

# Faith in the Synoptic<sup>1</sup> Gospels

## Introduction

In reading through the various miracle stories of the Gospels, we find many direct links between faith and Jesus' saving help. There are occasions where faith makes its appearance in the most unlikely places expressed through the most unlikely people. Correspondingly, in other instances, faith is strangely absent in some environments, where people "know better" or should know better. If we could "quantify" faith—there is the full spectrum of the faith-response to Jesus; it is expressed in varying degrees through different persons in numerous settings. A persistent and brash Canaanite woman refuses to be put off by Jesus' discouraging response, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" (Matt. 15:26). Jesus honors her witty and determined response; He meets the need of her demon possessed daughter, and affirms the "faith" of the woman, "O woman, great is your faith" (Matt. 15:28). Jesus responds to the faith of four friends (Mk. 2:5) for their paralyzed friend, "Jesus, seeing their faith . . ."; He pronounces the forgiveness of sins, and then heals the paralytic and thus, substantiates His authority to forgive sins. In another instance, Jesus makes the amazing declaration concerning the Gentile centurion, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith" (Matt. 8:10).

Conversely, there are numerous instances wherein Jesus' own people, the religious leaders, and even His disciples, do not evidence the faith response that Jesus values so highly, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" (Mk. 4:40). Jesus encounters unbelieving responses from Thomas, Peter and Judas. However, even in the midst of Jesus' rebuke for the unbelief of His listeners, He still takes people where they are, whatever may be the "level" of their faith, honors that faith and seeks to bolster their faith-response. He responds to Thomas' demand for physical evidence and yet moves beyond to pronounce a Beatitude upon the one who will believe without seeing (Jn. 20:29). He honors Nathaniel's response to a miracle and seeks to deepen His faith-response, even in the initial call narrative, "You believe because I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than these" (Jn. 1:50). The troubled and panicked father of the demon-possessed boy cries out, "Lord, I believe . . . Help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mk. 9:24); Jesus responds in a gentle and helpful way to the distraught father. Similarly, He responds in a tender way to restore Peter with a three-fold commission, which corresponds to Peter's three-fold denial (Jn. 21:15-19).

The human responses represent the full spectrum of people in their situations of need. And Jesus offers no particular formula, recipe or program; yet He constantly is on the alert, seeking to deepen the faith response of others around Him. He responds in a thoughtful and sensitive manner to the Baptist's doubts (Matt. 11:4-6). Further, in the gracious father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, we sense something of Jesus' ability to take people where they are, in their various places of need and he seeks wholeness from

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<sup>1</sup> Attention will be given primarily to the Synoptic Gospels although some reference is made to the Fourth Gospel. Since the verb "I believe," is used so extensively in the Fourth Gospel, it will warrant its own treatment.

both the "irreligious" and "religious"; Jesus desires to restore and increase the heart-felt faith response of all who approach Him in need.

## The Human Context

Given the fact that "faith" is the intended human response to Jesus, it is important to note the general witness of the Synoptic Gospels about the human situation. We cannot divorce the faith response from the human condition of critical need. We need the broad perspective of how Jesus viewed the human situation to provide the necessary background, which will aid us in understanding the faith-response that Jesus solicits. That is to say, the appeal to "faith" does not come to people in a vacuum. It speaks to them in their own context and need. The following affirmations of the human context need to be understood as we seek to understand the meaning of faith in the Synoptic Gospels. All four affirmations characterize the human person and must be embraced for a balanced perspective of faith.

### **Affirmation 1: There is an inherent goodness in creation and an inestimable worth in the human person.**

Jesus believes in the goodness of God, expressed through God's rule over nature and intends to share this outlook with others. Jesus looks to the fields with their wildflowers, trees and birds, sparrows, ravens and crows. God was vitally involved in the creation and continues to work in His providence in the simple but yet miraculous processes of growth, harvest and the changes of weather. God's rule extends over His entire creation in its beauty and order. Jesus uses members of the animal and plant kingdoms to affirm the ongoing providential care of God over His creatures. Correspondingly, Jesus uses the natural world to affirm the infinite and inestimable worth of the human person. Jesus tells His people that God knows the number of hairs on each human head (Matt. 10:30), a feat, which is impossible for people to know—the number of hairs on their own heads—much less the hairs of each person on the planet. Through His stories, Jesus reminds His people that their worth exceeds, beyond measure, the worth of the birds of the skies or the plants of the fields. Jesus' argument moves from the minor to the major. "If it is so that God cares for ravens in this way, much more will He care for you for you are worth more by far. Then rest assured that God will provide for you." Jesus intends that his audience believe in this shared attitude.

Most people, whether they believe in God or not, affirm that each person is of unique value and as such, is irreplaceable. Why is it that people will spend hundreds of thousands of dollars or millions on a rescue mission for one or more individuals, trapped in a life or death situation? Is it not because they believe the premise that no price is too great to spend and expend for the rescue of one life?

Jesus argues that even the various sins of the human person, affirm the goodness of life and God's creative intent. The sin of lying is in fact an affirmation of the goodness of the truth; thus, the people of God are to be committed to the truth, without recourse to oaths, which are really unnecessary (Matt. 5:33-37). Bad things are really distortions of good things. For instance, sexual immorality is but a perverted expression of the beauty of physical love. Jesus celebrates food and drink as good things, which God has

provided; while gluttony and drunkenness pervert the gifts of God. The very vices celebrate the goodness of the gifts that God has provided. The various sins and vices are similar to parasites, which bring no life of their own, but simply feed off of the life of something, which is healthy. As C. S. Lewis notes, "Pleasure is His invention, not ours. He made the pleasures; all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one."<sup>2</sup> Jesus also affirms the worth of human persons, even in their fallenness: "If you being evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask Him" (Matt. 7:11). Even in their fallen condition, human fathers still provide for the needs and requests of their children; Jesus assumes that this vital principle of giving to children is a good quality that characterizes people, even in their fallen condition.

Jesus believes and affirms the dignity of the human person and honors the freedom, which God gives to each individual to make choices—choices for good and choices for evil. He reckons with the reality of right and wrong choices in terms of faith or unbelief. He respects the decision of the rich young ruler to choose his riches over the choice for discipleship. He honors the positive and negative responses to Himself as well as to the disciples when they are sent out on their short-term missions excursions (Mk. 6:10-11). Jesus also affirms the purpose of human life; life is not mere existence, but is intended to be lived for the glory of God (Matt. 6:33). Human life only possesses meaning in fellowship with God. Just as the writer of Proverbs spoke of the "fool," Jesus uses the fool in a parable to express the dangerous fate of a person who does not take God seriously, who believes that the meaning of life is bound up with physical security and does not reckon with the Creator of these good things (Lk. 12:13-21). Human dependence is based upon human createdness and the faith-response reflects our dependence. Whatever people do and plan presuppose the existence of a world, which has been created as good—by God. God is the one who provides the opportunities for human plans and activities and it is impossible for people to independently construct authentic moral values; the will of God is the real basis for true value and meaning. The human reality of dependence and freedom affirms the worth, autonomy and position of people in the created order. That is to say, people are not simply determined by nature and history; they possess inestimable worth and are superior to the universe—even the angels (Matt. 18:10). Jesus believes that the individual choices that people make originate from hearts of faith or hearts of unbelief.

**Affirmation 2: Jesus believes that the fallen condition of creation and fallen condition of the human person are the unfortunate results of wrong choices and originate in unbelief.<sup>3</sup>**

Adam made a bad choice and his followers have subsequently made bad choices, misused freedom and have perverted the original intent and design of God. God's risk of creating free human beings turned out badly. We think of the advances in technology and the freedom we now have to communicate around the world through the Internet, which is a good thing to promote human community. And yet, as human beings, we pervert the Internet through illicit chat rooms, opportunities for gambling and family break-up, and

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<sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*

<sup>3</sup> The writer is indebted to portions offered by Philip Yancey for the general rubric of several affirmations..

the dissemination of pornographic materials. With our human gifts, we find the energy secret in the atom and can harness its power for electricity and healthy uses of radiation; yet, we also are capable of destroying our planet several times over with the atom bomb. Medical scientists work with the genetic code and the mystery of DNA, for positive purposes, and yet, that very purpose is used for the destruction of life in the womb and the aging population. With each advance in understanding and knowledge, we raise questions, which we are unable to properly answer, e.g., cloning of humans, which has just been allowed in England; thus, the new issues of bio-ethics raises some fundamental questions. And we are also aware that we do not possess the tools to answer adequately the questions.

