



NO KING BUT GOD

Walking as Jesus Walked

Michael Manning

Can faith be an idol? Can the state grant freedom? What about wealth? *No King but God* takes up the revolutionary cry found on the lips of Jesus and his contemporaries in the first century to argue that we need the same desire to see God as King in all areas of our lives. From the marginal and prophetic perspective of the Isle of Man, and informed by a decade of pioneering work among the homeless, five contemporary idols are unmasked. The church is given a provocative challenge to embody an alternative. The response to the idols of faith, freedom, the state, wealth, and the individual is not right belief or special prayers, but the humble path of walking as Jesus walked. Soaked in scripture and hope, this is a wooing invitation into true humanity, painting a vision of a kingdom of peace and justice founded on the self-giving love of Jesus. It is a call towards, and a glimpse of, lives and a world where there is no King but God.

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Michael Manning is a coordinator with Graih, a charity serving the homeless in the Isle of Man. He lives with his family in a shared household.

“Don’t read this book if you’re not open to lifestyle changes! The author draws deeply on scripture and his experience with the marginalized to challenge Western Christians on our attitudes—especially our practices—regarding money, sharing, community, and hospitality. What we do might be more important—and more Jesus-centered—than we believe.”

—Phil Craine, Isle of Man

“Beautifully written, potently challenging, full of passion, unrelentingly practical, *No King But God* is a timely call to God’s people to live a truly distinctive life. The integrity of Michael’s life matches the prophetic challenge of his words. If ten people live out the challenge of this book, the world will be a better place. If ten thousand are shaped by its message, we will have a revolution of love on our hands.”

—Bill Leishman, Minister, Broadway Baptist Church, Isle of Man

“Michael Manning’s book issues a clarion call to repentance and renewal to Christians who are so embedded within Western materialist culture they fail to recognize their distance from the way of Jesus Christ. Clearly written, passionately argued, and powerfully illustrated, this tract for the times is a sign of a growing movement within the margins of a globalized world which offers hope for the healing of the nations and renewal of the earth.”

—David Smith, Honorary Lecturer, University of Aberdeen

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MICHAEL MANNING

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Introduction

No King but God

O sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth.
Sing to the LORD, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.
Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvellous works among all the peoples.
For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be revered above all gods.
For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
but the LORD made the heavens.
Honour and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.
Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts.
Worship the LORD in holy splendour;
tremble before him, all the earth.

Say among the nations, 'The LORD is king!
The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved.

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He will judge the peoples with equity;
Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
let the field exult, and everything in it.
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
before the LORD; for he is coming,
for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with his truth.

—PSALM 96

“NO KING BUT GOD!” was the cry that echoed with revolutionary fervor around the tumultuous land of Palestine in the century or so either side of Jesus’ birth. Zealous Jews knew that YHWH was God. They knew that one day he was going to vindicate his people. They uttered this cry as a prayer, as a challenge, as a shout of battle, and as an encouragement. Above all it was a hope and a longing that consumed them. Faced with the oppression of Rome without and the compromise and collusion of other Jews within various groups offered their answer. Some sided with the despised pagan overlords to keep religious, political, and economic power. Some withdrew to the desert to embody a community of purity and wait for their vindication. Some urged fellow-Jews to keep Torah rightly, in anticipation of and participation in YHWH’s coming. Some took up the sword against Romans and fellow-Jews and waged the holy war by which YHWH’s kingdom would break in. No King but God.¹

Into this political, social, economic, and religious maelstrom there was another voice. Another prophet telling the ancient Exodus stories of redemption, calling on people to turn around because YHWH’s kingdom was near. His claims clashed with the

1. On the historical and theological background of the first century see Wright, *New Testament and People*; *Jesus and Victory*; *Resurrection of the Son*; *Paul and Faithfulness*. See also Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*; *Paul and Empire*.

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others on offer and made him popular in some quarters, hated in others. As with all would-be revolutionary leaders at the time, he was crucified. This is what Rome did to those who opposed her. Another claim about YHWH's kingdom was crushed by the empire. The prophet was wrong.

Except that within a very short space of time, in lands far from Palestine, followers of this prophet were hauled before magistrates for "turning the world upside down." And the accusation against them? They claimed there was another king, apart from Caesar. His name was Jesus (Acts 17:7).

The heartfelt, aching longing expressed in the cry "No King but God" found powerful redefinition in the early church. They would have recognized and affirmed that longing even as they re-thought the very concepts of "king" and "God" around Jesus. There was no King but God, but Jesus looked very different from the gods and kings that so many imagined, worshiped, and followed. The claims of this new King likewise transformed every aspect of life: political, social, economic, and religious (although the ancient world knew nothing of such compartmentalized and truncated spheres of life). Something amazing had happened. The world had changed forever.

Psalm 96 stands in just this stream of longing for YHWH's kingdom. In a ruptured world the claims of God stand not just as claims *for* something but also *against* something. Throughout scripture we see God and his people naming, confronting, diminishing, and overthrowing the "idols of the nations." Anything that distorts or demeans God's good creation must be dealt with. Too often we set up the works of our own hands to worship. The idolatrous urge of humanity must be challenged. We become what we adore. The pain and oppression of a groaning people and a groaning creation must be judged, not in a condemnatory sense but in the joy that such a judgment of righteousness and truth and equity will bring. There remain many idols today and Psalm 96 is programmatic for the rest of this book. We will look at five contemporary idols—faith, freedom, the state, wealth, and the

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individual—and in each case we will see how they are challenged as God becomes King.

