

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

Rev. Matt Carriker

Chapter Discussion Questions

Chapter 7: The Ego in Religion: Science and Spirituality

1. Page 46: “When we’re locked in contractive consciousness, our lives are characterized by egoic reactions such as defensiveness. This is equally common in church settings as it is in secular ones. Going to church does not make anyone immune from egoic reactions. Churches are not perfect, just as people are not perfect. Both are perfectly imperfect!”

Have you found contractive egoic consciousness (ie. Defensiveness; reactiveness) just as common in church settings as in society at large?

2. Page 46: “No place does the ego have a tighter grip on humanity than our religious beliefs. This grip is difficult to loosen because for religious people, our beliefs are often our foundation! If our beliefs crumble, the entire religious foundation crumbles with it! Many have in this way experienced a crisis of faith.”

Have you known religious people who have had a crisis of faith because the foundation of their beliefs have crumbled?

3. Page 47: “Egoic reactivity can manifest in any number of ways- including an incessant need to be right. From this lens, how insidious has the ego been in the life of the church- through the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the Salem Witch trials, and many other instances!”

What are historical instances you’ve been most disappointed in the church for its incessant need to be right?

4. How could the Native American adage on page 47 used to preface spiritual stories inform how you make meaning of scriptural narratives? “I don’t know if it really happened this way, but I know this story is true.”
5. Page 48: “Spiritual arrogance only leads to greater harm and destruction for people and for the planet. Our world now needs what Sir John Templeton once called ‘humility theology.’”

How can we “release the grip of the ego in our lives and our faith communities” and “hold our beliefs and traditions lightly” so that we are not “slaves to our own ideas and judgments”? (p.48)

Closing Prayer (adapted from p. 48): Let us remember that our primary spiritual task is not proper doctrine, but the practice of love. The kingdom of God is making God’s love real on this earth. May we live out Jesus’ prayer “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.” Amen.

Chapter 8: Heaven, Hell and Salvation

Opening practice from Page 54:

“Try out this meditation for your spiritual practice today- as you breathe in, receive and open to the life-giving love that Jesus embodied and incarnated; as you breathe out, release any lingering beliefs in your consciousness rooted in fear. Breathe in love; breathe out fear. Repeat.” Amen.

1. Page 49: “When a church’s doctrinal beliefs about God do not match with our personal experience of God, it is our responsibility to question ourselves *and* the church.”

When has church doctrine conflicted with your own personal experience of God? At those times, did church leaders encourage you to question your beliefs?

2. Page 50: John 14: 6: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

“Many Christians understand this text to mean that anyone who doesn’t believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior is condemned for eternity. Christians holding this worldview approach people of other faiths, or of no faith, through a lens of judgment and conversion.”

What has been your reaction when confronted with Christians who hold this judgment or conversion mindset towards people of other faiths, or of no faith?

3. Page 51 offers two suggestions for how to approach this topic:

“The first is to prioritize love over belief, as Jesus did. In this way, we start relationships and conversations from a place of humility. Knowing that Jesus had strong words for those who clung too tightly to their religious beliefs and traditions, we do well not to claim that we hold THE universal truth or possess THE spiritual answers for eternity.

“The second is to interpret scripture, traditions, and ideas as Jesus did- asking if they are rooted in love or in fear. When Jesus challenged the religious authorities in his day, he challenged their overly literal, harmful interpretations of the law. Might we, like the Pharisees and Sadducees before us, have unknowingly included exclusive, fearful elements in our beliefs?”

Have you ever changed your mind about different church beliefs such as this one? What was the impetus for doing so?

4. Page 51-52: ‘The “way,” the “truth,” and the “life” all refer to the Torah or the Law in Judaism. In this context, Jesus is saying that he is the way that his disciples are to follow, not strictly the Torah.

‘To distraught, grieving disciples, Jesus says that when they question what *way* to follow, remember that *the way is embodied in his life*. Jesus’ pastoral statement is intended for his disciples then and now.

‘Jesus’ words are not an exclusionary condemnation towards adherents of other religions.

‘John 14:6 is an affirmative statement, not an exclusionary one.’

As you consider Jesus, how is the spiritual path you aspire to live embodied in his life?