Faith reckons with the sober recognition of the real source of defilement—the human heart. Using story-parables, Jesus underscores that the only real position of standing before God is the recognition of our sinful condition, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner" (Lk. 18:13). The human person is able to stand only when the grace of God is the sole determinant of human existence; humans are utterly sinful and desperately need the grace of God. In the Parable of the Stomach and the Heart (Mk. 7:14-23), Jesus argues that the real source of defilement is the human heart; people—not things constitute the source of human uncleanness. Things cannot be religiously unclean or clean but are religiously neutral; thus, persons cannot be defiled by things, but can only be defiled by other human beings or by themselves, as by acting out of a heart that is defiled. In either case, defilement issues from a defiled heart. Numerous parables presuppose and express the fallen condition of the human person, e.g., two out of three people pass by the wounded traveler on the road to Jericho (Lk. 10:31-33). As far as the priest and the Levite on the road to Jericho, their evident fear and inability to identify with human misery—must mean the absence of faith. Children in a market-place are spoiled and are unable to be satisfied (Matt. 11:16-19)--Jesus likens His generation to the whining children. In His Parable of the Return of the Unclean Spirit (Matt. 12:43-45), the generation is likened to the last state of one who had been exorcised; it actually invites demons back in, which obviously will lead to a worsened condition. Other parables such as the Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Matt. 21:33-46) narrate the sad history of the shameful, abusive and murderous treatment of God's messengers by God's own people. The abusive treatment merely expresses the sordid condition of the human heart, which has rebelled against divine loving provision and is climaxed by the brutal murder of the Owner's Son. Without the faith-response, the human condition worsens. Thus, for example, the religious leaders perceive that the Parable of the Wicked Tenants was spoken against them; yet, they begin to enact the murder of the beloved son, noted in the vineyard, scarcely aware of their tragic deed and consequences of that deed.

In addition to the fallen condition of people and their struggle with faith and unbelief, people also must contend with an enemy who wreaks havoc, destruction, death; this enemy seeks to prohibit or inhibit the faith response. In some of the parables, Satan works in an insidious and deathly manner; Satan is pictured as a bird, who devours the seed that inadvertently falls along the beaten path (Matt. 13:19); the Evil One also surreptitiously sows a bastard wheat that grows alongside the real wheat (Matt. 13:38). This personal adversary aligns himself with people who work at cross-purposes with God (Mk. 8:33). In Jesus' parable of the Strong Man and Stronger One (Mk. 3:27-29), Jesus assumes the reality of Satan's kingdom; it still stands and is still strong, even though the

conclusive "binding" has occurred through the ministry of Jesus. Through the parable, Jesus says, "You should have realized that no one can enter the Strong One's house and ransack his goods, unless one first binds the Strong One. And only "the Stronger One" (i.e., Jesus) can do this (cf. Mk. 1:7). It is His power that enables the seventy or seventy-two disciples to win a great triumph over the Evil One (Lk. 10:18). We find the paradox that the Strong One is bound and yet is still strong. Satan falls like lightning when the disciples are sent out on mission (Lk. 10:18). Yet the Devil's power continues for the disciples forsake Jesus in Gethsemane (Mk. 14:40) and the chief disciple denies Him (Mk. 14:54, 66-72). And one can only conclude that a personal enemy is responsible and continues his destructive work upon people in their fallen human condition and fallen creation; this person continues to work directly upon people through possession, illness, death and seeks to lead people away from the faith-response.

**Affirmation 3: Jesus introduces the new relationship to those who believe.**

In the midst of fallenness, Jesus offers genuine fulfillment to people when He offers Himself in relationship. The fulfillment of creation and the human person is found in the person and work of Jesus; He fulfills the human longing for relationship with God in His Kingdom. The Incarnation involves the supreme condescension and self-limitation of God to human existence within history; the Incarnation means far more than the slicing of history into two parts. God intentionally limits Himself; His Son must learn how to understand and use words, memorize a Hebrew alphabet, will skin his knees, be born without bladder control, learn how to walk, learn how to obey God, be responsive to His human "parents," and then endure rejection through the very people who are the unbelievable object of God's love. The Incarnation is climaxed by the horrible spectacle of a public crucifixion, wherein the weakness and love of God are publicly exposed. God proves His love for His people through an exposed and vulnerable heart, in weakness and trembling. He offers Himself, both to those who will believe and those who will reject His supreme offer of fulfillment.

In His preaching, parables and actions, Jesus announces that the longed-for Rule of God has arrived; thus Jesus proclaims the "good news" (Mk. 1:14-15). God is at work in Jesus in a special way and Jesus intends to make God real to humanity. And He aims at the faith-response from the people. Jesus proclaims through His words and works that God is at work, establishing His reign upon the earth. All of His words and works are directed with concentrated force on the affirmation of God's rulership and love, and the personal response to the deep fulfillment of human longing, which comes through Jesus. Now is the hour of which the prophets foretold as "the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are being cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are being raised up, and the poor have the good news preached to them" (Matt. 11:5). In the future transformation, sickness, death, sorrow, demon-possession and sin will disappear; however during Jesus' ministry, relatively small numbers of people were healed and those who were healed, received their healing only for their lifetime. They would eventually die and become victims of the fallen human condition and the fallen condition of the created order. The people, who were healed or exorcised or followed in committed discipleship, were not the full manifestations of the Kingdom of God in their bodies or souls. The Parable of the Mustard Seed explains that the event, which occurs in the ministry of Jesus is

quantitatively and qualitatively like the incredibly small seed, which will become a large tree, already symbolized in Daniel. This tree, i.e., Kingdom of God, would span the entire earth. Through the very unlikely ministry of Jesus, the Kingdom of God makes all things new. In the ministry of Jesus, the Kingdom does not come through a visual and flashy display of power; rather the ministry of Jesus is like the hidden activity of the sower. People are offered the new relationship with God.

Numerous sayings of Jesus allow us to sense His perspective. The Beatitudes, in particular highlight the wonder of God's new day in the Kingdom of God. Matthew's first beatitude promises a future share in the Kingdom of God for those who are poor in Spirit (5:3), while Luke's beatitude promises the future kingdom to those who are described as simply poor (Lk. 6:20). The next beatitudes promise satisfaction for the hungry and comfort for those who sorrow. The Rule of God is inextricably bound up with the quelling of hunger and the gift of comfort as well as the satisfaction for those who are thirsty. The Kingdom of God promises laughter for those, who now mourn and weep. The Beatitudes reflect how the Kingdom of God is perceived and experienced through the varied needs of human existence: comfort for the ones who mourn, hope for those who feel dispossessed, joy for the sorrowful, satisfaction for the needy and hungry, laughter, mercy and the privilege of being sons and daughters of God.<sup>4</sup> The satisfaction that Jesus provides is all-inclusive; the dawn of the Kingdom of God brings with it the satisfaction of both the physical and spiritual needs of God's people. The end-result at the time of the transformation, will be a new world without need, without sorrow, without pain or suffering—nothing but the ultimate satisfaction of God's people—a world of peace, righteousness, proper relationships and eternal comfort (Rev. 21:1-5). The Kingdom of God means the personal activity of God on behalf of His people and it occurs wherever and whenever God, through Jesus, encounters people and draws them into fellowship with Himself. It means that God overcomes sorrow and disappointment and hunger; the ultimate expression of His compassion lies in His acceptance of each person as a child of God—as a son and as a daughter. The Kingdom comes in the context of a world of suffering, hungering and death, in a way that is independent of the ongoing fluctuations and ambiguities of human existence.

