

The Jesus Creed:
Loving God, Loving Others

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Foreword (*The Jesus Creed*)

My first exposure to the work of Scot McKnight came through my wife, Nancy. She breezed through the doorway one day and said, “I met a man at church who has a fabulous mind, you absolutely *have* to meet him.” Whenever my wife becomes that interested in another man it piques my curiosity, so I arranged to have lunch with him.

That first meeting led to a series of conversations and was the beginning of a relationship that continues to this day over a couple thousand miles. Scot has the kind of fertile mind that ranges from conversion theory to the debate over the search for the historical Jesus to Los Angeles Lakers’ coach Phil Jackson’s triangle offense, in a single setting. He relates well to people across every kind of spectrum. I suppose it is a backhanded compliment to refer to a scholar as a normal guy, but I can’t think of a better term to describe Scot.

Most of all, Scot has a great love for Jesus, a passionate commitment to discover all that can be learned about Jesus’ message and world. He combines this with a deep desire to help make the best of such learning accessible to people who will never earn a degree in Semitic languages or biblical archeology.

When I was in seminary David Hubbard (who was both president and Old Testament professor) talked about how the average seminary student today has more information available to her than Luther or Calvin did at the height of their learning. The problem, of course, is that in this era of information overload we have more information than we can handle streaming into our consciousness every day, from junk mail, to high-definition screens and fiber-optic cables. In this book we find no such informational overload, because Scot keeps his information in the proper perspective.

In *The Jesus Creed*, Scot has given a great gift to any follower of Jesus as he invites us back into the world in which Jesus lived. We learn, a step at a time, what it meant to be a Jewish rabbi in first-century Galilee. In these pages the identities, hopes, and struggles of Joseph and Mary, of John the Baptist, and of Simon Peter are portrayed in ways that are both fresh and deeply illuminating. Scot wears his learning lightly. We discover the significance of what it means to wrestle with being one of the *tsadiqim* or the *Am ha-aretz*—not simply for the sake of information, but because of the light it sheds on our own calling to follow Jesus. Scot, in the words of Garrison Keillor, “puts the hay down where the goats can get it.”

I am excited for you as you begin your journey through the pages of this book. I believe two gaps will grow smaller for you as you read it. One is the distance between you and Jesus. His world will draw closer to yours. In discovering the actual identities and struggles of the people around Jesus you will discover that you are reading your own story. You will find that little gestalt *aha* escaping from your lips as time after time you come to understand the essential dynamics at work in the Gospel narratives.

The other gap that will shrink is the one between the person you are right now and the person God created you to be. Dallas Willard has noted that all of us are constantly being spiritually formed for better or for worse—our wills and hearts are being shaped whether we want them to be or not. Jesus is, among other things, the maestro of spiritual formation. *The Jesus Creed* is both an invitation and a resource to put your spirit into his hands, to dine at the

Master's table. Enough with the preliminaries: time to get on with the main course.

John Ortberg
Pastor, Menlo Park Presbyterian Church

John: The Story of Love

Gospel Readings: Mark 10:35-45; Luke 9:49-56; John 13; 1 John 4:19

Good biographies tell the truth.

Israel's once-famous King Saul is the Pete Rose of the Bible. Propped up by magnificent gifts, he had some splendid successes and some blatant failures. His end was tragic. Chosen by Samuel to be Israel's first king, he's a shoo-in for a hero in Israel's storybooks for millennia to come, but, no, Saul breaks the rules. The Bible has a knack for telling the truth about people. Think of Adam and Eve, Abraham, and the kings of Israel.

At the other end of the spectrum is Christian biography, sometimes called "hagiography." Such Christian biographies often drift into fiction as the authors wipe away every trace of sin in order to make the person's life exemplary. But the Bible tells the truth about people.

Telling ugly truths about leaders may encourage sin, so doting biographers tend to hide the facts. But shading the truth may exhaust other Christians who conclude that they could never live such a perfect life. What is the solution? Tell the truth.

Telling the truth is exactly what the Christian leader and Old Testament scholar John Goldingay does in his book of reflections on faith, *Walking On*. John's wife, Ann, suffers from multiple sclerosis, and he explores the ups and downs of his own faith as he lives with her crippling disease. In his chapter on "Friendship," John says this:

I have had several experiences of women telling me they have fallen in love with me when I had no such feelings for them. I have also had the experience of getting sexually entangled with someone and thus doing wrong by her, by Ann, by God—and by the people who think I am an upright man who does a good job of living with the loss involved in his wife's illness. [After quoting a letter from a student who found John and his wife's relationship an encouragement to marriage, John adds this line of truth:] I wish the student's letter were more unequivocally justified.