As we consider various areas of life we should remember that they are not discrete. We are not so much examining half a dozen separate areas as we are looking at a whole from many angles. All of these areas interact with and cohere with the others. They all contribute towards an expression of life where there is no King but God. This is by no means a complete examination of such a life, merely an attempt to indicate what may be involved. The cry remains a longing, but it is a longing fraught with questions and uncertainties rather than clear answers. At the same time, we walk, or stumble, on a path that may be narrow but has been walked before. There is one who goes with us, and we need not be afraid. I had intended to subtitle the book “a prophetic-utopian manifesto for the liberated life” but the image of walking, rooted in both activity and direction, has impressed itself upon me in the writing (quite apart from the initial subtitle being a technical mouthful!). This is about how we live and where we are headed. It remains, however, a work longing for liberation, in the belief that the clearer view we have of the good (the utopia) the better we can discern how God’s kingdom might be lived out in the present (the prophetic). This embodiment of prophetic living and truth is always in opposition to a world and a church awash with idols, but there is a liberation. The longing of “No King but God” is very much a yearning and a prayer for my own life.

It will become apparent that the context in which we live and move and have our being is of immense importance, so a brief word on my own context. I have lived most of my life on the Isle of Man. My faith has been shaped in the Baptist tradition (in both agreement and disagreement!) in which I still stand. The island has many similarities with the UK but there are some important differences. The stretch of water engenders a sense of separation from the UK that leads to both backwater isolation and the freedom to do things differently. The fact that the island has its own government is a case in point. We inhabit a different political framework

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from the UK that brings independence, yet the febrile politics of small communities easily lead to corruption and inertia. This plays itself out in many areas of life, where the fact of a small society means that it is difficult for new ideas to gain traction. The (dis) economies of scale often lead to the maintenance of the status quo, as minority views on an island can sometimes be just a handful of individuals easily ignored. Change can be difficult. At the same time, when change does occur it can happen with astonishing speed and affect a far larger part of society than can happen in larger polities. On a small island small actions can lead very quickly to big differences, so the potential for wide-reaching change is great. The island's society has been powerfully influenced by the offshore financial sector for the past few decades, an area that we will consider in a later chapter. We have many of the same social problems as the UK, but on an island scale. This means that problems are often more hidden, denied, or avoided than recognized, uncovered, and addressed. The lack of plurality in the media and civic society can have a deadening effect on debate.

Perhaps the greatest influence on me, and my defining context, has been my involvement with Graih.² Graih is the Manx word for love and it is a charity that has pioneered services to those who are homeless or in insecure accommodation on the island. In this it has sought to bring to light some forgotten areas of Manx life and to at least attempt a response. The men and women I have met and have had the privilege of building relationships with through Graih have been a theological furnace that has fired my life and faith. Their stories and lives, often unheard and unseen on the margins of society, have spoken truth to me and challenged every area of my life. Many of their stories appear in the following pages, although names have been changed. We will look at the importance of the poor embodying truth and challenging us in a later chapter.

In these two contexts—the Isle of Man and Graih—this is a book written from the margins. In such contexts we can often

2. www.graih.org.im

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glimpse things that the mainstream misses. The liminal—the marginal and those on the edge—have a prophetic perspective. If there is even a hint in the following pages of what life in the kingdom of God might look like then part of my longing will have been answered.

There is no King but God.

Chapter 1

The God of Obedience and the Idol of Faith

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

—MICAH 6:8

Now by this we may be sure that we know him, if we obey his commandments. Whoever says, 'I have come to know him,' but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist; but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection. By this we may be sure that we are in him: whoever says, 'I abide in him,' ought to walk just as he walked.

—1 JOHN 2:3–6

JOHN, AS AN OLD man writing to his beloved children, is in no doubt about what lies at the heart of the Christian life. "You must walk as Jesus walked", he urges them. John, when pressed, goes straight to action as the determinant of whether one follows Jesus or not. It's not about belief, or statements of "knowledge" about

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Jesus. What matters is what you do. Which way you walk. Who you follow.

John has just opened his letter writing about the word of life, about fellowship, about joy. In the verses immediately preceding those quoted above he talks about Jesus being the atoning sacrifice for our sins. And not only ours, but the sins of the whole world. He will go on to write what is arguably the greatest chapter on love in the scriptural canon, tying it expressly to practical love shown to one another.

The heart of these verses, and the heart of this book, points to a new way of life that is founded on walking as Jesus walked. It is only when we walk as he walked that we can say that we know Jesus. It is only when we walk as he walked that we can “abide” in him. This walk is based, above all else, on love, a love exemplified in Jesus. The very love of the divine is shown through human obedience. John can obviously hold together what so many after him have tried to pull apart: belief and action, divine grace and human obedience, salvation and assurance based on practical deeds rather than abstract faith.