In the Synoptic Gospels, what Jesus offers is the new relationship—with Himself and with God. Jesus' stated goal is affirmed in the Zacchaeus story, "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Lk. 19:10) and is expressed in numerous parables (e.g., Lk. 15). Clearly, Jesus intends to redeem and restore the bankrupt condition of people. And He does so by giving Himself unreservedly to people, with the full awareness of the ridicule and insinuations that He would bring upon Himself as a "glutton, drunkard, and friend of tax-collectors and [publicly acknowledged] sinners." He offers Himself in a new relationship. This self-effacing gift of Himself is most notably expressed in the words wherein He institutes the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, a supper, which anticipates the redemptive work on the cross the next day:

"This is my blood of the Covenant that is shed for many" (Matt. 26:28; Lk. 22:20)

"I lay down my life for the sheep" (Jn. 10:15)

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<sup>4</sup> Leonhard Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament, Vol. I*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1981), p. 68.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (Jn. 12:24-25).

Jesus came to introduce the new relationship to the "world" (κόσμος), the total of created persons who are in rebellion against God. This tragic context is highlighted by the Fourth Evangelist in the opening prologue, "He came unto his own (things and people), that He had been instrumental in creating—but tragically, "His own subjects (people) did not receive Him" (Jn. 1:11). The truth is that Jesus was dynamically involved in the creation of the "world"; thus, "the world" is His rightful domain and legitimate sphere of authority, even though the subjects of this domain are unreceptive and disobedient. The Parable of the Wicked Tenants emphasizes the legitimate claim of God over the vineyard and its tenants and His rightful expectation of fruit from this vineyard. However, the tenants do not respect the owner's claim over the vineyard, but reject and abuse the various messengers who are sent for fruit. In a climactic way, the tenants reject and kill the Son and Heir of this vineyard (Mk. 12:7; Matt. 21:38; Lk. 20:14). In a real way, the rejection of God and His claim over His people is not caused by human weakness, ignorance or casual neglect but by gross distortion and violence, expressed most vividly through the murder of the Son in the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. Even the religious institutions belong to the world and thus, are worldly in attitude and action:

And all the people answered, "His blood be upon us and on our children" (Matt. 27:25).

The High Priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar" (Jn. 19:15).

Out of the disintegration and perversion of the old, God initiates a new thing, which is unrelated to the old perishing age (Matt. 11:12; Lk. 16:16). Jesus introduces the new relationship in the context of the world and creation in its fallenness. The old religious, political and civil institutions would be replaced by the affirmation of the presence of the Kingdom of God (Mk. 1:14-15); it is like new wine that would rupture the old wineskins (Matt. 9:17; Mk. 2:21; Lk. 5:38). When Jesus speaks of His own death, He calls it the inauguration of a New Covenant (Lk. 22:20); when He speaks of the new commandment of love (Jn. 13:34) and the higher righteousness (Matt. 5-7). The newness that Jesus speaks of is not a temporal "newness," but a qualitatively new way of life that is essentially different from its predecessors. The old structures and institutions serve as the "raw material" from which Jesus proclaims the newness of the Kingdom of God. Correspondingly, His followers must not look back to the old (Matt. 8:21ff.; Lk. 9:59).

Jesus' physical movement by the Sea of Galilee leads to his observation of people at work in their vocation and is issued in a command or call, with a promise (explicit with Peter and Andrew; implicit with James, John and Levi). It is a call to the new relationship, which begins with a faith response; Jesus' call to discipleship is a challenge, which must be acted upon. The call is not to a one-time event of attaining a status, but to a relationship in which they will become something new by virtue of the new relationship. There are many references to Jesus in the boat with his disciples and the sea. The people who are called to be fishers of people are already fishers of fish; they use their nets to gather in fish. Their activity of fishing will carry over into their figurative vocation. Their future vocation is determined by: following Jesus, Jesus' important role is that of "making them"; it is a commitment to a process, a future goal that is in view, a fresh and creative work in the persons who are summoned. The call is not simply to

evangelism here but the totality of Jesus' creative and holistic activity as He reaches out to people in need. The first command, "follow me" is the initial necessary response (3:14). The call is to the new relationship.

This call, which is realized in the more formal appointment of apostles is a call to be "with Jesus" (3:14) and involves several things: 1) seeing the works of Jesus and His beneficent activities on behalf of people, 2) hearing and learning the words of Jesus as He instructs the Twelve and others, 3) becoming involved in mission through verbal proclamation and action for the well being of others. This formal appointment will be realized in the growing life of discipleship. They will become primary witnesses to Jesus; they will grow in their personal trust in Him. In Mk. 4:11, the disciples are marked out specially by their reception of the "mystery of the Kingdom of God." They have received the mystery, although they scarcely grasp the reality that the coming of the Rule of God has already occurred in the person of Jesus, His words and His works—all in advance of its apocalyptic manifestation (future transformation). Jesus is the one who initiates the new relationship—the mystery is given to the disciples. The "mystery" (μυστήριον) includes the revelation of Jesus' Messiahship, God's kingly rule fulfilled in Him and yet to be consummated in the future, an understanding of the cross (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34) and the glory of the resurrection (8:31; 9:31; 10:34). The transfiguration is a prophetic revelation of His future glory and position—the meaning of which, will not be understood until the time after the resurrection (9:9). Meye notes:

What is *the* secret that the disciples guard? The whole appearance of Jesus constitutes the mystery or secret . . . Unfortunately, the word "secret" is misleading from the start, for the secret is a secret to be revealed. A mystery is that concealed from all but now disclosed to some through divine revelation. Jesus is the mystery. Jesus' way to the cross is a mystery. His glory and resurrection are a mystery which, Mark's Gospel shows with full clarity, is revealed to the disciples, the Twelve.<sup>5</sup>

Although the disciples, similar to the crowd, do not understand the mystery at this point, they are still marked out by the fact that they are the special recipients of the revelation of this mystery (4:11). So much of Jesus' public teaching is parabolic in genre (4:10-13, 33-34) but the disciples are privileged with the mystery in contrast to the "those outside," i.e., the crowd:

"To you the mystery of the Kingdom of God has been given;

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<sup>5</sup> Robert P. Meye, *Jesus and the Twelve*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968), p. 135.







Mark's Gospel is characterized by the revelation of the incredible mystery granted to a very small group of people who do not understand at the time that the mystery *is given* (δέδοται divine passive, i.e., "God has given"). It is also clear that understanding will follow in due course. Further, this small group of people will be the company from which the "good news" will proceed into the world.

In the various narratives that follow, the disciples will witness Jesus deep concern, activity and preaching for people in all dimensions and contexts: demon-possessed (1:21-28), a fevered mother-in-law (1:29-31), sick and possessed (1:32-34), (1:38), leprous (1:41-45), paralytic and needing forgiveness (2:1-12), society's "low-lives" in need of acceptance and table-fellowship (2:15ff.), withered hand (3:1-6), spiritual needs of the masses (3:7-13). His disciples are to reflect the same concern, the same positive attitude towards others—for their physical, emotional and spiritual needs. The disciples are present when Jesus enjoys table fellowship with tax-collectors and sinners (2:15ff.) and they are also expected to manifest a concern that others be fed (6:37, 41ff.; 8:6). As fishers of people, they are to be concerned with the people to whom they minister; they are to meet the needs of others in a similar way.

In Mark's Gospel, the call-narrative (1:16-20) and the formal appointment-narrative (3:13-19), there is a clear link to be found with the verb "to do/make" (ποιέω). In 1:17, Jesus says, "*I will make*" (ποιήσω) you to become fishers of men." In 3:14, Mark states, "And *he made* (ἐποίησεν) twelve . . . ." It is the creative activity of Jesus in "making" disciples that binds the two narratives together. That is to say, the purpose of the call is realized in the formal appointment of the twelve. The verb "make/do" is also used when the disciples report back to Jesus of all they had done on their short-term mission trip, "And the apostles gathered together around to Jesus and announced to him all the things '*they had done*' (ἐποίησαν) and taught" (6:30).

