

Giving Christianity Back to Agape Love: A New Paradigm for Being Church Together

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Chapter Discussion Questions

Chapter 13: Death and Resurrection, Being Born Again

1. Page 90: ‘The Law of Opposites relates that as more love comes into the world, more fear comes up also.
‘On a personal level, this is at work whenever we declare ourselves to be anything. “I am peace!” “I am love” “I am light!”
‘As soon as we make these declarations, we often notice that more of the opposite comes into our lives- stress, anxiety, and fear.’
Have you noticed the “Law of Opposites at work in your own life? How did you react when it happened?
2. Page 91: ‘dark nights can be the opportunities for our greatest spiritual growth... We express wanting more peace in the world and in our life, and yet anxiety, stress, and violence take an ever-greater hold.
‘The good news is that the opposite comes up precisely to be released... So long as our fears remain buried within the subconscious, they have a hidden power over us. Once we recognize that they exist, we begin the work of transformation.’
Why do things hidden in our subconscious have a hidden power over us?
3. Page 91-92: ‘Too often when forms of “negativity” arise in our life, they are seen as problems best dealt with through ignorance, denial, or suppression.
‘Ignoring, denying, or suppressing a problem does not lead to a solution.
‘Many people still deny the reality of racism or other forms of negativity that exist in our lives and in the world. Denial is one way that the ego clings to its perception of reality.
‘Acceptance of what is is the beginning of the end for our distorted ego. So long as we pretend that our distorted perceptions are true, the grasp of the ego maintains its hold on us.
‘To practice resurrection is to continually die to our egoic self and be reborn into life in the Spirit. This is a practice, not a one-time event.’
How do we ignore, deny or suppress our personal or societal problems?
What does it mean to you to ‘practice resurrection’?
4. Page 93: ‘The ego finds its identification with wealth, power, and material things, but also in belief systems and ideologies. This is evident in how frequently political and religious belief structures have been used to marginalize, hurt, and oppress.
‘Spiritual liberation does not come from a belief system. Our freedom in God comes through spiritual experience.
‘Belief is knowledge about; experience is direct knowing. Beliefs can be ephemeral and hurtful and change over time. Experience of God is transformative and eternal. Anyone who experiences God is always transformed in the direction of love because God is love.
‘One of the church’s great examples is Saul (who is later renamed Paul). Saul was an expert in using spiritual law and belief to hurt and oppress Jesus’ disciples...

‘Though Saul had a wealth of knowledge about the law, he was lacking in spiritual experience. Saul knew a lot about God but had never directly encountered God. In his experience on the Damascus road, Saul is immediately transformed.’

What are examples today of how political or religious belief structures are used to marginalize, hurt, or oppress?

Like Saul, have you or someone you know had a spiritual experience that transformed you? Feel free to share that experience if you are comfortable doing so.

5. Page 93 shares about the traditional Christian understanding of being “born again.” What does this phrase mean to you today? What have been your past associations with this term?

6. Page 94-95: ‘Being born again does not mean denying or suppressing our feelings. Rather, by first accepting our negative feelings, they can move through us, and we are emptied to begin anew.

‘Feeling our feelings can be a difficult practice to integrate, particularly when we’ve been taught to “tough it out.” We can spend lifetimes in avoidance! This is why it is helpful to have the support of therapists, coaches, spiritual directors, spiritual companions, or spiritual community. Small groups and retreats can also bring healing.

‘Sometimes we need to forgive others. Much of the time we need to forgive ourselves. The scriptures say that Jesus, in becoming human, “emptied himself.” (Philippians 2: 7) In becoming like Christ, we too must be emptied. To live in and fill ourselves with God, we must first empty ourselves of ego and all that is not love.’

What relational opportunities- therapists, coaches, spiritual directors, spiritual companions, spiritual community, small groups or retreats, have you found most helpful for sharing your feelings and emptying yourself of ego?

7. Page 95 talks about 3 layers of transformation: “Emptying happens on personal, interpersonal, and institutional levels.”

Where do you invest your energies for change? Do you find there is a balance with the 3 layers? i.e. Two extremes, only working on personal transformation, without thinking about institutions, or only focusing on institutional change without thinking about how to change yourself.