John stood in the tradition of scriptural writers who always knew that it was what you did that mattered. YHWH’s people were called for a purpose. God moved in revelation and redemption not so that individuals could have private spiritual experiences but so that God’s good, loving reign over all of creation could be brought towards fulfillment. The hope was never to escape to heaven (however conceived) when you died. The hope was that God would become King, that YHWH would dwell with his people, and that God’s judgment of justice and love would flood the earth. The Torah longed for the day when the people would obey YHWH with all their mind, heart, and soul (Deut 30). The Psalms echo with the yearning for God’s reign. The prophets have transformational encounters with YHWH and furiously denounce not only the idolatrous nations surrounding Israel but those within the community of faith who thought that possession of Torah or performance of cultic ritual in the absence of justice could save them. They attacked the comfortable assumptions of those who thought

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that because they believed the right things about God they were under no obligation to live an obedient life.

A prophet who saw through the deceit and idolatry of empty rituals and glimpsed God's heart would have agreed with John. What matters is to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.



Addicts come in as many varieties as there are people. Addiction knows no barriers of social class, wealth, education, family background, vocation, or personality. There are a complex set of factors that lead people into addiction and an equally complex set of factors that lead them out again.

Most, if not all, of the addicts I have spent time with over the years profess a desire to change. I have tended to see people at some of their lowest points, when addiction has stripped them of everything of value in their lives and is in the process of stripping them of life itself. People in such situations know what is happening; it has probably been obvious for some time that things are going wrong. In response to this knowledge addicts will profess a desire to change, whether because they actually want to or because they feel that such a profession is required of them.

Ian is caught up in his own rage and pain. The memories of years of substance abuse and the consequent breakdown of relationships are nursed close to his breast. The deaths of his children haunt him, re-lived again and again. The bitterness and anger fuel themselves and he descends into cycles of resentment, abuse, and self-abuse. In the midst of all of these wounds and all this chaos Ian always professes a desire to change. He believes that he needs to change. He believes that he will change. He believes that change is necessary, that he needs to stop drinking and get clean and find freedom.

Gerard is also an alcoholic. When I first met him his marriage had broken down, he'd lost his job, and he was homeless. The drink was stripping him of the last dregs of physical and mental health that he possessed. He was helpless in the face of a lifetime

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of drinking. He couldn't stop. Gerard, too, believes that he has to stop. He believes that he needs to change. He believes that change is necessary.

Ian has been in contact with many services. He has spent years talking to addiction specialists, years on prescribed medication to handle his mental health, years of access to resources beyond the imagination of addicts across the Majority World. Each time another place in a rehab comes up Ian professes again his desire and intention to change, his firm belief that he must change. And then he leaves after a few days, always with an excuse, and returns back to the addiction that may be horrible but is all that he has come to know.

Gerard went off to rehab too. He stayed the course and returned home and then relapsed back into drinking. He, too, remained firm in his belief that he needed to change. He stuck with the support groups. He got involved in various other activities. He continued to meet a counselor. Slowly, over the course of years, Gerard began to have longer and longer periods of sobriety. He discovered a freedom from alcohol that he never dreamed possible and that taste of freedom made him wanting more. Even though there are ups and down he continues to pursue freedom and make progress.

Ian's story about wanting to change starts to wear thin as the months turn to years and he refuses to do even the smallest thing that may lead to change. Gerard, on the other hand, finds himself drinking less and less and eventually becomes sober. They are both alcoholics. They started out looking and acting the same. They both said the same things throughout. The only difference was in what they *did*. One of them did want to change, and one of them did not.

Some years ago, following a baptism service where I had helped baptize a young man with whom I had had some involvement in terms of faith, a member of the congregation turned to me and said, "It must feel good, another one in the bag." The assumption

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was that I, and the church, could now breathe a sigh of relief. Here's another one who believes! Another one saved! We could turn our efforts to the next person who didn't yet believe "the gospel." And we wonder why we have a crisis of discipleship?

How did we get from John's passionate plea to walk as Jesus walked to this? That question is far beyond our scope here. Suffice to say that the grand Enlightenment project and the modernism to which it gave birth have cast a long shadow. Even those of us living in a post-modern world have inherited a set of abstract concepts from modernism that continue to shape our thinking, faith, and lives. Within this scheme things like "faith", "belief", and "religion" are squirreled away from, say, "politics", "economics", and "social and civic life." The former set are abstract ideas, private pursuits that may take one person one way, one another. They have very little bearing on the realities of daily life. Western Christianity, for the most part ceding the battle to this reduced and compartmentalized worldview, has only exacerbated the problem. The focus for so much "evangelism" and "mission" has been about getting people to verbally and mentally assent to some abstract statements about God, Jesus, and sin. The purpose of this, implicit or explicit, is for people to be sure that they will go to heaven when they die. This is a relentlessly individualistic ("my salvation, my relationship with God") and anti-creational ("the world's going to burn so why care about it, we'll be in heaven anyway") philosophy. The world of the real, the mundane daily world, the sin-sick, groaning world, can be left behind. It is of no ultimate importance, and therefore it is discarded. Actions are devalued and downgraded, at their very best seen as mere examples or proofs of the abstract belief that is deemed to have salvific importance. They are not less than this, but they are also much, much more. This is the point where the modernism of the Enlightenment and its heirs allies with the ever-fashionable Platonism (the ideal world is non-material) and Gnosticism (discover the divine knowledge within that will enable you to escape this evil, material world) that have for millennia denigrated this dirty, broken, and confusing creation. Abstract thought and belief are far more spiritual, far more real, than the

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mess we live with in our daily lives. What is Christianity about? It's about believing the right things about Jesus so that your sins are forgiven and you can, at some point, escape and go to heaven and live in bliss forever. This is a long, long way from "walking as he walked."

