divine presence for years on end.

But the God who was with me from the beginning was constant. My story isn't dramatic, but God's work is. God has transferred me from the dominion of sin and death into the kingdom of holiness and life. God has cleansed my sin and made me new creation, bringing me into right relationship with the Creator. God has knit me together with the body of Christ and given me good work to do as a part of the body. God is changing my life so that I am becoming, with time, more and more like Jesus. I know that's an audacious sentence. God is audacious.

There are no public miracles to show here, but there are countless quiet ones, and that work of God matters to my family and my students. It matters to me. In God's providence, it matters to all creation and to the kingdom that is without end. God is the drama of my story. It's about what God has done, the same thing God has done in countless Christian lives and local churches through the centuries, justifying and sanctifying God's people for life in right relationship to God, each other, and all of creation.

## THE BEAUTY OF THE SHARED CHRISTIAN FAITH

I am a Christian because of who God is, and Christian faith acknowledges a God who is more beautiful and more compelling

than any human mind could have conceived. We can know this God because of God's goodness in revealing truth about the divine character and nature. The core teachings of the Christian faith are about who God is; and who God is, is why I am a Christian. There are different ways to describe those core teachings; here I'll briefly speak of two. God is the God recognized in the reading of Scripture solidified in the early ecumenical councils, especially Nicaea and Chalcedon. And God is the God of the gospel, the good news for all people announced to the shepherds in Bethlehem and continuing to be announced by Christians today.

The “early ecumenical councils” may sound like a stodgy phrase for the beauty of God, but it points us to the history and the unity of Christian faith. Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox Christians all recognize the teaching of these councils.<sup>2</sup> They are “early” because they predate some of the rifts that would give us those groups we now call Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox, and they are “ecumenical” because they belong to and are shared by the whole church of God. When we speak, then, of these councils, we are speaking of a great treasure, a deposit of faith that shapes Christians beyond any lines that divide us. We live in a time when many claim that there is nothing that unites Christians across those lines, but scores of worshipers who know God—God as the God of the early ecumenical councils, God as the God revealed in Scripture, the triune God—testify otherwise.

Above I referred to the teaching of these councils as “the reading of Scripture” solidified there. Describing things this

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<sup>2</sup>Young Richard Kim, *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

way is somewhat Protestant, but you already knew that about me. The early ecumenical councils did not invent their teachings about God. They came to those teachings through sustained and careful wrestling with the Scriptures as the revealed Word of God. The doctrines of the Trinity (Council of Nicaea) and of the person of Christ (Council of Chalcedon) are the best readings of Scripture we have. Unlike other readings (many of which were condemned by these councils as heresies, which are obstinately false teachings about God), the Nicene and Chalcedonian readings of Scripture take up the fullness of the mysteries of the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments. They do not rely on a few prooftexts. They read the whole story of God's work in the world and help us to describe the God we meet through that story. They show us the God of the Bible, one triune God, the Father who sends the Son to invite us to unity with God through the Spirit.

As a Christian theologian, there is nothing I find more beautiful than this truth. God is God alone, the only God, who reveals the lies of the false gods and the not gods. God is one. God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three persons and still one God, an eternally existing relationship of love, a dynamic of unity and difference. The Father is not some mythic Zeus-type god, not a nationalist muscle man in the sky. The Father is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who reveals the truth about God in his flesh and through his Spirit. Jesus is fully God and fully human. He is the eternal divine Son, sharing his divinity with his Father and Spirit, and he is truly one of us, body and soul. He is truly with us and for us. In this space between Jesus' first coming and the time when he will return in glory, we are not left alone. God the Spirit is with us, indwelling, empowering, and making us holy.

The early ecumenical councils refuted those who would teach otherwise, those who would give a truncated picture of God. Those councils started with the great truth of God's oneness, as revealed to Israel, and they worked to understand how that oneness could fit with the threeness that had now been revealed in the events of the New Testament as the Father sent the Son in the Spirit to be born, live, die, and be raised from the dead for our sake.

The obvious thing to do was to declare that this simply couldn't all fit together. If God is one, God could not be three, so Jesus and the Spirit must be less than God. The school of thought called Arianism taught that the oneness of God was such that it could not be shared, giving us a false god who would need to hoard power to himself to be who he is.<sup>3</sup> Arianism gave us a false Son who was not truly God but a superlative creature, a helper, a second to the Father. This was certainly a neat solution to the question of how oneness might fit with threeness, but it could not account for the full biblical witness to the person of Jesus, for the gracious facts that Jesus does what *only God can do*, that Jesus is Lord and Savior, to be worshiped together with the Father and the Spirit.

