

# Twenty Statements toward a Renewed Christianity and a Post-Constantinian Church

The Rev. Daniel L. Prechtel, DMin

During an era when major changes are impacting our world, I offer the following statements as one who loves the way of Jesus and desires the Church's continuing renewal and growth in the Spirit of Christ. I offer these statements as my own perspective on a pathway to post-Constantinian reformation. These statements are shaped by many years of conversation with those inside and outside branches of the Christian religion and learning from other great spiritual traditions. It is also informed by my spiritual practices, including various forms of prayer and meditation. I value your own perspective and hope that any ensuing conversations can help in the movements of the Spirit in our times and in the evolving life of the Church.

**A little background first.** After Constantine I (the Great) had a vision on October 28, 312 he credited it with winning a decisive victory at the Battle of Milvian Bridge over competing Emperor Maxentius. The followers of Jesus were in a very different position in society and the Roman world before this event. Seeing a cross in the sky as a symbol of victory, and the resultant military success, led to his conversion to Christianity. The Edict of Milan, issued in February 313, assured Christian tolerance in the Roman empire and gave it favored status. It was a difficult time for followers of Christ prior to this development. They lived under the threat of persecution and their faith was rigorously tested, even to the point of death. It was then that the rise of social status and political power offered to those who identified as Christians ushered in a profound reversal, and the Church's institutional interests ran the risk of blending with that of the Roman empire and successive governments.

It is important to note that images of power and majesty associated with God were not unique to early Christians. A variety of metaphors are used in the Hebrew scriptures to describe God, and some reflect the human experiences of kings and patriarchs, who conceived of God as the most powerful and majestic force above all things and rulers. Early Christian literature carried those images forward and depicted Jesus as having divine majesty and power. In the Constantinian Church period, these images gained prominence and led people to think of rulers as endowed with secular and sacred power over their subjects as descending from God and his son, Jesus Christ. Along with such images of power over subject peoples came the authority to commit violence, even acts of genocide, in the name of God. The images of God in some scripture passages depicted a deity capable of wrathful violence and killing - sometimes of whole populations.

Our Christian religious experience was also influenced by this. Where Christians were once a persecuted people, with Emperor Constantine the cross of Christ was paired with the sword of empire and the Christian religion often became a tool for imperial power. A dark legacy of colonial oppression emerged, often directed against non-whites, Indigenous people, and people who followed other religions or forms of spirituality.

Many of us are considering how we live as Christians in a post-Christendom era when the "Constantinian Church" is crumbling. Although magisterial language and hierarchical structures, as well as imperial claims of Christian supremacy, linger. (Even as I write this, I hear Handel's powerful *Messiah* with the exalted lyrics "King of kings, and Lord of Lords..." in my mind. In this time, followers of Jesus should ask themselves, what in our religious structures and thoughts needs to pass away and what might God be raising up?

**Here are twenty statements that emerge from my own reflections:**

- 1. My experience of God is relational: the Divine One is within each and all of creation and works to bring all that is to unity, harmony, and wholeness.**

In my experience, God is that loving and dynamic center of all that is. This God is neither separate from nor confined to creation. This is the One who is creating new wholeness, new harmonious relationships. This is the One who brings the offering of shalom/salaam/peace/namaste for all and continuously invites all of creation into that shared oneness. Our God is the source, sustainer, and builder of relationships that are healthy and mutually respectful.

- 2. I find the Christian concept of the Holy Trinity helpful as a dynamic way of understanding this relational God that is present in all creation and who continues to bring creation into oneness in love, joy, and fullness of life.**

The image of the divine dance of *perichoresis* which the Holy Trinity expresses in the dynamic of mutual, interpenetrating love between the persons of the Godhead and reaching out to invite all creation into this dance is powerful. The "dance" of this love honors each particular being, even rejoicing in each being's particular uniqueness, while offering all a greater wholeness, and oneness through communion/community.

- 3. The Holy Trinity is the self-giving community of divinity in loving unity, ever inviting all creation to join in that unity. However, even the concept of Trinity is metaphoric language and should not be used to place limits on the innumerable ways God might be experienced but never fully known.**

There are many names for God, and none can fully contain this wonderful Mystery. So, a confession of our human inability to grasp the fullness of this Divinity is appropriate. Recognizing with humility that our names for God are provisional and capable of changing with new experiences of the Divine in our continuing collective and personal lives keeps us open to new revelations and ways God is acting as life continues to unfold.

**4. This relational God relinquishes hierarchical dominance and power over creation in favor of self-giving, compassion, and providing healing spiritual power for the beloved creation.**

I believe we humans are being invited ever more deeply into a loving relationship of trust, friendship, and co-creative partnership with God. Certainly, we should recognize and respect that God is the author of all life, including ours, and the great dreamer of what is to be. But that doesn't require a relationship with the Divine built on fear, control, hierarchy and domination. Often that is the very cause of our world's suffering and spiritual abuses. God is love, quite simply, and profoundly. That love is for all. God extends compassion and healing and wholeness to all.