It is crucial for us to grasp the importance of the different conceptions of faith on offer in John and in much Western Christian thought. There is a radical difference between the two. We must remember that the word "radical" does not mean "crazy" or "mad" but rather "deep-rooted." Something that is radical goes right down to the root of things and affects everything else. That is why we start here, with the radical roots of a conception of life and faith and theology that will flower into every other area that we consider. Standing against the worldview of modernism (and the worldviews of much paganism ancient and modern) is the worldview of the people of God throughout scripture. We are not compartmentalized beings, with lives split into neat categories that we can then dissect without reference to all the others. Neither is there a hierarchy of concepts, as if abstract faith is somehow more important and therefore takes precedence over all else. We are whole persons and all our different parts interact with one another. When the people of God acted they were acting in faith. Their spirituality was political, economic, and social. Their view of God and his good creation was historical, bound up with the belief that this God had an unbreakable commitment to his creation and that he would one day put all things right. They had a history, a story, and it was going somewhere, bound up in God's story and his purposes for creation. This worldview differs in almost all respects from a common Western Christian one that focuses on individual salvation, the private pursuit of faith, and the ultimate escape from creation into non-material heaven.

Faith as currently used and understood has become an abstract idol, a shibboleth without meaning. The God we encounter in scripture and Jesus invites us into obedience, into a way of life, a way of living and knowing and being that affects everything else and changes everything. When God heard the cries of his people

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enslaved in Egypt he didn't say, "Just believe in me and soon you'll go to heaven where it'll all be better," but, "I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land." (Exod 3:8). Indeed, the Exodus itself is the classic and paradigmatic act of the God who liberates, thereby revealing his "name" in history and speaking of the very identity and character of God. This is a theme to which we will return. When the prophets uttered their anguished pleas to a callous people they didn't urge right beliefs, right concepts about who God was, but the concrete actions of justice and peace (Isa 58; Amos 5; Mic 6). Jesus didn't invite his disciples to believe in him and go through life as usual, but to "Follow me." (Mark 1:17). James wrote his famous, "Faith without works is dead." (Jas 2:26). John, as we saw, urged the church to walk as Jesus walked. Even Paul, often hauled up as a witness for the primacy of abstract faith, at the start of his greatest letter speaks of the "obedience of faith" (Rom 1:5) and goes on to urge transformation (Rom 12:1-2) resulting in practical deeds of love and mutual welcome (Rom 12-14) that will lead to unified and multi-ethnic worship of the one true God (Rom 15). In Ephesians, following a statement about faith being a gift of God rooted in divine grace, he mentions the "good works . . . to be our way of life." (Eph 2:10). The entire scriptural canon is relentlessly focused on this creation, on praxis, on concrete actions, on real life. As Jon Sobrino, a priest living for more than fifty years among the poor of El Salvador, says, "The mere verbal proclamation of God without action to achieve his reign is not enough, and orthopraxis must take precedence over orthodoxy."¹

Orthopraxis (right living/acting) takes priority over orthodoxy (right belief) not just because God is totally committed to his good creation, not only because it indicates and embodies orthodoxy, but because it *defines* orthodoxy. Faith actually has no existence separate from deeds; statements of belief have no meaning divorced from real life. Although the very split between abstract faith and action is in many ways an unhelpful product of modernism the primacy rests on the *following* of Jesus, on walking as he

1. Sobrino, *Christology*, 45.

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walked. The disciples leaving their fishing nets behind would have had plenty of beliefs about God, about what he was doing, what he had promised, and what they hoped he would do. Perhaps they had a fascination with this strange man talking about, and increasingly acting out, the ached-for kingdom. But they would have had no clue what was in store for them, or how radically Jesus would re-shape their lives and beliefs. Their beliefs were wrong, or at least mistaken. The only way to change them, for the disciples and for us all, was to follow Jesus, to act as he acted, to walk as he walked. In that process they found orthopraxis redefining their orthodoxy. In a virtuous circle praxis and belief fed into each other, sustaining, clarifying, and deepening one another. Right living both defines and is sustained by right belief. But they started with obedience.

This would seem so obvious, both from the scriptural canon and from any serious reflection on the nature of faith, that you would think it would be accepted. Indeed, I may be thought to be guilty of caricaturing mainstream Western Christian thought by representing it as defined by the idol of abstract faith rather than obedience. Of course we act out our faith, I hear the church cry! Of course it matters what we do! This only exemplifies that the point has not been heard. The point is not that abstract faith doesn't lead to any sort of good action, of course it does. The point is that this way of thinking and living is not scriptural. It is also duplicitous, for when pushed this position will yield its ultimate answer: what matters most is what you believe. I contend that this concept is found nowhere in scripture. The difference—and it is a vast difference—is one of *importance* and *priority*. In scripture praxis, what you actually *do*, is of the ultimate importance and of first priority. Paul, early in his great epistle, talks about judgment through deeds (Rom 2); he goes on to write about accountability to God (14:10–12). Elsewhere he talks about the judgment seat of Christ to receive recompense for what has been done in the body (2 Cor 5:10). Abstract belief, as important as that is and as umbilically connected to praxis as it is, is secondary and subsidiary. Western churches, passionate about spreading the gospel, give the lie to where their priority falls: we need to get people to believe

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abstract creeds first, then worry about messy praxis later (if at all). This is most obviously seen in the sentimental generalizations of what passes for discipleship, where the costly and radical following of Jesus is turned into a moralizing set of precepts that can be adapted to any and every context. It doesn't really matter what you do or how you live, as long as you're basically truthful, gentle, honest, give some money away, and are generally . . . nice. What you do with the rest of your money, or your job, or your home, or your possessions, or your leisure time . . . well, that's your business.