Contrary to Arianism, the Council of Nicaea gave us something less neat and more astounding, more beautiful, and more biblical, and that response has rightly been recognized as the truth of Christian faith—as orthodoxy, if you will—for the seventeen hundred years since. Nicaea confirmed that, contrary to expectation, Jesus and the Spirit are both truly and fully God

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<sup>3</sup>Michael Thompson, "Arianism: Is Jesus Christ Divine and Eternal or Was He Created?," in *Heresies and How to Avoid Them: Why It Matters What Christians Believe*, ed. Ben Quash and Michael Ward (repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

(Jn 1:1; 14:5-11; 20:31). Jesus is of one being with the Father (Jn 17:22). The Spirit is the Lord and the giver of life (Rom 8:9-11; 2 Cor 3:17-18). These three are one. The Arian Jesus could not save, for God alone can save. The Arian Spirit, another creature, could not be the truth of God's presence with us, for Arianism made the Spirit less than God. Nicaea rejects the subordinationism of Arianism (putting Jesus and the Spirit underneath the Father), that is, it rejects the assumption that divine power means hierarchy and hoarding. The biblical, Nicene faith gives us the mystery of the Trinity. Three divine persons, coequal and comajestic. The Father is known truly through the Son and the Spirit, the Son speaks with the Father through the Spirit, the Spirit works nothing less than the power of God.

The Council of Chalcedon also wrestled with what seemed like a basic logical problem. How could Jesus, who is truly God, also be human? The obvious answer to the question was that surely, he couldn't be. How could the eternal enter time? The infinite take on the limits of flesh? The Holy One come into this world of sin? Surely the thing must have been just a trick of the light, and Jesus only seemed to be human? Or maybe he was a little bit human but not truly and fully so? Or maybe divinity had swallowed up and overcome whatever was once human about him? (All these ideas were suggested at the time and rejected at Chalcedon.)<sup>4</sup>

But if Jesus isn't truly and fully human, we are no longer talking about the Jesus revealed in Scripture. We are no longer talking about the Jesus who truly came among us to be *with* us

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<sup>4</sup>For more on christological heresies, see Frances M. Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and Its Background* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010).

and *for* us, to know our grief, bear our sorrow, empathize with our weakness (Heb 4:14-16). We are no longer talking about the Jesus who was born and grew up, who ate and slept, wept and died (Mt 1:23-25; Mk 15:34-37; Lk 8:22-24; Jn 11:35). A less-than-human Jesus could not draw our humanity into union with his to share a resurrection like his (1 Cor 15). What surprise would it be if a God were raised from the dead? What miracle if the eternal one proved not to have been beaten by death? The mercy, the majesty, and the good news of Jesus' resurrection are that it is the resurrection of one of us mortals, one who, like us, is human, who represents us and promises to bring us, his fellow humans, along the road that he has trod.

Chalcedon affirmed the full divinity and, at the same time, the full humanity of Jesus.<sup>5</sup> The truth about Jesus is that of divinity and humanity (two natures) in one person. He is truly God and truly human. Assuming Jesus to be less than human would have been easier, but it couldn't account for the fullness of the biblical witness to who Jesus is and what he has done, and it would rob of us the beauty and goodness of the God who chose to become one of us, for love of us. The incarnation of the Son is not a party trick. It is the very truth of God with us and for us.

All of this is the shared faith of Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant Christians. We worship the same God. We are loved by the same Father, redeemed by the same Son, indwelt by the same Spirit. This account of who God is comes with an attendant account of the good news of the gospel, and

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<sup>5</sup>"In the Incarnation, the Church proclaims the complete divinity and humanity of Christ not for their own sake, but for the sake of the other. The Incarnation demands that God truly *is* man, that it is truly *God* who is man, and that it is truly *man* that God is." Thomas Weinandy, "The Re-emergence of the Human Jesus," in *The Likeness of Sinful Flesh: An Essay on the Humanity of Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 107.

this too, in broad strokes, is shared across the three Christian traditions. The truth about God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is shared Christian truth. The true God is the God of the gospel.

## GOOD NEWS

God is the God of good news (the meaning of the word *gospel*). Any so-called Christianity that is not good news is simply not Christian. The triune God is good. The Father is good, the Son is good, and the Holy Spirit is good. God’s work in Israel—and, through Israel, God’s work in every nation—is good work. The life-changing news of what the Father has done in the Spirit through the Lord Jesus Christ is good, good, good news.

The good news of the gospel centers on Israel’s Messiah, Jesus Christ, and on what he has done in his incarnation, life, death on the cross, and resurrection (1 Cor 15:3-8). As an Israelite, Jesus brings the good news of the God of Israel (2 Tim 2:8) promised in the Scriptures, to all the nations (Rom 1:1-6). The gospel of this Jesus “is God’s saving power for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek” (Rom 1:16). In Jesus, sin and death are defeated, and all are invited into God’s righteousness. We live out this good news in unity as the people of God (Phil 1:27). The gospel is good news for all creation, for “every creature under heaven” (Col 1:23).

