

THE WAY, THE TRUTH & THE LIFE: CHRIST AS OUR ESSENCE & EXISTENCE

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“Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our **image**, after Our **likeness**.”

—Genesis 1:26

“I AM the Way, the Truth, and the Life.”

—Jesus Christ

“Holiness (Wholeness) is when the **truth** of our being becomes the **way** of our being.”

—C. Baxter Kruger/Wm. Paul Young

The Truth of Our Being: Christ, Our Image

In this essay, following Paul Young and John Behr (and Irenaeus of Lyons, for that matter) I will posit that the image of God (*Imago Dei*) is not a commodity we carry but rather, an indwelling Person who never abandons his human temple. Humanity was created in the Image of God, which is Jesus Christ. The prototype for Adam and Eve is not some disincarnate Word *sans* Jesus humanity but, rather, revealed through the Cross as Jesus Christ, crucified, risen, and ascended. The human God, Jesus Christ IS the image in whom Genesis 1 Adam (male and female) was created and IS the image we bear. His divine-human image is the ‘Truth of our being,’ our essence, our nature, the One in whom we live, move and have our being. All these words—Truth, essence, nature, being—are what we mean by ‘ontology.’ As David Bentley Hart has said, “The incarnation of the Son is the actual *redemption* rather than the destruction of humanity [because] all that makes us human is already wholly present in God. The incarnate Logos is at once wholly human and wholly divine, without conflict, separation, or diminishment because deification is the ‘natural’ end of all we are, and therefore, the eternal foundation of our nature.”¹

The Way of Our Being: Christ, Our Redemption

¹ Adapted from David Bentley Hart, *Theological Territories* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), 64.

Christ is also the 'Way of our being' whose Incarnate existence forges the path of redemption—the Way of the Cross he travelled and to which he beckons us, "Follow me." In his vicarious life as the New Adam, re-headed humanity, Christ reconstitutes human existence. In his real life and our real lives, Christ heals the human condition. This is not an abstracted position in some ethereal heavenly court. By Grace, (the Spirit's transforming presence), the Jesus Way enters our experience. All these words—Way, Incarnation, redemption, and experience—are what we mean by existence or existential reality. Like so:

- Truth → Way
- Essence → Existence
- Image → Likeness

The Union of Truth and Way: Christ, Our Life

To say that Christ is 'the Life' affirms the indivisibility of the Truth and the Way, of essence and existence, of image and likeness. And yes, the Spirit's work of transfiguring us from Truth to Way, from essence to existence, from Christ's image to Christ's likeness is a 'Life-work,' a healing journey, a saving process that we call redemption. The 'Life-work' is a perichoretic relationship of Grace (always first) and participation (always a response). We love because he first loved us.

That Jesus is our Life—our Life force—means that our essence and existence must not be divorced in our theology or in our hearts. Again, Hart says, "*Creation* [ontology] and *salvation* [existence] *are one act*, the way eternal divine Wisdom brings all things into being by drawing them to their divine source and end. For all of us, that whole story is the greatest of surprises—the awakening of everything from nothing, into the divine glory. For God, it is the perfect expression of who he is, in the absolute freedom of his infinite Being, which is infinite love."²

Luther's version of 'grace alone' sought to declare the Truth alone while negating the Way—a mistake the Bonhoeffer would call 'cheap grace' because he felt Luther (and all monergists since Augustine) repudiated participation as 'works righteousness.' But Christ IS the Life who unites the Truth and the Way, essence and existence, being and becoming in himself and therefore, in us. And those who, with unveiled faces, behold that cruciform Life are "transfigured (lit.) from glory to glory into the image of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 3:18). As Young points out, "Not from

² Adapted from David Bentley Hart, *Theological Territories* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), 64.

shit to glory and not from glory to glory-er, but from glory to glory.”³ Our participation is in beholding such Love, trusting in that Truth, and surrendering to his care. To “live in the grace of today” is the marriage of “come to me all you who are weary” and “take up your cross and follow.” It is the unified Life of Truth and Way. Or in the apostle’s words, “I [ego = the egoistic subject] have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me [me = the beloved object of his affection]. The life I now live in the body [existence], I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20).