Unfortunately you just have to mention the idea (!) of the priority of a life lived to be met with howls of derision and suspicion, particularly from Protestant quarters and particularly from those terrified of the prospect of even hinting that we could "earn our salvation" by living a morally upright life. The hoary old faith versus works debate belongs far more to the concepts and controversies of sixteenth-century Europe than to scripture and Jesus. We are whole people, created as wholes, and we cannot and must not carve out false antitheses between abstract faith and life, between body and soul, between a non-material heaven and a material earth. Scripture knows nothing of these and instead opens us up to vistas more radical, more real, and more stunning than these stunted alternatives. The one who spoke of a city set on a hill and two men building houses was concerned with real life and real actions, not abstract belief or special prayers. Jesus knew that orthopraxis mattered because it defined orthodoxy, embodying and incarnating it. The converse is also true: how you live gives the lie to what you believe. Where your treasure is, that's where we find your heart.

One of the many dangers of worshiping at the idol of abstract faith is the delusion that it creates. Consider a handful of people: a Christian, a Buddhist, a Muslim, an agnostic, a humanist, and an atheist. For the most part, in Western society, these people look pretty much the same. They have similar jobs, similar patterns of consumption, similar life-trajectories, and aspirations. In fact, modern society really needs them to look the same, to get the society or state to share values, to integrate, to work together. The only

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differences we might note are some private pursuits: the Christian goes to services and mid-week groups, as does the Muslim; the Buddhist meditates; the agnostic enjoys museums and the humanist is passionate about football. Private pursuits and private clubs. From all their different viewpoints they believe very different things, of course, and can articulate their various abstract positions on where we came from, if there's a god (or gods), and where we're going. From the modernist faith perspective they're very different. From the scriptural perspective they're all the same. Their abstract beliefs are at best benign thought-experiments and at worst damaging delusions. From a scriptural perspective they actually believe something very similar: the importance of earning money, of owning property, of consuming, of employment or education or economic growth, of family. From a scriptural perspective they are homogeneous. None of these things may be wrong in and of themselves. There's nothing wrong with shared values and integration and looking after your family. What does matter is priority. Treasure. Praxis. Life. These hypothetical—grossly caricatured and generalized—individuals believe, and serve, what scripture would call idols, despite their varied statements of abstract belief. Again, the powers we tend to serve is a theme to which we will return. The important point to note here is that what we might call the theology of a worldview is defined and embodied by the praxis of those concerned. What you do shows what, or whom, you believe most, what you give priority to. Is a Christian a Christian who not only stops his ears to the cries of the poor of the world but continues to live in ways that keep those oppressive structures in place? “Lord, Lord, we cast out demons in your name.” And Jesus says, “I never knew you.” (Matt 7:22–23).

The language and priority of orthopraxis, of walking as Jesus walked, also subverts and sidesteps another modernist folly: the myth of objectivity. If we relegate faith to the abstract sphere where we can discuss it, question it, study it, propagate it, and preach it without too much reference to deeds then we can succumb to the delusion that we can appropriate faith from a supposed neutral ground. This is in fact where most people live and choose their

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“spiritual” options: a bit of all the things that seem good, whose ideas appeal to me, that attract me. I am a neutral observer, picking what I choose, like a supermarket shopper poring over the vegetable aisle. Or rather, I’m a discerning customer dawdling through the market, with various stalls setting out their abstract wares, sometimes in competition with one another, and inviting me to come and “believe.” This is folly. Every choice we make, and the ones that we don’t make consciously, incarnates a particular set of beliefs, a theology. Society itself holds and embodies a particular theology, a particular way of telling stories about the world and meaning and purpose and importance, that we live within whether we like it or not. This is as true for those worldviews that acknowledge a deity (or more) as for those that do not. We are constantly embodying what we believe, whether we give thought to it or not and whether we acknowledge it or not. It is telling that there is so much dissonance between what people *say* they believe, and may well *think* they believe, and what is actually defined as their belief through their *praxis*. This is inescapable. There is no careful, safe place from which to disinterestedly observe the options open for us. Faith, properly understood, is a continuous choice of action rather than an abstract belief. It is a choice shown most truly in what we do rather than what we say we believe. “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers and sisters, are liars.” (1 John 4:20). “Show me your faith without works, and I by my works will show you my faith.” (Jas 2:18b). It is the way that you walk that tells the world what you believe, not some set of verbally or mentally assented-to statements. It’s the way you live that defines the faith you hold.