**5. I experience Jesus Christ as God's definitive and divine entrance into human existence to provide for new healing, forgiveness of sin, justice, shalom; withstanding evil and transforming darkness; and showing the way for an evolving humanity to act interdependently with respect for each other and all the worlds' network of beings.**

I look to Jesus as the completely human representation and embodiment of the Divine, incarnated into human history, and living his life in a particular time and place. He is the mirror, in a specific religious and cultural context, of God's desires for human beings. Jesus came to understand his mission and ministry as representing by teaching and actions what his Father (our Creator God) desires for humanity. The language he used, relationships he built, and activities he engaged in were both revelatory and understandable within the context of the culture and worldviews of his historical time. Where Jesus of Nazareth is the revelation of God in an historical context, the Christ spirit, of which Jesus was embodied and incarnated, transcends culture, time, and place. The gospels of Jesus Christ point to what God desires, the actions that human beings can engage in, the central values that generate care and freedom, and the spiritual power that builds right relationships.

- 6. I understand and relate to Jesus as my human-and-divine teacher, faithful friend, soul healer, ancestral brother, and trusted helper. Jesus is my principal guide in how to enter more fully into divine purposes, compassionate living, wholeness as holiness, vitality of spirit, and kinship with all that is.**

I have cultivated an active relationship with the spirit of Jesus Christ over the years. Exposure to the Church's treasury of sacramental, prayer, spiritual healing, and meditational resources gathered over many centuries has been a valuable assist to the nurturance of this primary relationship. That requires teachers with experience and familiarity with these resources, a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and the ability to listen and respond to the unique needs of each student. Spiritual directors and spiritual companions, alongside instruction through the church, are some of the better guides for helping nurture this relationship with the Holy One and Jesus. However, there are significant numbers of people who have either been wounded by religious authorities (or other abusers) that create painful barriers to a vital and free relationship with Jesus. To heal from such spiritual wounding, it may initially be necessary to establish a deep relationship with a feminine expression of divinity.

- 7. I experience the Holy Spirit as the spiritual power and presence of God operating in, and through, and around us for the purposes of healing, building vital relationships, leading us into unity, and partnering with us in co-creative activity.**

In some church traditions the presence, power, and activity of the Holy Spirit is understated, and the life-enhancing spiritual and affective power is muted or undeveloped. Religious authorities may be fearful and anxious about losing control over the people, resulting in rigidity in the community, and the diminishment of people's God-given abilities. In other branches there can be an over-emphasis on particular signs of the Spirit's presence at work within a person, which can result in spiritual and emotional manipulation and abuse. We should not hinder the work of the Holy Spirit, even when the Spirit brings about the messiness of change and transformation.

- 8. Panentheism is a concept that helps express my understanding that everything is alive and has a spirit, and that God is present within and around all beings while also the transcendent mystery.**

The understanding that everything is alive and has a spirit is a foundational wisdomkeeper's teaching in many Indigenous cultures. Our Western culture has ignored that wisdom to our detriment. Panentheism sees the presence of God in all created

beings, while not limiting the Divine to the creation. The animistic and panentheistic understandings, working together, provide a profound pathway to a deed acknowledgement of the sacredness of all creation that is alive and suffused with the divine Presence. This radically challenges our false sense of separation and brings us into communion with all of God's creation.

- 9. I understand that there is nowhere and no thing that is ultimately God-forsaken: God yearns for and works toward building healthy, whole relationships with all that is, was, or will be.**

God's holy desire is for the restoration of all creation into a new unity and shalom. God works tirelessly toward that fullness and wholeness. Whatever is broken or separated will be restored in the new creation. God reaches out to all created beings to become partners in that great work of love and healing. Hell, and conditions of separation, are not forever. They are impermanent conditions of the soul that can be overcome by God's unrelenting love and grace. I believe God's intentions are for universal salvation, and I trust in God's tireless love for all creation.

- 10. I intend to live in deep respect for all life-enhancing faith traditions and spiritual expressions, which share their own particular gifts from God moving through cultures and our essential spiritual nature as human beings. I see Christianity as one fruitful tree among many, some more ancient and others newer, in a sacred orchard that the Divine offers humanity.**

Christians must become friends with those of other faith and spiritual traditions. We should be learning from our neighbors and drawing from their gifts for the spiritual enrichment of humanity and the other species with whom we share life. This need not diminish our faith but can increase our appreciation for the many ways the Mystery we call God is at work within and among us all. I am grateful to have a deep spiritual tradition that has shaped me and that I can draw upon. As followers of Jesus Christ and the Triune God, we have gifts and liberating good news to share without conditions. But all human beings have a spiritual birthright that can thrive through the wild and free Spirit that meets and feeds us through various forms and traditions.