The initial call of the disciples (1:16-20) is formalized into an appointment as "apostles." As Mark records this appointment, he notes the three-fold purpose of their formal appointment: 1) to be with Him = a life of faith, 2) to be sent out to preach, 3) to have authority over unclean spirits (Mk. 3:14). The first purpose is significant; it is a call to the new relationship—they must be with Him, learn from Him by word, example and relationship before they could be sent out in mission (cf. 6:6b-13). By virtue of the new relationship, they are in the process of transformation, albeit in their context of fallenness. Their work is similar to the work of Jesus: ministry of the word and manifestation of authority in the exorcisms. In 6:7, they are given authority over unclean spirits and therefore to cast out demons—which they perform (6:13). In addition, the disciples also "heal" (6:13) and "teach" (6:31). The first purpose of the formal appointment was to "be with Jesus," which is then realized after the return of the disciples from their missions trip; they return to "*be with him again*" (6:30) = a life of faith. Jesus serves as a participating mentor to the Twelve; He is always personally involved in doing the work of His unique mission, yet He is ever so conscious of teaching the disciples who would "do and teach" (Mk. 6:30) what He had done and taught. The three blocks of material in Mark are bound together in a clear fashion and in a sequential manner; these are the "high points" that connect the other narratives as the disciples are observers and participants in His ministry.

Faith grows in the twelve when Jesus sends them out in mission and they return. The return of the twelve, subsequent to their being sent out in mission, is followed by their involvement with Jesus in the feeding of the crowd. Jesus says to the disciples, "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest awhile" (6:31). However, this purpose is frustrated by the response of the masses to *them*—including the disciples. Robert Meye notes the Marcan use of the third person personal pronoun that accentuates their new position with Jesus:

"many saw *them* going and knew *them*, and they ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of *them*" (6:33). The twofold mention (in the Greek text) of Jesus and the disciples, i.e., "them" (αὐτούς), is rather unusual in the Marcan narrative."<sup>7</sup>

The disciples are then drawn into active involvement in meeting the physical needs of the masses. Jesus challenges them with the impossible command, "You get something for the masses to eat" (6:37). Although they receive commands from Jesus, they are involved in the physical distribution of fish and loaves (6:41) and presumably the collection of the leftovers.

As the disciples live in the new relationship, they are also clearly involved in mission as it relates to the issue of suffering. Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi (8:29 par.) is followed by Jesus' first Passion Pronouncement. The Messiah's way is the pathway of suffering, rejection, death and resurrection. The verbal form, *he began* (ἤρξατο)<sup>8</sup> in connection with the complementary infinitive *to teach* is significant, in that Mark signals a new turn of direction, a pivot that is followed by two other similar passion pronouncements; the portion of text (including 8:27-10:52) that orients the readers to the forthcoming passion. The new relationship will also mean suffering and rejection for those who have responded to the gracious offer of the new relationship.

#### **Affirmation 4: Jesus believes that creation and the human person will be transformed.**

Jesus believes in a future transformation and intends that His listeners will also believe in the glorious future when God will restore, redeem and transform the created order as well as the human person. Through the parables, Jesus points to the inextricable link between present attitudes and action and the future transformation. There will be a transformation wherein God's original design will be realized. And Jesus argues that present behavior will impact the future, e.g., the way in which one treats "Jesus incognito" in the broken, will directly impact the future state of transformation (Matt. 25:31-46). In many of the parables, the End (ἔσχατον) is in view and is expressed with comprehensive language, e.g., a tree, which is the largest of all, with birds that nest under its branches (nations). Transformation is not simply relegated to the future; the transformative aspect of the rule of God has invaded the present. God extends Himself in unbelievable grace and wants to forgive the astronomical debt; clearly, He expects that such unheard-of-grace transform the individual in the present age (Matt. 18:21-35; Lk. 7:36-50).

Thus, the human person shares in all four aspects: original goodness, fallenness the new relationship and future transformation. A genuine faith-response must reckon

with the reality of these four affirmations; each element is vital and is inter-connected with the others and must be maintained in a creative tension and balance, if one is to be true to the Scripture and human experience. Different expressions in the history of Christianity reveal certain imbalances wherein one perspective is highlighted at the expense of the other two, e.g, religious humanism, which believed in the goodness of the human person and human ability to progress and be enlightened. Such a movement was silenced by the holocaust and the realization of the fearful human ability to produce weapons of mass destruction. Movements such as Puritanism highlighted the fallen condition of the human person, without the necessary affirmations of the positive intent and goodness of God's creation, the worth of the human person, as well as the possibility of the new relationship and transformation. Some types of religious fundamentalism simply look to the future transformation, with little thought to the inestimable worth of the human person, the joy of the new relationship with God and the provisional transformation that can be achieved in the present age through faith.

The Christian story insists that history is, in lurches and detours, moving to a resolution. Every spark of beauty, worth, and meaning that we experience in this strange existence glimmers as a relic of a good world that still bears marks of its original design. Every twinge of pain, anxiety, cruelty, and injustice is a relic of the fall away from that design. And every demonstration of love, justice, peace and compassion is a movement towards its ultimate redemption, the day when, in Paul's words, "the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God."<sup>9</sup>

The Good News comes to people who live in the context of these four truths amidst their ambiguities and paradoxes. I think of a woman named Joann, a faithful and devoted wife, a leader in the church, a woman's Bible Study leader, who prayed for people and saw some miraculous things occur in her ministry. But her husband become increasingly bitter and hardened and it was impossible for health in her marriage. And then came the day when she discovered homosexual material under her son's bed; upon further discovery she learned of an entire homosexual lifestyle that was part of her son's life. She came into my office with the agonizing questions of why. Why was it that her prayers of faith could be answered for women in her Bible study group and prayers for her husband received no answer and then, "How could God let this happen to her son whom she had committed to the Lord?" At times, disappointments with prayer and with our level of faith has a way of causing us to pray less so that we do not experience more disappointment. By way of contrast, "answered" prayer serves to bolster expectation in a God who genuinely responds to our human articulations of need.

Paradox is a built-in aspect of Christian existence and experience. And as people grow in their encounter with God, they need to come to terms with the element of mystery and paradox.

Throughout church history, Christian preachers and theologians have attempted to "pin down" doctrine and to reduce Christian faith and behavior to true-false questions, multiple choice exams, or recipes which need to be followed in sequential fashion, which will guarantee success. In the parables, Jesus speaks about surprising reversals, wherein the last are first and the first are last. He proclaims that the Kingdom has come but He also speaks about the Kingdom, which is yet to come. In His behavior and in several parables, He expresses the truth that God's grace abounds in contexts of the greatest sin.

Jesus says that life is found when life is lost. In the parables, Jesus proclaims the unmitigated grace of God and yet that very grace demands a response in terms of attitude and behavior. He commands faith; He encourages faith; He accuses people for a lack of faith and He honors the faith that people express. In His parables and His actions, He looks to the models, taken from the unlikeliest candidates, a tax-collector, a hated half-breed Samaritan, a dishonest manager, children and an apostate son. Jesus does not provide an easy road to follow; indeed He creates many new problems for people. We are perplexed when we read that Jesus effects a messianic sign upon a man at the Pool of Bethesda; we wonder at His selective purpose of choosing this one paralytic; why then does He neglect the rest of the needy people who surrounded the pool? We are then further stymied by the fact that this man gives no real evidence of faith; later in the narrative, we are sobered by the fact that this man is all too willing to provide the whereabouts and identity of Jesus to the hostile religious leaders (Jn. 5:13-15).

Paradox is a "built-in" feature of the Synoptic Gospels. For example, Jesus offers a yoke, which is proverbial for taking up a burden, and yet He promises that His yoke is easy and His burden is light. As we deal with the various paradoxes and seek to resolve them, perhaps the truth is not to be found in the middle between the two elements of the paradox but the ability to embrace both elements of the paradox as truth, without falling into ditches of extremism. Extremism occurs when one element of the paradox is held at the expense of the other. For instance, the issue of God's sovereignty and providence over human life is a truth, which is expressed in the Bible; yet, that very truth can give rise to a resigned fatalism, wherein people cannot alter the way things are or will be by their expression of faith.