When we shift the debate to the way we live and what we do we escape the sordid and sterile abstractions that have sullied so much Christian theology and mission. Instead of circular abstract debates trying to prove or disprove various bits of dogma or scriptural interpretation we find that the “proof” of any such creed or perspective is in the lives then lived, not the supposed coherence of an abstract argument. Instead of a fanatical insistence on praying a certain prayer, assenting to a certain belief, or making some

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one-off decision we find that Christian life is defined by walking in a certain way, by certain specific ways of life. On wider horizons we find that Christian engagement with the world is marked by praxis rather than abstract belief. Inter-faith discussion and disagreement rests now on lives lived—the fruit produced—rather than abstract beliefs or conceptions about God, the divine, ultimate meaning, and purpose. The strained relationship between faith and science, with some desperate to drive a wedge between them and others desperate to use one to prove the other, is radically relativized because what matters is how you live and not the theories you hold. The terms of the debate are firmly couched in the life you live and the deeds you do. There are doubtless many objections to this position but the point is that the proof of this or any alternative scheme is found not in arguments on a page but in the lives (and world) produced. It is the fruit that matters. Much of the troubled reflections in these pages have stemmed from the realization that communities supposedly confessing all the right abstract beliefs have yet produced awful, bitter fruit. Something is wrong, or at the very least misplaced.

If we have sidestepped the myth of objectivity, seeing it as a hopeless and arrogant idol, then it is important to note that we also sidestep subjectivity. The post-modernist, happy to collapse everything back to the self (itself then deconstructed) is as deluded as the modernist thinking that he has found the objective, disinterested ground. The Christian gloss on subjectivism is that attitude that reduces all matters of faith and life to “my relationship with God.” As long as my heart is right before God then nothing else matters. I make my moral choices in splendid isolation and private communion with my deity and it is for no one else to judge them or dare to call them into question. After all, I *feel* that it’s right. To the unscriptural backwaters and idolatrous follies of objectivity and subjectivity orthopraxis demands a focus on and priority of the life lived. Even those most committed to subjectivity eat, drink, and do something with their days, and therefore embody a faith-in-praxis that we can observe.

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There is a certain non-negotiable factor to praxis. You can approve or disapprove of my praxis (and therefore the faith it embodies) but you cannot deny what I do. You cannot deny the praxis itself. This is most true when we consider love, particularly the love of God in Jesus. The entire scriptural canon bears witness to the God who acts in love, a God so committed to his creation that he will personally bear the hostility and pain of the sin-sick world to reconcile it to himself. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus we have the supreme example of orthopraxis, the God who doesn't ask us to believe in an abstract truth but shows us what love truly looks like in the life that is most fully life. Perhaps this public aspect of orthopraxis is what Paul meant when he wrote that, "It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified!" (Gal 3:1). That is, in the life of the apostle the Galatians had seen the unmistakable marks of the new creation inaugurated by and in Jesus. Paul's praxis showed them what it meant to follow a crucified Messiah as their King.

There is no better argument or critique of the status quo than orthopraxis. Instead of exhausting ourselves in an endless attempt to get people to believe certain things we are freed to focus on the good, on the kingdom, and allow our lives to shine in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation (Phil 2:15). If we want to persuade people that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life then we must be people embodying truth and life as we walk that way. This leads to a model of engagement and critique that is relentlessly focused on the good. I do not need to argue with you, to try and persuade you with abstract arguments or knowledge; I need to act justly, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God (Mic 6:8) towards his kingdom. This is the cast-iron credibility of praxis. If we are correct and this way in and of Jesus does indeed lead to truth and life then this will be obvious to all. Of course, scripture is under no illusion that this will mean widespread acceptance of the gospel, quite the opposite in fact. It will more often mean hostility and aggression from those who stand condemned not because they believe something different but because they are threatened by the truly human lives of the redeemed people. Though the

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nations malign us, they won't be able to deny our good deeds (1 Pet 2:12). The ambivalence of the response to the gospel—the proclamation and embodying of Jesus as king—is exemplified in Acts 5:13, where people are both attracted and terrified by the church. There is something joyous and something threatening about a way of life that promises to be in the process of setting all things to right at last. At a stroke we see the desperate need for a fresh emphasis on praxis, on lifestyle, on deeds, as *the* defining element of Christian mission and discipleship. We have huddled for too long in small groups studying scripture and increasing our abstract belief and knowledge. The call for simple but demanding—indeed, cruciform—obedience has gone unheard for too long.

Orthopraxis is the only thing that gives credibility but it is also the only thing that gives authority. There is a paradoxical power in the humiliated praxis of the cross. The powers and those formed by them may rage against it but they, even they, will find that love never fails. The sole source of all our credibility and authority lies in what we do. Not what we believe. Not what we say. Not the social or civic positions that we occupy. What we do. The way we walk. Authority and credibility are earned through the hard, mundane faithfulness of service. This is what Jesus points to, not only in his life but also in his words about true leaders becoming slaves (Luke 22:24–27). Slavery is what Jesus took upon himself (Phil 2:7) and we are invited to share in and imitate our King (Phil 2:5). In a world where almost all conceptions of authority carry with them the threat of violence and coercive power the orthopraxis of slavery and the cross stand in marked contrast. This should not surprise us, for we all know that those who have the power to move us most in life are those whom we love and who love us. Fear and violence, although universally used to enforce social conformity, find that they cannot in the end have power over us. Only those who love and live in love can speak into broken lives and a broken world the word that restores to fullness of life. Here again we see Jesus as the one who can command obedience only because he is our slave, because he loved so fully. Paradoxical power and undeniable credibility and authority.