8. Page 96-97: ‘Jesus reserved some of his strongest words for the religious authorities of his time. Since Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire, it has been in a constant struggle to return to the simplicity of the faith of Jesus. For centuries, the church has become caught in power struggles, fear-based violence, and preoccupation with belief, doctrine, and dogma.

‘During every historic age, the church has drifted further away from Jesus. This includes the 21st century church...The church has much to shed when people do not find Jesus in the church or Christ in the Christians.’

What do you think the church most needs to shed in this 21st century ‘rummage sale’ (p.97)?

Closing from Page 93 and 96:

‘What if being born again was not about belief, but total life transformation?’

‘Prophets and saints of all religions call us to transformation from sleeping to waking; from death to new life; from bondage to freedom. There is a personal dimension to this transformation, the first step. Personal transformation then inspires us to transform oppressive structures and institutions, including the Christian ones.’

Chapter 14: Embodying the Good News: Spiritual Community and Being Contemplates in Action

1. Do you resonate with the question on page 98: 'Have you ever felt that life never seem to slow down, but seems to move at a breakneck pace?' or with this statement on page 100: 'In today's world, we are so "go-go-go" all the time that we have difficulty relaxing and simply being.'

Have you ever felt that the 'sheer speed of life and the magnitude of our responsibilities' (p.98) exhausts and overwhelms you?

2. Have you ever felt like the apostle Paul from Romans 7: 15: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

Page 99: 'I have found Paul's statement true for me also. Why is it easier to be relaxed in Belize? Why is it easier to fall into a fast-paced frenzy when I'm in Boston?

The Indian saint Paramhansa Yogananda often said, "environment is stronger than will power." As you look at the habits of your own life, how is environment stronger than will power?

3. Page 99: 'If we can be part of life-giving communities that model a different way of being, then we can begin to counteract the negative influences of our culture and our world.'

'There are many reasons why people who are spiritual shy away from spiritual community. Many have been scarred by religious communities and are reluctant to try again. Many have searched but been unable to find a community that resonates with them- a place where they are fed spiritually.'

Have you found life-giving, soul-feeding spiritual community? Have you been scarred by bad experiences with religious communities? How have life-giving communities helped you to live into a different way of being?

4. Page 100: 'Throughout Jesus' life, he prioritizes his relationship with God by spending time in prayer and meditation to fill his cup.'

'Jesus was human, like the rest of us. He got tired and worn down from the fullness of life and ministry, just like the rest of us. In the gospels we often read about Jesus going off to find a quiet, solitary place to rest and to pray.'

'Contemplation points to the mystical dimension of faith, where we engage in spiritual practices that connect us to the divine.'

In what ways have you engaged on your spiritual path with contemplation and contemplative practices that connect you to the divine?

5. Page 101: 'By taking scheduled time to rest, restore, and renew, I found at the end of the semester that I had more energy for the tasks of ministry, which at times can be very demanding. In taking time to care for my own soul, I found that my spiritual cup was filled. I was able to give to others from a full, instead of an empty, place... To constantly push ourselves without rest, renewal, and refreshment leads to high levels of stress, overwhelm, and burnout.'

What have been your regular Sabbath practices (i.e. every day, week, year, etc.)

6. Page 102: “There are many ways to connect to the Divine. I dare say there are as many spiritual exercises as there are physical exercises to choose from!

“To become physically fit, it doesn’t matter so much what form our physical exercise takes. Similarly with spiritual exercise, it doesn’t matter what form our spiritual exercises takes. What matters is that we do them!”

Take a look at the “Tree of Contemplative Practices,” found with a quick Google search. Note that this Tree isn’t an exhaustive list of practices. What forms of spiritual exercise help keep you ‘spiritually fit’?

7. Page 103: “If you don’t feel that you have a spiritual community that nurtures you, I invite you to risk the search for one. It will be a risk, just like dating is a risk. The reward of dating is to find another whom you love and can share your life with. The reward of searching for life-giving spiritual community is having others whom you love spiritually (in a non-romantic way :) and can share your spiritual life with.”