5. What are your thoughts of this passage on Page 53-54:

‘Fear and judgment have an important place on the evolutionary ladder. The fear of God as the beginning of wisdom has helped many otherwise nonreligious people contemplate divine

realities. If “fear of the Lord” has helped thieves and murderers begin anew lives of service and compassion, then fear has indeed played a role as a positive evolutionary catalyst.

“Vengeance is mine, says the Lord” can be viewed as a positive spiritual step also. Instead of retaliating, this scripture verse has inspired many faithful Christians to reserve judgment for God. Unfortunately, this mentality has also led to harsh sentiments expressed by the same faithful churchgoers: “God will judge you for what you’ve done!”

6. Page 55: “To declare God must send us to perish in eternal damnation makes God into an oppressive, abusive parent. What loving parent would send their child to time out forever? Don’t loving parents want their children to learn and grow from their mistakes? Doesn’t God want the same for us?

“God’s hands are not tied. God created a system of consequence, not of rewards and punishments. “You reap whatever you sow” says the apostle Paul in Galatians 6: 7...

“When our lives aren’t in alignment with the law of love, there will be consequences. This is where the wisdom of “hell” can be found- not in a God who condemns sinners, atheists, or non-Christians, but in the personal and societal hells which individuals and society co-creates in the here and now.”

Is there any wisdom in the idea of hell in your spiritual/religious foundation?

Closing blessing from pages 54 and 56:

“The final step on our spiritual journey takes place when we release fear-based actions and beliefs and live out actions and beliefs solely from a place of love. The first letter of John says, “Perfect love casts out all fear. For those who fear have not been perfected in love.” (1 John 4:18)

“Jesus embodied this unconditional, expansive, perfect love.

“Beliefs engrained in condemnation and judgment don’t accurately portray the God of agape love who always wants our highest and best. Each of us is precious to God. God loves us, and there is NOTHING we can do about it!”

Chapter 9: Jesus and Homosexuality

1. Page 57-58: “Jesus said nothing about homosexuality. Churches over the centuries have followed suit, often saying nothing, or more frequently, condemning same-sex behaviors as sinful. Many churches today subscribe to “don’t ask, don’t tell” and “hate the sin, love the sinner” approaches.”

What has been the attitude of churches you’ve been part of towards persons with LGBTQIA identity?

2. Page 58: “Since I identify as a heterosexual, cisgender male attracted to cisgender females, I didn’t think much about how faith connected to homosexuality, let alone the spectrum of LGBTQIA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer & Questioning, Intersexual, Asexual).”

What privileges are you aware of that you have or don’t have? How has that affected your thinking about faith and LGBTQIA identity?

Matt says: “Blinded by my own privilege, I had been unaware how much courage it took to come out in the face of what was sure to be condemnation and violence from strangers and even from loved ones.”

3. Page 59: “In my conversations with Christians who were confident in their judgments, reason and experience seemed to take a back seat to the authority of scripture... In Christianity, the authorities of reason and experience often do not factor as heavily as scripture and church tradition.”

Of these 4 “authorities”- reason, experience, scripture, church tradition- which ones are most important to you in thinking about connecting faith and spirituality to LGBTQIA identity?

4. Page 60: “Christian beliefs about the sinfulness of homosexuality claim to be rooted in scripture... Homosexuality refers to relationships of mutual consent between persons of the same gender.”

Why does Matt assert that “And yet, most of the scriptures that refer to same-sex relations do not refer to homosexuality”?

5. Choose one of the scriptures addressed in Chapter 9 that have you heard used to justify the argument that homosexuality is a sin. What do you think of the alternative interpretation to that scripture offered in Chapter 9?
6. In asking the question “How do we know if a sexual behavior aligns with love and mutual consent or not?” what do you think about the three-fold questions offered by Matt’s seminary professor Leanne Tigert: “What is the meaning? What is the motive? What is the consequence?” (Page 62)
7. How does it change your view of the Bible to think of it as offering (in the words of Walter Wink on page 65) not ‘a sex ethic, but only a “love ethic.”’

Closing Prayer: “Jesus’ own words convey the radical freedom that God gives us, and that we are invited to exercise in our lives and decision-making. “Judge for yourselves” says Jesus in Luke 12: 57. In other words, do not blindly accept the teachings of others who are in authority. Look to your own inner wisdom. Paul himself says, “Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, matters pertaining to this life!” (1 Cor. 6:3).