- 11. I see the sciences, the arts, the inherent wisdom of our bodies, our intuitive and emotional capacities, the profound teachings of nature, the wisdom of Indigenous cultures, and the spiritual resources of prayer and imaginal meditation and shamanic journeying, as ways of knowing and informing us about the worlds and dimensions of**

**reality within which we live. All these ways of knowing are gifts from God and pathways to the wonder, vastness, and intimacy of that great Mystery.**

The age of Enlightenment and the use of the scientific method in the West has brought us much for which I am grateful. The path of knowledge and discovery that the methods of reason and technology uses is remarkably fruitful. However, there has been a costly price exacted in emphasizing one way of knowing as supreme over other paths of wisdom and knowledge. This is the time for us to reawaken to these other resources and ways of knowing and receiving with gratitude the wisdom that other cultures bear for the growth and maturing of humanity.

**12. I no longer place my faith in, or align myself with, a god: that uses violence, domination, and killing as the means to fulfill divine purposes, and that calls human beings to commit acts of violence, domination, and killing in the name of God.**

I am far from alone in this rejection of a god of violence and wrath. I have sat with so many people in spiritual guidance sessions and in Bible study groups that are appalled by this depiction of God's actions and demands. Do the ends (purportedly fulfilling God's purposes) justify the means (committing violence against humans or groups of humans, and at times whole peoples and their animals)? To say that we limited mortals cannot fully understand Divine purposes doesn't mean we must give our consent or allegiance to a wrathful, jealous, and vengeful god. This is not the God that Jesus Christ reveals to his followers in the Gospels.

**13. I no longer believe that God's final judgment is condemnatory, but rather I trust that God's ongoing desire is for healing and bringing humans and all creation to wholeness and unity.**

The God with whom I am in relationship treats human sin as a disorder to be corrected and forgiven. How can the God who *is* love and brought creation into being and called it good then condemn it? Even if we willfully depart from God does that mean God will condemn us forever? I believe God allows our exercise of free will and often we humans place ourselves in a hell or purgatory of our own making, suffering the consequences of our errors/sins. But it is in the nature of God to work for the eventual restoration of all relationships. That restoration may not be fully complete in our individual span of time on this earth, but God is not so limited.

**14. I renounce interpretations of the Church in the past and present that draw on the depictions of a God of violence in Hebrew and Christian scriptures for moral justification to use violence, killing, and domination of one people over another.**

In my understanding of Christian history these interpretations came to greater consideration as the Christian faith started to merge with the interests of the Roman Empire. The development of “Just War” theory is an example of that merger. Before that, Christian followers largely embraced pacifism. Jesus’s own life provides the standard of behavior for followers. Of course, we need to discern afresh who this Jesus was in his time and in his cultural setting, the shifts in understanding that occur in the communities that followed Jesus’s earthly life that formed the gospels, the early church’s layers of experience that show up in the epistles, and our own context. That is a large interpretive undertaking to be done in community with humility, prayer, and critical research tools. As we draw closer to Jesus in this violent era, how are we to live in response to his teaching to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”? [Matthew 5:44]

**15. I refuse to recognize scriptural “texts of terror” as inspired by God or presented as revelations of God’s intentional actions and interests in human history, but rather as ethnocentric and culturally determined rationalizations for violent actions of domination projected as divine will.**

It is so easy, and so dangerous, to project our own impulses, shadows, and desires upon the screen of history and unconsciously try to make God in our own image. Add that culture shapes our understanding and makes “normal” what is declared by the dominant culture to be right and acceptable and influences our perception of what is wrong and unacceptable. In a pervasive cultural worldview that normalizes racial prejudice, violence, subjection of women, and suspicion or outright hostility towards those different from us, we have a recipe for violent projections and actions as the right order of things that is the will of God.

Take for example Deuteronomy 7:1-2:

When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you—the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you—<sup>2</sup>and when the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy.

In this passage we read about a demand, attributed to the Lord God, for a holy war of genocide against seven nations. These rules get further spelled out in Deuteronomy 20:

<sup>10</sup>When you draw near to a town to fight against it, offer it terms of peace. <sup>11</sup>If it accepts your terms of peace and surrenders to you, then all the people in it shall serve you at forced labor. <sup>12</sup>If it does not submit to you peacefully, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it; <sup>13</sup>and when the Lord your God gives it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword. <sup>14</sup>You may, however, take as your booty the women, the children, livestock, and everything else in the town, all its spoil. You may enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the Lord your God has given you. <sup>15</sup>Thus you shall treat all the towns that are very far from you, which are not towns of the nations here. <sup>16</sup>But as for the towns of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. <sup>17</sup>You shall annihilate them—the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—just as the Lord your God has commanded, <sup>18</sup>so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the Lord your God.