This good news calls us to repentance and to new life in the kingdom, which has come near in Jesus (Mk 1:14-15). The kingdom is good, unlike the kingdoms of this world. The kingdom is a blessing to the whole world, open to all, a kingdom of justice and peace. The good news demands a kingdom-shaped response; we hear “the word of truth” and respond with

trust; God marks us “with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit” (Eph 1:13). The good news of the gospel transforms lives (Rom 15:16) in ways no human power could accomplish, in ways that can happen only through the power of God (1 Thess 1:5-6). The good news is to be proclaimed wherever Christ is not known (Rom 15:20), for good should not be hoarded. Good news is meant to be shared.

The good news is not obvious. It runs contrary to expectations, “for the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing” (1 Cor 1:18). The good news “is not of human origin” (Gal 1:11); rather, it comes to us from the good and true God. The good news can be gotten wrong (Gal 1:16); it can be falsified, and false gospels tell lies about who God is and what God’s work in the world looks like. The gospel is not some private, interior matter; it invites us into new life, new community, a new world; so says René Padilla:

The gospel of Jesus Christ is a personal message—it reveals a God who calls each of his own by name. But it is also a cosmic message—it reveals a God whose purpose includes the whole world. It is not addressed to the individual *per se* but to the individual as a member of the old humanity in Adam, marked by sin and death, whom God calls to be integrated into the new humanity in Christ, marked by righteousness and eternal life. The lack of appreciation of the broader dimensions of the gospel leads inevitably to a misunderstanding of the mission of the church. The result is an evangelism that regards the individual as a self-contained unit—a Robinson Crusoe to whom God’s call is addressed as to one on an island—whose salvation takes place exclusively in terms of a

relationship with God. It is not seen that the individual does not exist in isolation, and consequently that it is not possible to speak of salvation with no reference to the world of which he or she is a part.<sup>6</sup>

The real gospel is counterintuitive, countercultural, and so counter to the evil of sin and death. It points us always away from “the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches” (1 Jn 2:16) and toward the way of Jesus:

who, though he existed in the form of God,  
 did not regard equality with God  
 as something to be grasped,  
 but emptied himself,  
 taking the form of a slave,  
 assuming human likeness.  
 And being found in appearance as a human,  
 he humbled himself  
 and became obedient to the point of death—  
 even death on a cross. (Phil 2:6-8)

This gospel is not that of pride and power. It is that of the Lord who emptied himself for our sakes. As such, this gospel is so priceless and so powerful that it is worth losing one’s life for, and it is so challenging to the world that it may result in that loss of life. But resurrection—and not loss—is the gospel’s final good word (Mk 8:35).

Good: I keep saying it. Good, good, good. But goodness is not the whole truth about what we live through day to day. This world groans under the weight of sin. We are broken. We are

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<sup>6</sup>C. René Padilla, *Mission Between the Times: Essays on the Kingdom* (London: Langham Global Library, 2010), 26.

unable to fix ourselves or this world. We are weeping. We are sinners (Rom 3:23), and we are sinned against. Injustice, oppression, and violence reign, and the vulnerable are pressed down under the feet of those with worldly power. We flee from God. We do harm. We turn, in pride, to our own power, and we worship false idols of staggering variety. We mourn, and we grieve. The world is full of abuse and pain and suffering. How can I even say the word *good*?

I say it in faith that the God of good news brings good news to just this world of pain. The gospel is good news for sinners who cannot save themselves. The gospel is good news for mortals who grieve our dead. The gospel is good news for the oppressed and the suffering. The gospel is our good God's promise to make all things new. In Jesus, sin and death are being undone.

On the cross, he has held our sin (1 Pet 2:24), and in the resurrection we are united with Jesus in the new life of the kingdom (Rom 6:5-6). We are forgiven (1 Jn 1:9) and made new (2 Cor 5:17). Utterly *unlike* any religion that asks people to do good in order to appease some deity, the Christian gospel acknowledges the deep brokenness of the world and of human beings. That gospel tells the truth about our inability to make things right on our own terms. This means the Christian gospel is that of grace. It is the gospel of the God who chooses to heal and restore us as a gift. In the gospel power of the Spirit (Acts 1:8), God's people are empowered to "do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with . . . God" (Mic 6:8).

I am a Christian because I cannot live with evil and suffering. I need hope. I need to know that God hates evil. God is the one who is undoing it, and God is the one who will finally "wipe

every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more” (Rev 21:4), and we will see the good God of the gospel reigning in truth, love, and power, over this good world, created by God’s good will.

So, I am a Christian because of God’s work in my story, because of the beauty of the universal Christian faith, and because I trust the God of the gospel. Of course, the reasons I am a Christian entail more than reason alone. They include heart and spirit, body and soul, the whole of human being. Christian faith embraces logic, but it is not only a logical exercise. If God is God, if Christian faith is true, it will have to be embraced by faith and not by sight.

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