When a woman gives birth to a profoundly retarded child, no "how to" book will remove the pain. Poverty and injustice do not go away despite our best programs. Kids in the most affluent suburbs shoot their classmates at school. Marriage problems don't get solved. Death snares us all eventually. And any faith that does not account for complexities such as these cannot last. Quite simply, being human is hazardous to health. Unlike angels, human beings get cancer, lose their

jobs, and go hungry. We need a faith that somehow allows the possibility of joy

in the midst of suffering as well as realism in the midst of praise.<sup>10</sup>

There are times where our own prayers and expressions of "faith" are really misguided attempts to control God. We cannot control His presence or His absence or specific answers to prayer and prayers, which we pray with the greatest of expectation. And somehow we feel that we need to possess an explanation of God's "inside track." Yancey provides the following scenario:

A man steps from a curb and narrowly misses being hit by a speeding car. "Providence was looking out for him," says an observer. A day later the man steps from the same curb and this time gets hit. After long months he recovers from serious injuries, "Isn't it marvelous how God spared him?" the observer remarks. Later, he steps from the same curb, is hit again, and this time dies from injuries. "Well, God saw fit to take him home."<sup>11</sup>

This comical set of scenarios merely indicates the mere human attempt to explain the divine purpose at work, wherein we "cover all of the bases." We seem to feel the need to explain various human conditions and experiences. Frequently, our faith resides in our own explanation than in the Living Lord, with whom we live in relationship.

### **The meaning of faith in the human context of the four affirmations.**

In a summary way, there are three broad categories in which "faith" is expressed in the Synoptic Gospels:

#### **1) *Belief and trust that God is acting in Jesus in a special way and that the hoped for Kingdom of God has come in His person.***

In a summary statement, Mark records the response that people are to make upon the declaration of the Good News: "repent and believe in the Good News" (Mk. 1:14-15). The content of the "Good News" is that "Time has been fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has drawn near." God's Kingdom is "on its way" with the radical newness that it brings. The kingdom intimates the rulership of God in the present time in the person, words and works of Jesus, anticipating the Day in which all powers will be subject to Him. Jesus desires to make God real to people. The intended response is that of repentance and trust that God is at work in Jesus in a special way. God has taken the initiative, and the response of trust means that the listener has really heard the word of the Kingdom and accepted its reality. In the Parable of the Soils, the term "faith" means the proper response to the Good News, "Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so they may not believe and be saved. Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away" (Lk. 8:12-13). There are other instances where the verb means to respond to the preaching of Jesus or John the Baptist and thus "be a disciple" (Mk. 11:31; Matt. 21:25, 32; Matt. 18:6).

#### **2) *Faithfulness.***

Jesus solicits an abiding faithfulness and fidelity in the midst of life's ambiguities, the type of persistence in prayer and commitment to God in the face of obstacles and difficulties. In two clear instances, Jesus refuses to respond to a supposed cause-effect

relationship between sin and suffering (Lk. 13:1-5; Jn. 9:2-3); instead, Jesus encourages the faith response irrespective of the experience of tragedy and the assigning of blame. In the Parable of the Persistent Widow and the Unjust Judge, Jesus concludes with the rhetorical question, "And when the Son of Man comes, will He find the faith [persistent faith] upon the earth?" (Lk. 18:8). In Lk. 22:31, the term "faith" occurs in the context of Jesus' prayer for Peter:

Lk. 22:31 Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon that your *faith* may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.

Jesus knows that Simon will fail and will deny Him, and yet Jesus prays for Peter's ongoing loyalty in the face of his denial. Peter can be characterized as a "loyal traitor," one who defects in the face of social pressure and acts in a traitorous manner. Nonetheless, Jesus prays for Peter's "faith," his loyalty and faithfulness in the midst of his own brokenness and failure.

### **3) *Trust in the miraculous power of Jesus to meet pressing human needs.***

Jesus summons a trust in Himself and His ability and will to meet genuine needs. From a purely human standpoint, these needs are incapable of being resolved. Jesus responds to people, who bring themselves or others to Him in the direst of circumstances: a woman who experiences a hemorrhage of blood for twelve years (Mk. 5:24b-34), Jairus approaches Jesus in behalf of his daughter who is at the point of death (Mk. 5:21-24a; 35-43). Disciples are afraid of drowning at sea (Mk. 4:35-41). In each of the desperate crises, Jesus honors faith or is keenly disappointed at its absence. In several instances, Jesus expects and encourages a miracle-working faith for the ones who are sent out in mission.

There are occasions where Jesus accuses the disciples themselves for "little faith" (ὀλιγόπιστοι).<sup>12</sup> The term "little faith" is tantamount to "no faith at all," even if the people are believers. By their response, they reveal that they have no practical confidence in Jesus' or God's ability to meet the practical need they encounter. They reveal the assumption that God is not "big enough" to meet their need. In each of the instances of "little faith," the disciples reveal that they experience no firm reliance in the power of God or Jesus to provide for the pressing need—physical provisions, healing, exorcism or deliverance from danger. A practical failure to place trust in Jesus is a sign of an unbelieving generation (Matt. 17:17).

a) *Trust in the involved and holistic concern of Jesus.* Jesus is vitally and personally involved in the situations of desperate human need; Jesus reveals no picture of a deity who has wound up the clock of the universe and lets it tick, but He is vitally involved with people in their pain. He is not remote or distant but very near. The people whom Jesus encounters need love, mercy, concrete help, forgiveness and grace—qualities that only a person can demonstrate. God's forgiveness of sinners, healing of the sick and exorcising of those who are demon-possessed—do not occur through a transcendent decree from on high; rather these wonderful saving activities occur through Jesus' personal involvement among people who experience pain and rejection. As Goppelt notes, "Jesus became the physician of sinners because, in his involvement with them, God the Father accepted them."<sup>13</sup> And Jesus looks for a personal trust in His saving involvement with people.

In the story of the healing of the paralytic (Mk. 2:1-12), Jesus surprises and disturbs the onlookers with His pronouncement of the forgiveness of sins. It is noteworthy that Jesus responds to the faith of the four friends; their faith is evidenced by their dogged determination to get their friend before Jesus, even if it means demolishing the roof, since there was no access available through the door. For the paralytic, perhaps there was an inner cry (not voiced) for forgiveness. While the audience anticipates the man's healing, Jesus declares what He had done for the man; He bestows the forgiveness of sins, and this is in direct response to the faith of the four friends. To substantiate His claim and authority to forgive sins, Jesus then pronounces the word, which results in the paralytic's healing (2:11). The forgiveness of sins and the physical healing are juxtaposed; together they underscore the saving involvement of Jesus in a person's wholeness. Both sin and paralysis (disease) reflect distortions of the original purpose of God in creation of the world and the human person; Jesus "makes war" on both fronts. Thereby He signifies the saving involvement of God in a holistic way, restoring and transforming a person who lives in a fallen condition.

Through His declaration, Jesus is acting for the Father and assuming a prerogative, which belonged solely to God. In the OT, God was gracious and forgave sins, but it was a function, which was God's alone to convey:

Exodus 34:6 The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed,

“The LORD, the LORD,

a God merciful and gracious,

slow to anger,

and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,

2 Samuel 12:13 David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the LORD.

” Nathan said to David, “Now the LORD has put away your sin; you shall not die.

Isaiah 44:22 I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud,

and your sins like mist;

return to me, for I have redeemed you.

Isaiah 43:25 I, I am He

who blots out your transgressions for my own sake,

and I will not remember your sins.

These texts and others affirm the direct and sole prerogative of God to forgive sins and often were associated with sacrifice, priestly activities of atonement in a penitential system of removing sin and guilt. However, in this instance, Jesus pronounces and imparts a direct forgiveness of sins. The authority, which He both claims and demonstrates, is amply confirmed in the healing of the paralytic, an act, which is observable by all. The authority to pronounce the forgiveness of sins parallels Jesus' antitheses in the Sermon on the Mount, "But I say to you." The holistic response of Jesus to the human need is in direct response to faith—the faith of the four friends. Faith is not simply here a confidence in a miracle worker, but a trust in the saving involvement of God in the person of Jesus. By way of contrast, the villages of Galilee, which reject Jesus are accused for a lack of repentance—in response to Jesus' saving deeds; conversely, those who seek Jesus' help were always addressed in the language of faith.

b) *Faith is humble and understands the authority of Jesus.* Faith also means the humble recognition that people are unable to build upon their human worth or possibilities. Just as the prodigal son says, "I am no longer worthy to be called your son .

