

Read this First!

I usually ignore demands to “READ THIS FIRST!” Is it laziness, defiance or my preference for learning things the hard way? Maybe I just hear ALL CAPS as a drill sergeant barking commands in my head. But when I fail to read directions, it often doesn’t end well.

A READ THIS FIRST! caution is doubly important in the case of *A More Christlike Way*. The Jesus Way is already risky, given that it involves taking up a cross (whatever that might mean). But wrongly understood or approached, such a venture may also trigger shame, instigate perfectionism, induce cynicism or other unintended side effects. The following directions serve to avert unnecessary misunderstandings that divert us from our pursuit of the Jesus Way. So please: READ THIS FIRST!

IT’S ABOUT A (HU)MAN

A More Christlike God (2015) was about God—the God revealed perfectly in Jesus Christ. I explored how Christ unveiled the divine nature as cruciform and kenotic. Essentially, I recounted the central dogma of the New Testament and Patristic Christianity: that the true God of triune Love is completely Christlike. We will review that material in chapter one below.

This sequel is also a book about Jesus Christ. In *A More Christlike Way*, I will lay out how Jesus Christ of Nazareth, in his fully human nature, forged the path for a new and true humanity. We’ll call it the *Jesus Way*.

This is literally crucial. When I refer to the *Jesus Way*, I am describing the life and faith of a man—the Jesus of the four Gospels—whose earthly sojourn embodied complete surrender to and trust in the God he called his *Abba* (the Aramaic equivalent to Papa).

Knowing that our subject matter is “the man Christ Jesus” matters greatly because herein, I will make no grandiose claims for any church or any individual disciple, alive or departed, least of all myself. In fact, Christianity’s infamy is that our way and our faith have not been very Christlike. Observers attempting to retrace the *Jesus Way* from the path walked by those who identify as Christian would become hopelessly lost. They would stumble over all manner of obstacles to our beautiful faith,

including me. Jesus alone created the *Jesus Way* and walked it perfectly.

Each of the attributes I will use to describe the *Jesus Way*—for example, radical forgiveness, radical hospitality, radical inclusion—describe Jesus, not me and not the church.

Here's the problem—Jesus said, “Take up your cross and follow me,” which is to say, “Imitate me.” Largely, we don't. And the harder we try, the more we fail. Miserably. A rule of thumb: *the deeper our religious zeal, the further we stray from Christ*—just ask Saul of Tarsus! No, we don't become Christlike by willing ourselves into radical discipleship.

Whatever forays we do make along the *Jesus Way* occur by locking our gaze on Jesus, not on our performance.

We must look ahead to Jesus. He is the one who carved out the path for faith, and he's the one who brought it to completion (Heb. 12:2).

When “the Word became flesh,” God's unexpected total identification with humanity opened a road, a path, a *Way* for all of us. That *Way* is Jesus' path back to *Abba's* house, our return home to paradise. By the indwelling grace of triune Love, those who surrender to *Abba* as Jesus did are thus empowered to walk as he walked. As Paul said,

I have been crucified with the Messiah. I am, however, alive—but it isn't me any longer; it's the Messiah who lives in me. And the life I do still live in the flesh, I live within the faithfulness of the son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:19b-20).

We live, we walk, we imitate the *Jesus Way* “within the faithfulness of the son of God.” I love that. Whatever steps we take into a more Christlike faith occur because Christ lives in us and we (somehow) live in him—in the grace of today.

I cannot overstate this. This book could be—but must not be—mistaken for a manifesto. It is not a set of ideals we strive after or laws we live up to. Believe me; straining to achieve Christlikeness through self-will only leads to despondency (failure and disappointment) or to pride (zealotry and hypocrisy). The *Jesus Way* is surely a struggle, but one engaged not by striving, but by surrender.

A More Christlike Way calls us to a *more beautiful faith* as we focus on Christ and allow his life to fill and transform ours. Just as he showed us the perfect image of *Abba*, now Jesus of Nazareth shows us the perfect image of humanity. The miracle and the mystery is that in beholding his glory—his cruciform (i.e. cross-shaped) image—his glory incrementally transfigures us toward something closer to his image. Do you see that? His work and his *Way* is transformation—our part is trusting enough to follow him on the *Jesus Walk*.

NAMES, PRONOUNS & CAPITALIZATION

In this book, I will occasionally write about “God” simply because that’s the norm. At some point, “God” as a generic noun became a name we use—following the way New Testament Jewish authors who avoided using the divine Name directly. But the word “God” doesn’t say enough. In fact, I heard one podcaster say, “God is the most promiscuously used word in our vocabularies today.” By its vagueness, the word “God” may be emptied of its riches or loaded with idolatries. I’d like to practice more precision in our God-talk.

In the New Testament, “God” sometimes refers to the Trinity (Father, Son and Spirit) or the *LORD* (the unspeakable Name) but more often, God specifies the Father, especially on Jesus’ lips. When referring to God the Father, I will mainly follow Jesus by using the name he revealed: *Abba* (equivalent to our *Papa*). I italicize *Abba* to remind myself that this is an Aramaic word, presumably Christ’s first language. I will even take the liberty of swapping in *Abba* for Father when citing my default NT translation (Wright’s *New Testament for Everyone*). When referring to the Trinity, I will occasionally experiment with *Trinity* or *Love* as a personal name for the one triune godhead. If I say, “*Trinity* loves you,” I haven’t mistakenly deleted “the”—I’m reminding readers that our God is both three-in-one and personal.