Share one story of how you found life-giving spiritual community.

Do you resonate with the dating image in finding the right spiritual community?

8. Page 103-104: ‘The brokenness of humanity is not absent from church. Church, just like any community, is messy. Church can test our faith and our patience. While no community is perfect, “We need to remain aware of systems, churches, and communities that breed none of the openness that is in God. Church should not be hazardous to your health. Spirituality should not take from you... Relationships and communities are meant to be places where people build one another up in faith and love, places for us to be seen and to see others.”’¹

In what ways have you experienced the brokenness of church? Has church ever been ‘hazardous to your health’?

9. Page 104: “For me, a changed heart led to re-orienting my life towards service and social justice. This sometimes looks like serving and cooking at a homeless shelter, or just as important, accompanying and listening to the stories of the people I serve. In whatever way this happens, my life no longer revolves around my needs alone.”

How has your spiritual journey re-oriented your life towards service and social justice?

10. Page 105: “Jesus’ movement in faith was to take time for solitude and spiritual practice; to form and be sustained by spiritual community; and go change the world. The order of that movement is important.”

What is the balance of these three movements in your spiritual life?

Do you resonate with Matt’s experience (p. 105): “I met a lot of people working for peace in the world who were not peaceful inside themselves.”

Close with this prayer by Bishop Kenneth Untener (p.106):

¹ Pagitt, Doug: *Flipped: The Provocative Truth That Changes Everything We Know About God*, (New York, Convergent Books, 2015), 203-204.

“No program accomplishes the church's mission.
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.
We lay foundations that will need further development.
We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.
We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.
We are prophets of a future not our own. Amen.”

Chapter 15: Spiritual Gifts and Overcoming Ego

1. Page 107: “One of my favorite scriptures in 1 Corinthians 12 points out that we are one body and many members. As all of us are different, we all have gifts that differ accordingly.”

What are your unique gifts in your vocation, and also gifts that you express in church settings?

2. Page 108-109: ‘Gifts of clairvoyance, clairaudience, or claircognizance... are often met with suspicion. Many churchgoers lump these gifts into the “woo-woo” category. And yet, the ability to peer into future realities was demonstrated many times by Jesus, as we see in the gospels.

‘If we are to grow spiritually, then our unique talents are meant to be shared with others. In the case of communicating with loved ones who have “passed on,” this gift has long been demonized and vilified within spiritual circles.’

‘Saul’s situation (in Samuel 28: 8-9) is not unlike church today. We are spiritually curious, yet reluctant to consult mediums, or even speak of such things in our churches.’ Have you ever participated in modalities (i.e. psychics, intuitives, healers) that the church has frowned upon or been silent about?

Did you share about these experiences with church friends?

3. Page 110: “Whether our skill be in politics, religion, science, education, sports, or elsewhere, when we let power go to our head, we forget that the power behind all these gifts is not ours, but divine. When we place our identity in “our” gifts, we get stuck in contractive ego-identification.”

Have you ever had a gift taken away through injury, disease, old age, a job loss, or otherwise?” What was your reaction initially and over time?

4. Page 110: “Spiritual maturity invites us to remember that all gifts are given to us by God. As such, they are best used with humility, in a spirit of selfless service. Those who thrive in their vocational lives realize the wisdom that no gift belongs to them. The gifts we hold are simply on loan from God for service to humanity. Our task is to be good stewards of these gifts.”

In your own life, how do you integrate the wisdom that no gift belongs to you?

Close with these words (p. 109 and 111):

‘Jesus invites us to a spiritual paradigm that transcends demonization, moves away from tolerance, and finds itself in the centrality of love. When we truly love another, we see God in them. To love as God does is to see God in all things, including every gift that we and others have been bestowed with.

‘Service in its highest expression is just another form of love... if our service is not infused with love, it has only the name, but lacks the essence. Service without the essence of love is spiritually empty. Service infused with love is the “still more excellent way” that Paul

refers to in his letter to the Corinthians², and that Jesus and saints of every religion model for us through the example of their lives. Let us live in that still more excellent way.’

² 1 Corinthians 12: 31