. . ." (Lk. 15:18f.), so a centurion says, "I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word . . ." (Matt. 8:8, 10). These two individuals in great need could not build upon their own possibilities or presume anything; they could only deliver themselves over to the forgiving and saving power of God. In a similar way when a woman is healed of her affliction and then identified, she falls down before Jesus in a humble and vulnerable manner, telling Jesus the entire truth (Mk. 5:33). She presumes nothing and can only be honest with respect to her genuine need and covert actions.

The Syro-Phoenician woman, who comes to Jesus on behalf of her demon-possessed daughter, approaches Jesus with genuine humility. She refuses to be denied her request because of Jesus' rebuttal that it is not good to take the children's bread and give it to the dogs. Her witty response affirms that she recognizes that she and her daughter are Gentiles, i.e., "house-dogs," but nonetheless she presses in with her request, this time with an acute insight, "Yes Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (Mk. 7:28). In Jesus' initial rebuttal, He adopts the well-known Jewish designation of Gentiles as "house-dogs." Jesus says the dogs eat bread, which properly belongs to the children, and thus is taken away from them. However, in the woman's statement, the children are still fed; what the dogs eat are crumbs, which drop under the table (7:28). Her answer reveals that she acknowledges Israel's privilege and does not rebel against God's election of Israel. She does not seek to diminish Israel's privileges but she desires merely the crumbs, i.e., the "leftovers." She appeals to Jesus' kindness in an unconditional manner, with boldness and yet a corresponding humility. She presumes nothing; "Here is faith that grasps Jesus' promise—a faith that will not be denied."<sup>14</sup> In Mark's Gospel, Jesus grants her request due to her insightful response, "For such a reply" (διὰ τοῦτον τὸν λόγον); in Matthew's Gospel (Matt. 15:28), her request is granted due to her faith, "O woman, great is your faith" (ὦ γύναι, μεγάλη σου ἡ πίστις). Her persistence and refusal to be deterred is also mirrored by Bartimaeus, who refuses to be silent when the masses are annoyed by his loud yelling, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me" (Mk. 10:47). Jesus honors his cry for mercy and his persistent desire to experience the mercy of Jesus (vss. 47, 48). Thus, Jesus pronounces the words, "Your faith has saved you" and immediately Bartimaeus is healed from blindness and follows after Jesus (v. 52).

Through experiences of illness or demon-possession—on a personal level or on behalf of others, people come to the realization that they are "poor" (*anawim*).<sup>15</sup> They come to the realization that they are unable to rely upon themselves; they can only rely upon God and the realization that God is at work in Jesus in a special way. The human experience of critical need is the starting point of faith. Faith begins at the point of human need and through an experience of faith, one appeals to Jesus as the One who is vitally interested in making people whole. The miracles, which occur, reverse and transform present existence of the world in its fallenness. The healing miracles of Jesus signify the coming of the Kingdom (Matt. 12:28 par.) in a provisional way; people who are healed and exorcised are restored to wholeness of life and yet, they will still die. Those individuals, who are exorcised from destructive demons, will still die. Lazarus is raised from the dead as a sign and signpost of eternal life that Jesus bestows, and yet Lazarus will die again. Yet, amidst the fallen and broken condition of human life, the promise, which Martha knows and Jesus affirms is sure—there will be an utter transformation of life as we know it.

The account of the Centurion from Capernaum is an amazing story. The man seeks Jesus' help, expresses his own unworthiness and also evidences his buoyant confidence in Jesus' ability and readiness to help. What stands out so clearly is Jesus' concluding affirmation, "not even in Israel have I found such faith" (Matt. 8:10; Lk. 7:9). In the Synoptic Gospels, faith possesses very little objective content. The Centurion, outside of the covenant people of God, is credited with faith, while the pious Jews, who daily confess belief in the articles of faith are not credited with faith. What constitutes the faith of the Centurion? He expresses his own understanding of authority and correspondingly, the authority that Jesus possesses. He is a man under authority who knows how to exercise authority; he gives commands to those under authority and expects that his commands will be fulfilled without question. He is sure that Jesus is likewise able to give commands in this sphere of human need and those very commands will be obeyed. Further, Jesus does not need to be physically present to effect such an exercise of authority. The only thing that Jesus must do is to pronounce the verbal command and it is as "good as done."

This link between "faith" and an understanding of "authority" is a radical departure from Judaism, wherein faith is vitally linked with its objective content. The Jews believed and confessed twice daily the objective content (e.g., the Shema); they would proclaim the God of their fathers as their sole God who commanded a heartfelt response of love. However, here in this narrative, faith has no objective content other than an understanding of Jesus' own authority; for the Centurion, faith means a forgoing of self-guarantee and self-help and a trust in Jesus alone to give help in this concrete human need. In the radical pronouncement, Jesus means that the Centurion stands in an utterly unique position of responding to the divine pledge in Jesus. A Roman officer with many other Gentiles will sit at the Messianic Banquet, while the "sons of the kingdom" will be excluded (8:10-13). The participation in the blessings of salvation is irrespective of race or religion but depends upon a vital principle of faith in Jesus' God-given authority. God is at work in Jesus in a special way and thus, an army officer seeks God's help in Him. The pledge is similarly extended to the "poor" in the Beatitudes; they turn to Jesus in the midst of their poverty and brokenness as One who establishes His reign so rich in saving help.

Jesus descends from the Mount of Transfiguration (Mk. 9:2-13) to a valley, where He encounters a distraught and frustrated father, who has approached the disciples on behalf of his epileptic son,<sup>16</sup> who is demon-possessed; the disciples, who have formerly been sent out in mission, involving exorcism and authority over unclean spirits, are unsuccessful in their attempts to exorcise the demon from his son. Jesus' initial response is that of complaint, "O unbelieving (ἄπιστος) generation, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?" (Mk. 9:19). Jesus feels the pathos of the father in his narration of the pathetic loss of control when the son is thrown on the ground, foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth, becomes rigid, and is often thrown into the fire." Jesus senses the long-term trauma of the father as he has helplessly observed his son's seizures. When Jesus asks the father if he believes that Jesus is able to help his son, the man says, "I believe, help my unbelief." The same verb "to help" (βοηθέω) is used of both the requested help for the exorcism of the son (v. 22) and the help of Jesus with unbelief (v. 24). Similarly the verbs "to be able/can" (δύναμαι) and "to be strong" (ἰσχύω) are used of the inability or ability to effect something miraculous:

9:18 I asked your disciples to cast it out, and *they were not able* (οὐκ ἔσχουσιν)—refers to the disciples impotence and inability

9:22 But if *you can do anything* (εἴ τι δύνη)—refers to the father's belief in Jesus to effect the exorcism and express His compassion

9:23 *If you can* (εἰ δύνη)? All *things are possible* (πάντα δυνατὰ) to him who believes—refers to Jesus open promise both in the immediate and open-ended context.

9:28 Why *were we unable* (οὐκ ἠδυνήθημεν) to cast it out?

In Jesus' initial response to the father, He challenges the father with his counter-question, "As to your question, 'If you can'"—Jesus quotes the exact words to challenge him.

Jesus' various responses in the narrative are both strong and compassionate. He indicts the unbelief of the generation and yet He encourages the father in his struggle for faith and faith for the surrounding onlookers. He is gentle and refuses to coerce faith and is content to nourish the spark of faith, which is present, particularly in the father's response, "Lord, I believe . . . Help my unbelief."

"Previously (9:22), the father saw himself as simply a member of a family that was involved together with him in this heart-rending never-ending ordeal with their son, "Help us by having compassion on us (9:22)." But as he confronts Jesus' direct appeal to faith, the father discovers the issue to be unavoidably personal."<sup>17</sup> The troubled father is completely dependent upon Jesus' word; he confesses his faith but is also aware of the presence of faith's opposite, his unbelief. And he asks that his unbelief may turn into faith (9:24); thus, Jesus heals his son.

People are motivated by the popular response to Jesus and come to Him out of great personal need or the pressing need of another person who is dear to them. Faith occurs in the context of individual encounter with Jesus' person; people come to Jesus for help. Further, faith does not arise in the context of affirmation of orthodox confession and objective content. People simply believe that Jesus will guarantee His immediate saving help in their particular crises. In the later preaching of the Early Church, faith begins to assume objective content (I Tim. 3:9).