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The first-century world was just as awash with competing ideologies, powers, theologies, and answers to life's questions as the twenty-first century one. Jesus and the early church knew that the only thing that could hold you steady to the kingdom of God was praxis. When you're wondering who is true and who is false, and people are saying they believe all sorts of things, where do you turn to find proof? You look at the fruit of their lives. You look at what they do. Jesus, Peter, James, John, Paul, they all insist on praxis, on deeds done, as the determining factor marking out those in the kingdom and those outside (and, more importantly, those who claim they're in but in fact are not). There's no point quizzing people over an abstract list of beliefs that anyone could reel off. Look at what they do. Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks, and the life is lived. Abstract belief is always in service to praxis.

Before we turn everything over to praxis, however, we sound a note of caution. The danger with praxis, and one of the reasons why we resist conceptualizing faith in these terms, is that we are ragged, halfhearted, contradictory creatures. How can we walk as Jesus walked? We cannot, and if we cannot we stand self-condemned. We are not perfect disciples. We are all painfully aware of the horrors and shortcomings of the church, the one who looks a lot less like a pure and beautiful bride and a lot more like a deceiving, damaged, and damaging whore. Is this our God? This is the tension that has driven faith into the desert of abstraction. We are terrified of our own brokenness, and what that might say about our God. In technical terms this is the danger of an over-realized eschatology, of equating what we do now with the fullness of God and his kingdom. We fear the mocking of hypocrisy that will stain our God. Here we need the tension of the now and not yet kingdom. Rather than trying to escape again to an unsullied abstraction where, thankfully, we don't have to worry too much about the awful mess we're in (after all, our sins are forgiven, our hearts are right before God, and it'll be nice in heaven when we die) we must instead take the route of obedience, and follow. Praxis, humble and humiliated and broken though it may be, is still all we have. The

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disciples got up and followed Jesus without knowing or believing anything “right”, and Jesus invited them to walk as he walked. If Jesus is the way then he’s the way to something or someone, and although we may be on the path we’re not there yet. It isn’t all right. The kingdom is here, but not fully. We need to learn to live in this tension, as hard as that is and as painful as that is, and to insist that both how we live defines what we believe *and* that Jesus is always calling us to something better. We are not yet converted. The fulfillment of the kingdom is always over our horizons. We can never reduce the kingdom of God, or God himself, to our fractured praxis, just as we cannot glimpse God or enter the kingdom without praxis.

At the heart of our refusal to consider orthopraxis—embodied theology—as having prime importance is just how dangerous and messy and radical it is. Praxis is about all our life, not just the abstract beliefs we hold. Up for debate then are all those things we shy away from in the church and in society, all those things we hold so private and so precious: what you spend your money on, your leisure time, your job, your home, your family, your pension. Orthopraxis demands a quite specific obedience in every area—to think through and act on all of life with Jesus as King—and is therefore a much more terrifying prospect than recalibrating some abstract beliefs. We have been afraid of judging others, of rank hypocrisy, but this is only because we fail to grasp the essential goodness of praxis. To walk after Jesus is not to condemn those who do not, or who are not so far along the way, but to offer a living example of faith, hope, and love. This is no judgment but a joyous encouragement towards the good. The kingdom is not our own, nor is our path a lonely, individualistic one concerned with my personal salvation and purity. It is by definition a communal enterprise. A body. We need to provoke one another to love and good deeds (Heb 10:24). Community, walking together, is the essence of love. Praxis is radical, dangerous, and world-changing. There will be crosses to be borne, deaths to suffer, the relinquishment of things held on to for so long, but there is the joy and the hope and the promise of a good kingdom and a good King. There

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is a murmur of a way of love that brings us into truth and life. If we start to walk this way we will find that it is no sacrifice to lose our abstractions and gain our very being.

If we are people of the way, then, people marked and known by praxis, can we then disregard all that abstract belief as so much unnecessary baggage? By no means! If faith without works is dead then works without faith are deaf, blind, and dumb. It is simply a matter of priority. Abstract belief is in service of the life lived. Always. Our praxis then feeds back to question, sustain, and inform abstract belief, and vice versa, but praxis is always prior. We follow Jesus, then we know him, then we can believe. That was the route the disciples took and that must be our route too. Abstract debate, ideas, creeds, dogmas, doctrine, beliefs, all of these are important but only insofar as they are defined and embodied in praxis. It matters what we do. That's all that matters. A Christian theology is always an embodied theology of doing, of praxis. Of course, we can argue that the only reason we do what we do is because of what we believe, or that we can only do what we do because of what we believe, but even here it is the *doing* that matters. To return to Ian and Gerard, what matters is what we do. Not what we say or the statements that we make but what actually happens, even if the road to freedom is marked by many cycles of failure and stumbling. The church needs her abstract thinkers, needs her scholars and studies and academia, needs her abstract debate and definition. The church needs these things more than ever in a culture that denigrates the role of intellectual effort and striving. These gifts to the body, however, always serve within a context, and that context must be the sustaining, clarifying, and enabling of orthopraxis. Without this they become ends in themselves, self-absorbed and idolatrous. As if one could ever discuss theories of justice or peace without actually seeking to embody them! Or worse, while living a lifestyle that demands injustice and conflict to sustain it! Yet such is the absurdity of so much Western Christian discourse, in hock to an idol of abstraction that leaves us incapable of walking in the path of obedience.