Pronouns for God are always tricky. When speaking of *Trinity*, I will use the “singular *they*” (to emphasize God’s unity-in-trinity). When speaking of Christ, I’ll call him “he” to match the Gospels, though his glorified humanity no doubt transcends “maleness.” When speaking of *Abba*, I will retain the traditional “he” for Father, recognizing that God’s parenthood

is not gender-specific. So too, I like to use “*she*” for the Spirit (following the Hebrew feminine pronoun for Spirit), recognizing “*she*” indicates grammatical, not sexual, gender.

Speaking of the Holy Spirit, I will also refer to her as *Grace* (capitalized) because in the Eastern tradition, *Grace* is not merely “unmerited favor”—*Grace* is defined as “the uncreated energies of the Holy Spirit.” That is, *Grace* is God experienced directly as the indwelling, transforming presence of the Holy Spirit.

Aside from my Trinitarian name preferences—*Abba*, *Christ* and *Grace*—I’ll capitalize other words to emphasize the divine persons. For example, you’ll see me capitalize “*Basis*” when I’m referring to *Abba* as the “*Source*” of our salvation. Or sometimes, you’ll see “*Voice*” in the upper case when I’m talking about Christ speaking to our hearts. “*Voice*” is like “*Word*” here but perhaps more personalized to the individual being addressed. The upper case B or V in both cases is your hint that I’m talking about one of the Persons of the Trinity, or even all three when I write “*triune Love*.”

JESUS OR CHRIST

In the New Testament, *Jesus* (lit. *the LORD saves*) was our Lord’s given name—the name by which the Gospel characters and writers knew and referred to him. *Christ* was the Greek word that means *anointed one*. It’s the word the NT authors used to translate the Hebrew *messiah*, which likewise means anointed one. The *anointed one* was associated with God’s anointed kings, inaugurated by the prophets with the oil of the Spirit. Eventually, *Messiah* and *Christ* designated the divinely anointed King whom *the LORD* would send to redeem Israel to reestablish the Kingdom of God. In their understanding, the Christ would be God’s king on earth, but not necessarily divine or even if so, certainly subordinate to *the LORD*.

When Jesus of Nazareth was revealed as *the Christ*, at first this meant he was indeed king of the Jews, although not at all the warrior king their prophets seemed to anticipate. With his death and resurrection, the apostles realized (a) that Jesus was not only the *Messiah of Israel* but also (b) *Savior of the world*. Moreover, they believed this was not merely a human ruler or even a semi-divine king, but that he shared one divine identity with *the LORD*! Hence, *our Lord Jesus Christ*.

While John the Theologian (author of the Gospel and epistles) and the church Fathers insist that Jesus is the Christ and that Jesus Christ is one divine-human person, the name Jesus would gradually emphasize his human nature and earthly ministry, while the name Christ drew attention to Christ as our crucified, risen, ascended and glorified Lord and to his divine nature.

Because of this, just calling him Jesus became suspect of Arianism—a denial of Jesus’ deity. But don’t worry, when I use it, I’m merely following the Gospel writers and believe with them that Jesus was fully divine at all times. In modern times, it’s become popular to refer to Christ in ways that I suspect leave behind his humanity. Not me. I’m with the apostle John (“*Jesus is the Christ*”) and the creed (“*I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ*”). With those sensibilities in mind, if I use Jesus and Christ interchangeably it is to emphasize the unity of the one Person, not to distinguish his two natures.

CHRISTIANS VS. CHRIST-FOLLOWERS

The term “Christian” has morphed such that now I think it’s fair to call Christianity a “major world religion” with so much history and baggage that it’s difficult to identify as “Christian” without first asking, “What do you mean by that word?” In this book, I’ll use Christian generally to speak of that religious tradition. When such disparate characters as Donald Trump and Lady Gaga both identify as “Christian,” we probably need to be more specific. While registering my concern with what the label now connotes, I can say that Christianity is the tradition from which I come.

More helpful, I think, is the term “*Christ-follower*,” which I’ll use for those who follow (or intend to) the *Jesus Way* as lived and taught by Jesus Christ. By that definition, not all Christians are Christ-followers and not all Christ-followers are Christians. Gandhi was a Hindu, not a Christian. But given his devotion to following the *Jesus Way* of the Sermon on the Mount, he was arguably a Christ-follower. So too are many millions of Muslims today. This doesn’t mean that Muslims and Christians agree. It’s just that many have come to love and follow Jesus, their orthodoxy notwithstanding.

I hope I’m a Christ-follower, though I’ll leave that for Christ to decide. I identify with the *Jesus Way* for sure. I just know that it’s a journey and I’ve not yet arrived.

THOUGHTS AND PRAYERS

“Thoughts and prayers” are often offered as comfort to victims in the immediate aftermath of a tragedy. Politicians and media outlets post “thoughts and prayers” via press conferences and social media after a devastating hurricane or the latest mass shooting.

As a euphemism for willful inaction, “thoughts and prayers” ring hollow and even blasphemous, worthy of derision in countless, equally useless internet memes. “Thoughts and prayers” are now associated with the powerless god whose people intend to do nothing when instead, they should be the first responders of a seamless connection between the Christlike God (who came down to help) and a Christlike faith (people who go out to help).

In this book, each chapter will conclude with “thoughts and prayers” as a sardonic warning against platitudes and as a sincere call to embark on and embody the *Jesus Way*. These summaries are written for personal study and should serve as guides to group book studies.