*c. Faith is gratitude.* In Lk. 17:11-19, Jesus heals ten lepers in response to their cry for mercy. All ten lepers are then directed to the priest to verify their healing (17:14) and as they are on their way to the priest, they are healed. They are not healed immediately, but are healed en route to the priest. But only one of the ten feels the inner responsibility to express gratitude to God and gratitude to Jesus, "he turned with a voice of great joy, glorifying God" (11:15). And surprisingly, this man was a half-breed hated Samaritan in an apartheid society. Presumably, the other nine were Jewish lepers; but they were all united in their common social brokenness—they were all ostracized lepers. When the man finds Jesus, he falls before Jesus' feet with extreme gratefulness for his healing. His response sparks Jesus' haunting question, "Where are the other nine?" The nine men went on their way, still in a healed condition, but did not choose to make the effort to return to Jesus to give thanks for their healing. After Jesus agonizes with the rhetorical question, "Where are the other nine?", he turns to the healed leper and says, "Your faith has saved you."<sup>18</sup> Clearly, the term "faith" here signifies far more than deliverance from the scourge of leprosy, since the ungrateful nine still were healed. The perfect tense, "has saved" clearly signifies that a much greater wholeness has come to this man than his cure from leprosy. He senses his debt to God (17:15) and to Jesus (17:16).

The term "saved" expresses something of the wholeness of life, which has come to the paralytic; it is expressed as gratitude for what he has received. For the healed leper, he is still incomplete until he returns to render thanks for the immeasurable gift that he has just received, while he was walking down the road. From Luke's standpoint, it is all the more remarkable that the leper is a Samaritan, who did the right thing, as did the Samaritan in Jesus' parable in Lk. 10:25-37. In a similar manner, the "sinful" woman of Lk. 7:36-50 expresses her greater "love" as gratitude for the forgiveness, which she has received on some prior occasion. The context and Parable of the Two Debtors requires that "love" in this setting means gratitude for the forgiveness of sins. Her extravagant and vulnerable expressions reflect the grateful heart for what Jesus has done for her, which is confirmed through Jesus' words of grace, salvation, acceptance, affirmation of the saving event ("Your faith has saved you" v. 50) and declaration of peace. Genuine gratitude lies at the very core of the story, parable and dialogue and is a vital part of the saving event.

4. *Faith can effect the miraculous, even do the impossible.* There are several variations of a mountain-moving saying:

### The Mountain Moving Saying

Mark 11:22-23	Matthew 21:21
22 καὶ ἀποκριθεὶς ὁ Ἰησοῦς And Jesus, having answered	21 ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς And Jesus, having answered,
λέγει αὐτοῖς said to them,	εἶπεν αὐτοῖς said to them
ἔχετε πίστιν θεοῦ. "Have faith in God.	ἐὰν ἔχητε πίστιν καὶ μὴ διακριθῆτε, "If you have faith and do not doubt,
23 ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι Truly, I say to you that	ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, Truly, I say to you
ὃς ἂν εἶπῃ τῷ ὄρει τούτῳ  whoever should say to this mountain,	οὐ μόνον τὸ τῆς συκῆς ποιήσετε, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῷ ὄρει τούτῳ εἶπητε you will not only do what has been done to this fig tree, but even if you should say to this mountain,
ἄρθητι καὶ βλήθητι εἰς τὴν θάλασσαν, "Be taken up and cast into the sea,"	ἄρθητι καὶ βλήθητι εἰς τὴν θάλασσαν, "Be taken up and cast into the sea,"
καὶ μὴ διακριθῆ ἔν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτοῦ ἀλλὰ πιστεύῃ ὅτι ὃ λαλεῖ γίνεται, and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass	
ἔσται αὐτῷ. it will be done for him	γενήσεται it will be done
Matthew 17:19-20	Luke 17:5-6
19 Τότε προσελθόντες οἱ μαθηταὶ τῷ Ἰησοῦ κατ' ἰδίαν εἶπον· Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said	5 Καὶ εἶπαν οἱ ἀπόστολοι τῷ κυρίῳ· Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said
διὰ τί ἡμεῖς οὐκ ἠδυνήθημεν ἐκβαλεῖν	πρόσθεσ ἡμῖν πίστιν.

αὐτό "Why could we not cast it out?"	"Increase our faith!"
20 ὁ δὲ λέγει αὐτοῖς He said to them,	6 εἶπεν δὲ ὁ κύριος· And the Lord said,
διὰ τὴν ὀλιγοπιστίαν ὑμῶν· ἀμὴν γὰρ λέγω ὑμῖν, ἐὰν ἔχητε πίστιν "Because of your little faith. For truly I say to you, if you have faith"	εἰ ἔχετε πίστιν "If you had faith"
ὡς κόκκον σινάπεως, "as a grain of mustard seed"	ὡς κόκκον σινάπεως, "as a grain of mustard seed"
ἐρεῖτε τῷ ὄρει τούτῳ you will say to this mountain	ἐλέγετε ἂν τῇ συκαμίνῳ [ταύτῃ]· you could say to this sycamine tree
μετάβα ἔνθεν ἐκεῖ, 'Move from here to there,'	ἐκριζώθητι καὶ φυτεύθητι ἐν τῇ θαλάσ σῃ 'Be rooted up, and be planted in the sea,"
καὶ μεταβήσεται· καὶ οὐδὲν ἀδυνατήσε ι ὑμῖν. and it will move and nothing shall be impossible for you	καὶ ὑπήκουσεν ἂν ὑμῖν. and it would obey you.
<b>Mark 9:28-29</b>	<b>I Corinthians 13:2</b>
28 Καὶ εἰσελθόντος αὐτοῦ εἰς οἶκον οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ κατ' ἰδίαν ἐπηρώτων αὐ τόν· ὅτι ἡμεῖς οὐκ ἠδυνήθημεν ἐκβαλεῖ ν αὐτόν· 29 καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· τοῦτο τὸ γ ένος ἐν οὐδενὶ δύναται ἐξελεῖν εἰ μὴ ἐν προσευχῇ. And when He had entered a house, His disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer."	2 καὶ ἐὰν ἔχω προφητεῖαν καὶ εἰδῶ τὰ μυστήρια πάντα καὶ πᾶσαν τὴν γνῶσιν καὶ ἐὰν ἔχω πᾶσαν τὴν πίστιν ὥστε ὁ ρη μεθιστάναι, ἀγάπην δὲ μὴ ἔχω, οὐθ ἐν εἶμι. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.
<b>Gospel of Thomas 106</b>	<b>Gospel of Thomas 48</b>
When (ὅταν) you make the two one, you shall become sons of Man, and when you say: "Mountain, be moved," it will be moved.	Jesus said: If two make peace (εἰρήνη) with each other in this one house, they shall say to the mountain: "Be moved," and it shall be moved.

We can note the following *similarities*:

1. Faith is mentioned in all verses (except the Gospel of Thomas) as the necessary condition.
2. Faith is described in terms of an amount.
3. Faith is expressed through a command (absent in I Cor. 13:2, but perhaps is assumed).

4. The result is that something very large is removed, which is impossible from a human standpoint.

The *differences* are as follows:

1. The way in which faith is introduced: Matt., Lk., Paul, GT—all contain a conditional clause, while Mark introduces faith with a solemn exhortation—"have faith in God" (Mk. 11:22)
2. The amount of faith is different: Matt. 17:20—"as a mustard seed"; I Cor. 13:2—"all faith,"; GT—making the two into one or at peace with no mention of faith.
3. The tenses and persons of the command are different: Mk. 11:23—"whoever should say" (aorist with 3<sup>rd</sup> sg.); Matt. 21:21—"if you should say" (aorist with 2<sup>nd</sup> pl.); Matt. 17:20—"you will say" (fut. with 2<sup>nd</sup> pl.); Lk. 17:6—the unusual, "you would have said" (imperf. With 2<sup>nd</sup> pl.); GT—"when you say (106) or "they shall say" (48).
4. The place of removal is different: Mk. 11:23; Matt. 21:21—"Be lifted up and cast into the sea."; Lk. 17:6—"Be uprooted and planted (strangely enough) in the sea"; Matt. 17:20—"Be removed from here to there," which may be implicit in Paul and GT.
5. The object to be removed is different: Mk. 11:23; Matt. 21:21; I Cor. 13:2; Gospel of Thomas—all refer to a mountain; Lk. 7:6—sycamine—fig or mulberry.
6. The wording of the actual result varies: Mk. 11:23—"it will happen"; Matt. 17:20—"it will move" (cf. Also GT 106, 48); Lk. 17:6—"it would have obeyed you."