Logical Priority: Essence Precedes Existence

When we contemplate the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, we see a logical priority of the eternal procession of the Son from the Father. So too, we conceive the One begotten of the Father in eternity born in time of the Virgin. Very importantly, this logical priority of Father to Son and eternity to time is *not* temporal. There was never a time when the Father had no Son just as there is no Son other than Jesus Christ. So, the eternal essence of the triune God does not precede the existence of Jesus Christ in any temporal sense. Our Christology forever involves the paradox of the changeless One who ‘becomes’ or the impassible One who ‘suffers impassibly’ (Cyril, *That Christ is One*). As Fr. John Behr says so beautifully (and provocatively!), “Through the Passion, the one Lord Jesus Christ becomes, as human, that which he, as God, always is.”⁴

Our transformation seems to follow the same logic. We only become (the Way) what we behold (the Truth), so it is a revelation of the Truth of our being that redeems, heals, and transforms the Way of our being. When our eyes are opened to the Truth of our being—Christ in us—we’re freed to become who we already are. Essentially (sic), this perspective is analogous to what we experience in cognitive-behavioural therapy⁵ and the inner healing movement. That is, in hoping to heal symptoms or dysfunctional behaviours, we need to return to the activating events at the root of our maladies and expose the lies we came to believe there. The lies we believe about God, ourselves or our existence are consequential. But when Christ the Truth supplants those lies at their very roots, the theory is that the fruit will wither. And so it does, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly.

Epistemological Priority: Existence Precedes Essence

³ Both this and the frontispiece quote are aphorisms Paul Young and Baxter Kruger frequently use. See “Personal Correspondence” (Sept. 2019) and “Untitled Lectures, Open Table seminars” (Portland, Sept 2019).

⁴ John Behr, *John the Theologian and his Paschal Gospel* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 326.

⁵ Cf. for example, Albert Ellis’ “ABC model” – Activating Event, Belief, Consequences.

The logical priority is one perspective, but the epistemological priority is quite another. On this front, I am a confessed and unabashed existentialist (as are all Orthodox believers in the tradition of Dostoevsky). For existentialists, existence precedes essence. This requires explanation but to distil it briefly, we come to see the truth through encounter. For faith-denying existentialists (esp. Nietzsche and Sartre), existence *negates* essence. That is, they see no authority higher than themselves—whether divine or institutional. They cast aside all top-down virtues and generate their own values from their own radical individuality. Their deconstruction is absolute, even down to human nature. For them, no ‘identity’ exists except that which we create or choose for ourselves.

But for the great Christian existentialists (esp. Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky), existence *precedes* essence in terms of epistemology (how we know). Let’s begin again with Christ. Even though Christ the Son *logically* proceeds from the Father and the Lord Jesus ‘descends’ from eternity (“came down from heaven” – Nicaea), *how* do we know the Truth of God and God in Truth but through Incarnate existence of Jesus Christ. It is in the Way that he died that we know the Truth of God’s being. We know that the triune God is self-giving, radically forgiving, co-suffering Love through the revelation of the life of Christ—and as the nature of God comes into clearest focus at the Cross in time. For Christian epistemology, existence precedes and unveils into clearest focus at the Cross in time. For Christian epistemology, existence precedes and unveils essence.

So too with our transformation. Yes, logically, seeing the Truth of our being (beloved children bearing the image of Christ the Image of infinite Love) works itself out in the Way of our being when the penny drops. But there’s the rub: when or how does the penny drop? How do we come to know the truth of our being? Through an existential encounter. Inside of our darkness. In the context of life ‘here below.’ We *enter* the Truth *on* the Way. The Light of Truth shines in the darkness of our old, broken, and false ways. Just as we see the Truth of the Father through the cruciform existence of the Son, so we see the Truth of our being when Christ unveils our hearts on whatever Damascus Road we happen to meet him. In this sense, existence precedes essence and the Way brings us to the Truth.

Life IN Christ: the Perichoresis of Truth and Way

So, in the end, which is it? Which has priority: Truth or Way? The Life of Christ shows us that we need not (and must not) create a binary or distinction. Essence and existence are one act,

indivisible in Christ even if we can distinguish logical and epistemological priorities. Christ is One in perichoretic union with the Father and the Spirit. Even if we imagine the logic of Father as source, Spirit as theosis and Son as telos, they are One in essence and undivided, and IN Christ—the Way, the Truth and the Life—so are we.