I don't retell John's story to pounce on him, nor to rationalize his behavior by appealing to the all-too-easy "we are, after all, sinners." Instead, this story is true; it is part of John's life. Because John is a clear-minded reader of the Bible, he told his own story the way Bible authors

told the biographies of others.

Around the table of Jesus, his followers were telling the true story of their life. We've already heard the stories of Joseph, Mary, and Peter. Another one of those about whom the Bible tells a true story is the Apostle John. John's own story has been shaded more than perhaps anyone in the Bible.

Do you know John's story?

Readers of the Bible rarely put together a complete picture of the Apostle John. Instead, most readers focus on the glowing picture of what John was like later in life.

One word comes to mind when we think of the Apostle John: love. But, John's own "story of love" is not pretty. Love, for John, didn't come easy. In fact, if we sort out every reference to John in the Gospels we see this: John is with Jesus at some dramatic moments, but not once does John do anything that would lead us to think he would later become the celebrated Apostle of Love. We know this because the Gospel writers told the truth about John's life.

If we were to ask John about his life, he would respond by telling us the story of learning to love. Here is where he would begin:

Chapter #1: I learn about love

The skinny on John begins with his family context. Many scholars think John was a cousin of Jesus. John's father, Zebedee, was a Galilean fisherman who employed John and his brother James. James was also an Apostle of Jesus.

Jesus rocks the boat of all of three when he calls James and John to "follow him." To follow Jesus means to travel with him, to learn from Jesus, and to live as he lived. John will later write a Gospel and a significant letter to Christians, explaining to Christians what he had learned from Jesus. The one theme that consistently runs through John's writings is the theme of love. John sums it all up by telling us that Jesus gave to his followers a "new" commandment, and it was to "love one another." Why is it "new"? Because Jesus added the "love-others" line to the *Shema* of Judaism when he taught the *Jesus Creed*. John even ties together the two parts of the *Jesus Creed* in another of his statements: "Whoever loves God must also love his brother." What John learned from Jesus was "love God, love others." When he sums up what he learned from Jesus, John says he learned about love.

But, learning *about* love doesn't mean *living* lovingly. Or, *knowing* is not always the same as *doing*.

Chapter #2: My love is tested (and I don't do well)

In a moving, tender story of the love of a father and son, author Brian Doyle talks about the ups and downs of his own love for his parents:

Like most children, I loved my parents without qualification until I was a teenager, when I began to hate them for the boundaries they placed about me; and then when I woke up from those years, at about age nineteen, I began again to love them without qualification

but also with a deepening sense of the thousand ways in which they had given their lives for me, to me.

The rest of Doyle's book is a story of love, but a story incomplete if those five years are not mentioned. As Brian Doyle "learned" love from his parents, so the Apostle John learned love from Jesus. But just as Doyle didn't practice it, so John didn't either. As Aesop said about what really matters, "Deeds, not words."

John is about to be tested to see if his deeds match up to his words.

This young Apostle of Jesus, the Gospel writers truthfully tell us, had some love to learn. In fact, they tell us—if we listen to what they are saying—that John fails when he is *tested in love*. Three times. We blame Peter for his three denials. Let's not forget John's failures. What are they?

First, John and James approach Jesus and, banking on grace, state: "We want you to do for us whatever we ask." Jesus humors their obvious pettiness and asks them to proceed to their request. "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory," they say. We are not surprised to learn that the rest of the apostles bristle over the snobbish *chutzpah* of these two brothers. If love is service (which is what Jesus goes on to explain to the brothers), then John fails in love.

Second, John's love for others is tested when he doesn't recognize someone exorcising demons in Jesus' name. John tries to stop the person from doing miracles, and "tells on him" to Jesus. To which response Jesus gives the agelessly valuable "whoever is not against you is for you." Anyone following the *Jesus Creed* would not denounce someone who is breaking down demonic walls. Except John.

Third, John hears that some Samaritans refuse hospitality to Jesus "because he was heading for Jerusalem." John's response: "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" Ouch! He prays for hell to fall on these people. John was in the Thunderbolt Gang before he was an Apostle of Love. Jesus explains that his followers are not to think of Sodom and Gomorrah, to call for "ash in a flash," every time they encounter someone who doesn't respond properly. When John's love for the Samaritans is tested he fails.

For someone who spends his last days writing about love-love-love, John sure fails when his love is tested. John may learn about love, but as a young man he is crusty and cranky. But, he does have something going for him: he spends plenty of time with Jesus. Perhaps we need to join him with Jesus. "Example is better than precept," as Aesop also said. John has both precept and example in Jesus: Jesus keeps on loving John.

Chapter #3: I am loved anyway

Nothing is more important for the development of love than being loved—we may be taught the importance of love, but *to experience it is to know it*. This is why Lewis Smedes, in his marvelous memoir of his own slow and painful growth in love of God and others, describes the love he looked for in his mother:

Every comfort I was taught to see from my heavenly Father I looked for in her, my earthly

mother, but, all the time I was growing up, she was working too hard and working too much to have either time or energy to get close to me long enough for me to find God's comfort in her. I was never conscious of my missing father whom I had never known, but I missed my mother all too often.

But Lew's growth in love all comes together when his mother was eighty-six and broke her hip for the second time. Lew is able (by providential accidents) to spend every afternoon with her. One afternoon Lew opens his heart of pain to his mother. After his mother expresses gratitude to the Lord for forgiving all her sins, Lew probes another serious issue.

Why had she never gotten married again? [He asked her,] 'Didn't you ever want a man in your life? A man to take care of you? A man to talk to at the end of a day? A man to sleep with you?'

'Oh yes,' she said, 'I did; I felt so tired and so alone, and I sometimes wished that I had a husband, but I was afraid that if another man came into the house, *he might not care for my children as I did.*'

I knew then [Smedes continues] that I had found the love of my heavenly Father tucked into the love of my earthly mother.

For Lewis Smedes a painful process leads to a personal knowledge that God loves him. That love had not been obvious in the love of his parents, but one day, many years later, he does see that God's love has been there all the time in his earthly mother. *To be loved is to know love.*

John learns that love is more than learning. He had learned the *Jesus Creed* from Jesus, and he had seen Jesus live a life of love, but he is struggling with loving others himself. What eventually circles him is Jesus' love.

John knows what it is to be loved. He is, after all, 'teacher's pet.' Jesus loves him so deeply he includes him in everything. Several incidents in the life of Jesus reveal how specially Jesus treats John. When Jesus goes to the synagogue ruler's home to heal his daughter, Jesus takes John along. When Jesus is transfigured on the mountain, Jesus permits John to see it take place. And, when Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane he asks John to stay close by. In each of these, John experiences the special loving attention of Jesus.

So much is John the teacher's pet that John refers to himself in his Gospel as 'the beloved disciple.' Perhaps the most fascinating dimension of John calling himself the 'beloved disciple' is when John describes a famous meal with Jesus, and says he was 'reclining next to him [Jesus].' Literally, the text says that John was 'reclining in his bosom.' Now, it is a short step from this statement back to John's statement about Jesus: 'No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, *who is at the Father's side.*' Literally, this text says 'who is in the bosom of the Father.' Put together, John's own language suggests he thinks the love he experiences from Jesus is the same sort the Son experiences from the Father!

John knows what it means to be loved by Jesus, even though when tested, he goes belly-up. The love he experiences in the bosom of Jesus is what eventually transforms John's story from a Thunderbolt to an Apostle of Love.

Chapter #4: Finally, I learn to love others

We know Mr. Thunderbolt became the Apostle of Love from John's later writings. Several considerations show the transformation of John's life:

First, John abandons his idea that he is the most important apostle. In fact, so profound is John's own self-humiliation and service to others that he *doesn't even identify himself* in the narrative of the Gospel he wrote. John gives himself only one name: the "one Jesus loved." The would-be MVP becomes the anonymous loved one.

Second, John writes for us a theology of love. The young Apostle who wanted to turn Samaritans into ash and who thought gifts of exorcism were limited to one small group of disciples comes full circle. It doesn't take much imagination to know how John would have responded to each test later in his life.

Third, we need to count some words. The epistles of John are about 2 percent of the New Testament, yet they contain more than 20 percent of the instances of the term "love." It is not just usage. It is about *centrality*. John learned from Day One that Jesus wanted his followers to love God and love others. If Jesus adapts the *Shema* in his *Jesus Creed*, John adapts the *Jesus Creed* ever so slightly: "This is his command," John says, "to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us." That is, love God, *believe in Jesus*, and love others.

This is the story of John: the rascally Thunderbolt becomes a tender Apostle of Love. This is the true story of John's life, and by telling the truth we see the fullness of God's gracious work in his life. We need to tell the truth about our lives, too.

By telling the whole story of our life, we awaken sleeping paragraphs in our own lives and in the lives of others, and when they awaken, they give to our life a fullness, a continuity in time, and a richness.

In the community of Jesus there are many stories, none more exemplary than this story about the Apostle John. As an old man, it is said, all John wanted to talk about was love. His own students were amazed at how loving he was. He would have been the first to remind them that "It was not always so."