Telford makes an extensive argument for the "*life setting*" of this saying in the pericope of the demon-possessed boy (Matt. 17:20), but we are less optimistic about determining a single *life-setting* for all these variations. At best we can say that we have two sayings (mountain and sycamine), which may be been expressed in several variations in Jesus' teaching and the subsequent tradition of the early church. Perrin states, "Since a developing tradition does not sharpen and isolate metaphors but rather mixes and blunts them, we may assume that these two sayings have given rise to the tradition of faith 'moving mountains' in the Church than *vice-versa*, and there is good reason to accept their authority."<sup>19</sup>

In any case, the two sayings make exactly the same point: the inconceivable power of faith.<sup>20</sup> References are made to the Talmud in which the expression(s) means a spectacular miracle of making possible what seems impossible, or the solving of exegetical problems.<sup>21</sup> Dodd<sup>22</sup> and Telford<sup>23</sup> wish to apply this saying to the Temple Mountain, but the saying may best be regarded in the general sense of doing the impossible.

Both metaphors of uprooting trees and moving mountains have one point: the incredible power of faith to do the impossible. Faith is the condition, which is actualized in speaking, which results in an impossible feat. Ebeling notes, "The saying about the faith that moves mountains is of such elemental force, penetrates so deeply to the relations of being, and stands so completely alone in the world of late Judaism that it would be hard to find a ground for denying it to Jesus and considering it an anonymous

product of the church.”<sup>24</sup> The paradox of a tiny mustard seed and a vast mountain is similar to the paradox of the needle’s eye and the camel and brings out the point most sharply—the “impossible power of faith.”<sup>25</sup>

In Mk. 11:24, we encounter the motif of prayer, introduced by the expression, “on account of this”—which is found in two other places in Mark (6:14; 12:24) and is used with its full force, but not for the purpose of coupling stray logia. Because of the inconceivable power of faith, “all things for which you pray and ask (προσεύχεσθε καὶ ἀτεῖσθε), believe that you have received them, and they shall be granted to you.” The clearest parallel is found in Matt. 7:7-8, “Ask, and it shall be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock, and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks, finds, and to the one who knocks, it shall be opened.”<sup>26</sup>

## Synthesis

In the various narratives, story-parables and sayings, Jesus so clearly looks for the heart-felt response of faith. And in each instance, the summoned response of faith is contextualized. Our human tendency is to de-contextualize a saying or lesson from a story and generalize the saying or truth and apply it in such a way that is not sensitive to the general human situation, the historical setting, the literary setting, or the unique situation of an individual or community in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Given the fact that people live in a creative tension of the four affirmations: original goodness, fallenness, the new relationship and future transformation, it is inevitable that the experience of faith likewise must grapple with these four truths. A theological position, which simply looks to the End for resolution and transformation, reveals an assumption that God is not really interested, capable or willing to effect a provisional transformation of life in the present. Others who argue for “faith’s possibilities” assume a posture of a glib triumphalism, which fails to reckon with the paradoxical nature of our human existence in its fallenness nor with the the incredible transformation, which will occur with the Blessed Hope. The history of the Church has been characterized by numerous excesses and ditches. There are occasions, such as with some false charismatics in Matt. 7:21-23, where “miracle-working faith” is divorced from relationship with Jesus; thus it issues in the stern words, “I never knew you.” In this text, people claim charismatic giftedness and activity; however, they do not live in the new relationship with Jesus. Faith must never be separated from a living context. Each person has a “story” to tell and possesses an infinite number of variables, all of which directly impact the potential and possibility for a positive faith-response.

As we wrestle with the various paradoxes of our human condition, we also wrestle with paradoxes of faith. And doubt itself can be a friend of faith as we struggle with the profound human questions. We need to face the realities of our human conditions. Christians do live in poverty, become sick, develop far-sightedness—and all Christians will die at the rate of 100%. We need to realize that God is not primarily concerned with our creaturely comforts as if He is beholden to our demands. In magical religions, people seek to control their deity, while the Christian faith believes that our human will is to conform itself to God's will.

A recent issue of *Christianity Today* explored the issue of the “prayers” in the NFL after touchdowns as if God is committed to only one athlete on one team.<sup>27</sup> What is often implied is “The Gospel of Success.” The Tampa Bay Buccaneer, Trent Dilfer noted

that he does not expect faith to necessarily produce success on the football field. I tend to differ from some athletes in the NFL who have been very outspoken in their faith . . . I don't think that our success level dictates the amount we can glorify God. [the false assumption] the more successful I can be, the more I can glorify God, because now I can show the world that I serve a powerful God who can give me victory and great circumstances and blessing where he's not giving it to others. But as I search God's Word, I don't see him saying that . . . Scripture indicates that God calls believers first to be faithful and secondarily to develop 100 percent of what he has given them—whether they are athletes, business owners, spouses, parents, or any vocation."<sup>28</sup>

At times, Christians see a demon behind every traffic jam that causes a missed appointment, an angel behind every empty parking place; often the glib expression is used, "Man, I'm under attack." Some Christians operate with a verbal or hidden assumption that if their life goes along well, if they're happy, if God answers every request of faith they make, if their loved ones do not die, if they prosper and live the good life—then they will serve God, give to the Church and give themselves to "ministry." But what happens when there is no miracle? Both Jesus and Paul struggled with various obstacles and prayed for their removal ("cup," Mk. 14:36;"thorn in the flesh" II Cor. 12:8). Neither request was granted they resolved to commit themselves in faithfulness to God and to give themselves to Him without the tangible proof of God's intervention. We do not read that Jesus prayed that the hardness of the human heart would be softened; He reckoned with the hardness of the heart as a reality. He was also aware that His miracles ("signs") would serve to further the hardening process (Jn. 12:37-39). Moreover, He interprets divorce as a divine accommodation which keeps pace with the hardness of the human heart; at the same time He leads His audience back to the original purpose and intent of God in creation.

When Jesus sends out the disciples in mission, He anticipates that they will face rejection. Yet He encourages His disciples to be undeterred in their mission. He grieves over the hardness of Jerusalem, "O Jerusalem, O Jerusalem . . . how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing" (Matt. 23:37). He was well aware that people often make wrong choices, which merely serve to further harden themselves in unbelief.

In the midst of our complex and living relationship with God and unique circumstances we need a faith-expression, which allows for various principles, understanding, commitments, ambiguities and possibilities of faith:

- Jesus looks for the faith-response, honors the expressions of faith and is fully engaged with people in their various crises and seeks to deepen their faith.
- Jesus approaches people in a holistic manner, affirms their incredible worth and honors their freedom to make choices.
- Jesus offers the new relationship with God as a reality in the midst of a fallen world.
- Jesus responds to human brokenness, declarations of bankruptcy and need and provides provisional acts of grace to people in their crises.
- Jesus is aware of the future transformation and orients people towards the End.
- Jesus accepts people where they are in faith and life, encourages their response to Him and points them to their potential for greater things.

- ❑ Jesus encourages people in their own understanding of God's Kingdom as it is realized in His person; He summons them to trust Him and to be amidst the ambiguities of life.
- ❑ Jesus honors the paradox of humble faith and confident expectation in His authority. He affirms the power of the spoken word to effect what is miraculous.
- ❑ Jesus looks for gratitude as a vital part of a saving event and honors it as an expression of faith and salvation.

Those who say that they believe in God and yet neither love nor fear him, do not in fact believe in him but in those who have taught them that God exists. Those who believe that they believe in God, but without any passion in their heart, any anguish of mind, without uncertainty, without doubt, without an element of despair, even in their consolation, believe only in the God-idea, not in God.<sup>29</sup>#