This is but one example of what Phyllis Trible called the “texts of terror” in the Bible. The example quoted gives a holy warrant for military occupation and forced labor of the occupants of towns that are *not* part of the nations destined for annihilation. If those occupants fail to accept the “terms of peace” the males will be murdered, and the women and children will be enslaved, and the resources of the town plundered. But for the areas currently resided by the seven nations that God supposedly destined for occupation, “you must not let anything that breathes remain alive.” This is a grim, genocidal massacre of the greatest degree possible. It is ironic that this is commanded to be done so that “they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods...” What does that teach us about the deity? Surely it is a rationalization projected upon their image of God by a people’s authorities for their own ends.

**16. I ask the Church to repent of its long-standing alliances with the secular and military powers of State and Empire and its resultant atrocities and genocides committed by colonization. May we who are the Church repent of its suppression and subordination of other peoples’ spiritual and religious understandings. May we turn away from dehumanizing and labeling other people as subhuman or uncivilized savages. May we repent of the forced “Christianization” of whole populations. May we repent of creating and perpetuating racial privilege and enslavement, fostering sexism and homophobia, and domination, murder, and oppression of Indigenous peoples.**



One of the current forms of general confession in the Episcopal Church reads in part: “We repent of the evil that enslaves us, the evil we have done, and the evil done on our behalf. Forgive, restore, and strengthen us through our Savior Jesus Christ, that we may abide in your love and serve only your will.” Discerning what *is* the will of God has been so compromised and clouded by greed, covetousness, and unbridled power over and against people deemed “other” that we must stop and seek the humility that so often eludes us. That Constantinian part of our history needs to come to an end. It needs to die, so that God can bring this community of faith, and us personally, to new life in Jesus. Such repentance is not easy because the established ties with human institutional power are strong

**17. I lament the horrendous damage and grieve the uncountable millions of people slaughtered over many centuries in the name of Jesus Christ. I repent for any implied consent or use of ministry that represents or endorses such cruel abuses of power in and through the Church.**

The work of reparations and justice for those who have been harmed by the offices of the Church is a moral imperative. The current focus of attention is on the way the Church has collaborated with governments in structured racism against Black and Native populations. That is necessary and essential for the process of healing and reconciliation of relationships to begin. But the deadly collaborations and genocidal activities go back many centuries against Indigenous peoples and spiritual traditions in many lands. This is a time for the Church to be deeply repentant and offer a humble amendment of life.

**18. I reject any theological justification for separating humans from creation, exploiting creatures and nature by claiming a God-given right to domination over the earth.**

Rather, let us step into the offered kin-dom of God and take our place as members of creation rather than apart from this community. That we are separate from God, or the rest of God’s creation, is *the* great lie. We are part of the natural order and belong, and are responsible, to all that God brings into being. Many Indigenous peoples have always understood this truth. The Earth is our true mother, and we haven’t done right by her. The climate catastrophes we are bringing onto ourselves is a testament to our own greed and carelessness. It is overdue that we humans, including followers of Jesus, make a new covenant with Earth.

- 19. I am suspicious of hierarchical church structures due to the inherent temptation to misuse power to force control over others rather than serve others in the Spirit of Christ's love. Such structures can be helpful but sometimes abusive, so an ongoing critical scrutiny of how power is used is extremely important.**

One of my teachers said that there is a protestant principle at work in Catholicism and a catholic principle at work in Protestantism. Human structures help provide order and oversight in ministry and communal activities and gatherings. But those structures, and the power entrusted to leaders, can be corrupted and abused. In Jesus' time his disciples struggled with the temptations to favoritism and the use of power over others, rather than sharing power with others. We still do. Servanthood as the model of leadership is not often modeled in our culture. Yet, this is the subversive model that Jesus taught to those who would follow him.

- 20. I urge church leaders to move beyond magisterial and masculine-exclusive language and imagery for God and Jesus, which is the lingering vocabulary of imperialism and patriarchy in the Church. There are many creative language and image alternatives available in theology, liturgy, and prayer to express relationship with God, Christ, and Spirit.**

Now is the time for new vision and creativity, working with the Spirit that makes all things new. Change is unsettling and risky, especially to those of us who hold places of vested power and privilege, who have held a narrow and self-serving image of the divine. We do this in repentance for the mistakes and narrow vision of the past and a commitment to live, now, into the greater reality that God holds for us and all creation. We are now called into the vastness of this Being that reflects all and blesses all. We are invited by that same Spirit of Jesus that called out in gospel times to step into God's reality. Step into that kin-dom where there is room enough for all and not just the few, where the Holy One loves all and welcomes all into the great dream of unity.

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