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Here our modernist language and concepts—of the abstract and the concrete, the subjective and the objective—break down and become unhelpful. John writes of love, and love is something that has to involve others. Love is never objective or subjective, neither staying aloof nor collapsing back into itself, but it is self-involving. We cannot properly understand love unless we live it; it is participatory by nature. So is orthopraxis. So is theology. Love *is* orthopraxis, for love cannot but express itself in practical deeds seeking the good of another. We love because he first loved us. We walk as Jesus walked not because we are caught up in a ceaseless striving for an unattainable perfection but because we abide in him. We stand by the life lived, yet find that this life is not just our life but the life of the Messiah who lives in me, who loves me and gave himself for me. It is not just our life, but our life caught up with the community of all those who are bound together into one body, the Messiah's body, the Messiah's life. We are brought by love into the very life of God and this is the radical change that urged these men and women of faith to lay down their whole selves for one another and for God.² This is knowing through and by love, an epistemology of love. This is abiding and participating in love, an ontology of love. This is walking and living in love, a praxis of love. And where do we see love? How do we know what it is? How dare we begin to walk or believe? There is a man who says, "Follow", who says, "Come, you who are weary", who forgives as he's nailed to a cross. There's a King and a kingdom that look different from anything we've ever known. And there's a tomb that stands empty and breathes of a new creation where everything is going to be set right . . .

Graih is a small charity seeking to serve the homeless on the Isle of Man. I have been involved with it for many years. It grew from the smallest of roots: the faithfulness of a few individuals opening a

2. See Fiddes, *Participating in God*. This is arguably an example of orthodoxy in service to orthopraxis, as Fiddes seeks to develop a "pastoral doctrine of the Trinity" focused on communion with the life and love of God.

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drop-in for men who were alcoholic. As relationships were formed it became obvious to the volunteers that the guys coming in were not only alcoholic but often sleeping rough in public toilets and squats. With fear and trembling and the blessing of the church the drop-in opened for a few months over winter overnight to give shelter to those who were homeless. There weren't even any beds, just ancient sofas, but it was better than being outside. Unbeknownst to the volunteers running the drop-in (who still had little idea that a charity would ever be formed from their work) there was a high-level multi-agency group comprising top civil servants, heads of charities, and faith leaders meeting to discuss the "issue" of homelessness. In those early seasons gradual connections were formed and the volunteers of the drop-in were eventually invited into the meetings. It was obvious that these were two groups from different worlds. There were those who knew men who were homeless and spent their nights dozing on sofas next to them, and there were those who spoke of strategies and policies and procedures. The volunteers, untrained and unprofessional, knew that what mattered was serving those in need. The multi-agency group, shaped by a statutory mentality, knew that what mattered was formulating the right policies. The multi-agency group decided that a charity was needed, a charity that would serve as an umbrella organization for a wide array of "homelessness issues", including the drop-in. Documents were drawn up, funding put in place, staff appointed, and procedures drafted. It was then apparent that there was a problem. This new charity actually had little or no contact with homeless people. They had everything in place, all the abstract boxes ticked, but they had no praxis.

The government approached the volunteers at the drop-in (which had by this point coalesced into its own charity, Graih) and asked them to take over some government premises to run as a shelter. The language of partnership was used. When the volunteers inquired as to whether the homeless guys could paint the walls or make a cup of tea they were told that such activities could only be undertaken by government-appointed contractors and those with food safety and hygiene certificates. And risk assessments

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would have to be done on everybody. The volunteers pointed out that they intentionally took risks to build relationships with risky people and that allowing the guys ownership of small tasks was a really big part of their successful praxis. They were ignored. Those well-versed in procedural abstractions could not believe or trust a praxis-driven group of amateurs. Although partnership was spoken of it was clear where the power would lie: in the abstract formulations of legal necessities and policies rather than actual praxis and real people. The volunteers decided not to take up the offer. A shelter was opened anyway, complete with risk assessments and procedures. It closed after a few months due to lack of use.

You may think that one group who has no relationship with people who are homeless might choose to listen to another group that spends a lot of time with those who are homeless. You may think it would be obvious where credibility and authority lie. Yet the powerful appeal of abstract meetings, words, positions, procedures, policies, strategies, and risk assessments tend to exclude those who choose a different approach. Who walk a different way. Divorced from praxis, this bloated abstract edifice collapsed. If you start with what you believe, what you think, the abstract ruminations and principles, but never *do* anything, you have nothing. If you start with action and let that inform your abstract formulations you may not stray too far. All your abstractions must always be in the service of praxis; they exist only insofar as they liberate, clarify, deepen, and sustain praxis. It doesn't matter what you believe. What matters is what you do.

Chapter 2

The God of Liberation and the Idol of Freedom

God also spoke to Moses . . . ‘I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name “The LORD” I did not make myself known to them. I also established my covenant with them . . . I have also heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are holding as slaves, and I have remembered my covenant. Say therefore to the Israelites, “I am the LORD, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgement. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians . . . ”’ Moses told this to the Israelites, but they would not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery.

—EXODUS 6:2–9

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit