GENESIS 3 CHRISTIANITY

and my journey beyond it!

by Jim Juers

As a seminarian I served my vicarage year in Lansing, Michigan. My bishop there at Christ Lutheran Church gave me a gift, a book from his personal library. It was an anthology of sermons covering the full two-thousand-year span of Christian Church history. Although I no longer have the book, I distinctly remember reading homilies by such revered and ancient authors as Chrysostom, messages from medieval preachers and mystics, and sermons from Reformation heroes. The surprising thought that came to me at the time was that none of them presented the heart of the evangelical gospel as I understood the good news at that time. It was not until I came to the sermonizing of eighteenth-century evangelist John Wesley that I began to feel more comfortable and at home with the presentation of the good news as Jesus and Him crucified for our sins. It was in reading the clear Wesleyan message of the forgiveness of sins through Christ’s vicarious blood sacrifice on the cross that at last resonated more precisely with my own twentieth-century understanding of forgiveness, redemption, atonement, and reconciliation—with resurrection and heaven to follow. To my youthful thinking, it was as though it had taken more than a millennium and a half for the church to finally arrive at a clear and proper articulation of the gospel. At the time, this curious discrepancy that I sensed between early church teaching and modern evangelical preaching sowed a seed in my soul that has since then sprouted and begun to grow amazingly during the last half century of my life. One might say that I had unexpectedly and without deliberate searching or even desire stumbled upon the ‘until-then-for-me’ unrecognized ‘problem plant’ of Genesis 3 Christianity!

My invention of the term Genesis 3 Christianity is designed to critically highlight the evangelical church’s gospel proclamation as an imprecise perception based on an incomplete paradigm of the New Testament gospel. That is, it sees the essence of the Scriptural story to be the failure man encountered as recorded in Genesis 3 and then answered by God’s Christological solution to that problem. In this article I want to argue that there has always been much more to the divine designs for humanity according to the full teaching of Scripture—and that the failure to evangelize with and declare according to that full story has resulted in a feeble church and carnal, worldly Christians. To that end I trace something of the pilgrimage of my own unfolding Christian journey and the hermeneutical modifications to my slowly maturing worldview. As we face increasingly difficult challenges to Christian faith in these eschatological times, it is logical that such insights for spiritual growth will be more necessary than ever for a true faithfulness to our calling. We can no longer bear a craven fear that clings to tradition and fears to strive in our knowledge of God!

Over the past fifty years of my life many books have been read, many experiences encountered (even and especially the painful ones), and an increasingly deliberate seeking of the Lord pursued. These have watered and fertilized that ‘problem plant’ as it germinated out of that rather intuitive and inductive thought emerging from my youthful observation that something was quite different between the gospel presentations of ancient versus modern church teaching! For the sake of this article’s purpose to encourage a more mature understanding and embrace of our Christian faith, I am suggesting that worldly institutions and the ecclesiastical processes of history have shrunk, to the point of distortion (perhaps even caricature), the full and large-scale gospel message of the faith. That reduced gospel as it has been handed down to the present time is what I mean by referring to the church’s
contemporary good news message as *Genesis 3 Christianity*. It implies that we are prone to begin telling the metanarrative of the Scriptures too long after the real beginning, long after the divine plot and program have begun. The full story of the Bible, for which Genesis 3 and the gospel dimensions applicable to it are ‘added or included’ as necessary, begins in eternity past and rests upon the purposes of God in creating man and the time-space cosmos of Genesis 1 and 2 as the platform upon which all the meaning and telos of His majestic intentions would transpire toward a deliberate design and consummation. The difference between the earlier church message and the contemporary gospel interpretation (that *Genesis 3 Christianity*) is the difference between having a much broader appreciation of God’s grand designs from eternity past versus a partial faith focused only on the resolution of problems encountered later and then being resolved with a view for selfish personal heavenly blessings. And that difference has very real and very negative consequences. It helps to explain the pathetic contemporary condition of the church and her often carnal, worldly disciples. It interprets the history of the ‘church’ during and after the failed era of Christendom—and suggests where and how in that history we might best discover a modern pathway forward. Let us begin our study by considering the more in-depth worldview of the first century disciples and their teachers. That look will lay a foundation on which a dialectical synthesis can be developed to rightly merge the ancient and the modern versions of the gospel. With such an historical worldview we will be blessed with a mutual correspondence of ideas rather than an ‘either/or’ argument with only an imperfect compromise or resolution.

In my readings, I have come to appreciate increasingly that the NT apostles, the apostolic fathers, the early church fathers and apologists, and the first-centuries theologians (both Hellenic and Latin) lived out of a philosophical worldview that was based on the ancient Hebrew understanding of the created cosmos as the platform upon which God was working his deliberate and eternal designs for man in the divine kingdom within the historical processes of time. That worldview begins with Genesis 1 and 2 and with the many further hints from other OT and rabbinic writings. Added to all of this the NT church also found some powerful statements from apostolic references to the mysteries and purposes of God as originating in past eternal ‘ages’, being pursued by redemption and recreation in the present era, and promising a future of perfect completion and consummation. Beginning God’s gospel story with Genesis 3 is to start the saga too late, long after God has already set his plan in motion. God did not create to redeem; he redeemed in order to fulfill the purposes of creation! If we begin our gospel account with Genesis 3 we are always living only with a subplot (important as it may be and likely to contain significant divine purposes as well). All of the imperfectly understood issues and profound questions that man faces have their roots before the ‘fall’ of man resulting from Adam’s original sin. The designs of God preceded and surpass the graciously added redemptive elements of salvation from sin. We are correct, even if somewhat amused, to have our mental pictures of Jewish rabbis gathered in intense and animated discussions and debates, pouring over the record of divine revelations given to them by Moses and later the prophets. In those writings, much of what God purposed in and for the origins, nature, and telos of our time/space created cosmos are, even if often and tantalizingly hidden in mysteries, at least in some measure implicated and revealed. Those debating rabbis wanted to better understand such mysteries and how they, as sin-damaged men, might live in a true pursuit of and conformance to God’s eternal intentions and find life’s full meaning as divine heirs of sonship. They wrestled with questions about the nature and destiny of man. What is man? Who is this more than merely material creature distinguished as he is by his formation in the image of God? How and by what processes would this human mature and satisfy God by fulfilling his great purposes in and for coming ages? In their discussions they did not fixate on Genesis 3 and thus ignore the preceding and following chapters. Who and from whence was this adversary of the Divine Being appearing as a serpent to tempt with taunt His unique creation? Indeed, what was the origin and root of an obvious grand warfare
between God and that creature who had deceived man into a false alliance and captivity? How would that war be resolved? And would man be able to recover what had been lost by his disobedience and yet attain to his highest ultimate calling and purpose? The contemplations and arguments of the historical record of Genesis 1-11 embraced so much more than just Genesis 3. Their interest broadened into pondering all of the Holy Spirit inspired Scriptures and the mysteries of the ages that were secreted there concerning God’s Kingdom—and, of course, how their elected Hebrew nation would excel as those mysteries unfolded and were fulfilled. If, as the Apostle Peter tells us, such ancient rabbinic study sought to understand what they knew to be Holy Spirit inspired teaching concerning both the sufferings and the subsequent glories of the Christ (oh, and even angels desire to look into this), ought not we as today’s believers be urgent and interested to consider not only the sufferings of Christ (*Genesis 3 Christianity*) but also the glories to follow (an Acts 2 Kingdom and his Parousia consummation yet to come)?

The development of Hebrew thought (as it wrestled with the broader philosophy of God’s plenary designs for man) can be more greatly appreciated when contrasted with the diminished memory and understanding of other peoples and cultures of the early post-diluvian world and the nations that arose from it. Their religions harbored, at best, fading historical memories, idolatrous pictures of their non-gods, and childish utopian dreams built upon man’s own greatness on a refined natural earth. Their vision of history and the time-process was, in one form or another, some cycle of repetitions for human development and deterioration. One author correctly and scornfully refers to them as ‘eternal recurrences’; and the oriental worldviews teetered on various versions of pantheism and polytheism. Not so the Hebrews. If they were familiar at all with the ‘dreams’ of the surrounding nations (think Babylonians, Persians, Egyptians, etc.) they were reinterpreted correctly and filtered through the more accurate divine revelations—however incomplete and cryptic those might at times have been. The early faint glimmers of divine meaning and purpose began to mature with prophetic revelations and eventually apocalyptic authors who understood history as a deliberate and perfect outworking of historical processes working toward a complete fulfillment of the divine intention. And in their contemplations, they sensed that there was in the spirit of man as part of that *imago Dei* a realization that he was destined for and capable of a reality surpassing mere material existence. What had begun as a material *creatio ex nihilo* could only be finished in a new creation through a divine adoption of the children of a new race. All of this I recount in order to make the point that the early church’s inheritance from their Hebrew origins was an appreciation that from the ‘beginning’ a divine purpose, meaning, and goal was being implemented by God. When the early Christians declared that Jesus had inaugurated a new and promised dispensation of the Kingdom of God, they were evangelizing with a message of the progressive fulfillments of such plans. If a redemption had become necessary, God would provide all that as well. But salvation as redemption alone was never the full plan. The fulfilling of divine eternal designs was, is, and always has been God’s story for the gospel message. The early church grew out of that Hebrew worldview. Its gospel declaration always began and ended with the glorious word that God’s Kingdom had been inaugurated in order to further the implementation toward complete fulfillment of the eternal purposes and plans! Thus far the modest description of how my reading introduced me to alternate paradigms and a maturing worldview that thus began to challenge *Genesis 3 Christianity* and to encourage a bigger and braver walk with God.

Over time, in addition to the serious study and reading, the experiences of life also kept challenging and adjusting my contemporary, modern Christian interpretation of the gospel. Forgiveness of sins with heaven to follow (important and necessary as that divine reconciliation is), simply was ceasing to be for me an adequate and whole picture for my Christian faith. Already in seminary the contact with and exposure to other denominational traditions as well as my own more thoughtful considerations given to
my personal tradition of upbringing and culture forced a realization that there were other
hermeneutical perspectives than the very limited one that I had only always known. Opening one’s
mind to other aspects and interpretations of truth is exhilarating even when challenging and painful.
But do not suppose there was never caution or concern for the potential of false teaching and false
teachers. But a wholesome openness to a radical implosion of old in favor of better truth (such as Paul
faced on that road to Damascus) was being clarified with caution and maturing with eager expectation.
Later, when confronting those who spoke of baptism in the Holy Spirit as interpreted by the ‘new’
Charismatic Movement, I could not resist looking into some of the Pentecostal realities (even though
often misused and abused as well as suffering from much poor exegesis and historically questionable
interpretations) of my Christian faith. It seemed that Jesus’ Ascension, Glorious Session, and
Pentecostal Outpouring were more than just the birthdate of record for the Christian Church! How
strange it all seemed! But so much appeared to fit so well with early-centuries Christianity. Yes, a
gospel message that surpassed the limited view of Genesis 3 Christianity. Thus between study and
experience, the Way was opening before me for an understanding and interpretation of the gospel that
could reach back from the eighteenth century preaching of John Wesley declaring reconciliation
between man and God and with the boldness of such good news to retrieve the full scope of God’s
ancient promises and purposes. But such a reconciliation of Genesis 3 Christianity and early church
teaching must wait as we first consider how and with what effect a gospel of reconciliation without a
gospel of purpose both developed and caused serious problems in the present church age.

How, we might wonder, did the church’s proclamation become so distorted? How might we
explain and understand the morphing of the Christian faith from a good news declaration that God was
faithfully fulfilling otherworldly purposes with glorious designs of meaning for man and his part in God’s
victorious spiritual war to a minimized message of merely solving man’s problems of the Genesis 3
stumble into sinful disobedience? How did such a reduction of the faith occur and what have been the
unfortunate impact and results of such a change? I confess to not having fully satisfying answers to such
difficult questions. But we must make attempts to answer them as the first steps in recovering the
fullness of our own faith and in walking in obedience to the fullness of Jesus’ desires for his Church.

It seems impossible to evaluate the church’s weaknesses and failures without at least laying
significant blame-of-origin on the institutional church’s compromise in the Constantinian formula. That
unauthorized ‘truce with the world’ resulted in the medieval and feudal world of Christendom as it
eventually grew and blossomed with all of its beautiful flowers as well as its many rotten fruits. Having
eventually abandoned hopes for Jesus’ soon return in a glorious Parousia and for an earthly sovereign
rule, the young church settled for an institutional and worldly church as the kingdom of God on earth.
This impatient response was shortsighted and lacking in insight and understanding. It was all both part
cause and part effect of the natural eventualities of the compromises germane to the Constantinian
formula. Christendom lost the necessary appreciation of the full supernatural work of the Incarnation of
God’s Son in Jesus of Nazareth. A full and proper appreciation of the Incarnation would have
understood the ontological reality of Jesus and his now-present Kingdom on earth. Instead the
compromise formula embraced for the kingdom of God the governments of the nations, their social
structures and cultures, and the worldly ecclesiastical structures as the viable reality of heaven’s
kingdom itself! The medieval church settled for the material ‘enchantments’ of Aristotelian philosophy.
Thus, in a sense and in a measure the Gentiles by default made the same mistake as the Jews who
would settle for nothing but an earthly realm! To the extent that we are able, as heirs of Western
civilization and culture, to set aside an appreciation of the many positive Christian influences and effects
evident in our world, we will in honesty observe that Christendom and its fruits in the Renaissance
eventually resulted in a church that supported a secular view of the church with its materialist and
earthly agenda. We have received from the past a church that would help us create and refine worldly civilizations rather than develop outposts of heaven on earth. It was inevitable, then, that the humanism which first so powerfully raised its ugly head in ancient Babel and then enjoyed a strong resurgence in the heart and heat of the Renaissance and it offspring, the Enlightenment, would actually be the philosophical and moral capital upon which the beautiful civilization and its ally, a worldly church, would build upon its own repeated ruins in the 21st century! Thus, void of a proper understanding of it true place and role in relationship to the ontologically real Kingdom of God, it became impossible for such an institutional church to recognize its own captivity and to raise up disciples who were not only ‘in’ the world but also ‘of’ the world. And this is exactly what we see today! When we consider such documents as Pope Francis’ Laudato Si or read journals such as Sojourners, it becomes painfully obvious that the earthly church that lives from and for this present age has totally lost the vision of its true power and purpose as the Ark living in but ‘separated’ from a fading age and perishing world. All the cries for ‘social justice’ arise, not from heavenly Kingdom seekers, but from those who are captive to the false dreams promised by the peace and prosperity message of those who are angry with (hate) God and, perhaps often in ignorance, work for the great city of latter day Babylon.

But we must also address a question as to how Genesis 3 Christianity arose out of Christendom’s unfortunate model. Answer: the grand truth of atonement-reconciliation was co-opted by an earthly church to be used to manage disciples and share rulership with earthly potentates, all for its own benefit. By claiming the possession of the power to grant the forgiveness of sins that God had freely provided in Christ Jesus, the worldly church required believers to submit to an earthly master who promised later blessings in heaven (after Purgatory). When at last the Reformation strove to eliminate these medieval abuses, the matter of ‘sin/forgivenessgoing to heaven’ naturally rose to the top of all theological discussions and debates. Christianity was redefined in terms of a salvation that focused on the Genesis 3 tragedy and the religious services designed to address that problem through the doctrine of justification. The ultimate purposes of God, that had been so significant to the early church, were for all practical purposes, totally lost. Whether in the medieval bondage or by Reformation freedom, believers were directed and taught to live with an emphasis and focus on the affairs of this present life. If the assurance of a future life in heaven were in hand, believers could refocus their interests and activities to the cares and pleasures of this present life. Jesus had so warned! And the advice of the Apostle Paul to set our affections on things above was interpreted to mean looking forward to going to heaven later, not enjoying its presence here and now. The proper place of the vicarious atonement in the program of God had been lost—and with it any appreciation for the greater being and work of the church thus constituted. The Incarnation had been reduced to a divine solution for sin. The new creation begun with Jesus’ session was all but forgotten. John Wesley came forth to gloriously declare an open heaven—but a present Kingdom of God was missing. Genesis 3 Christianity had won the day. Those many years ago when I first sensed the problem, I could never have imagined, nor would I ever have thought of such a solution. History, with its earthly/worldly church, had created an improper and misleading divide between the means and the end. Genesis 3 had created a crisis need; but the provision for a solution was not the sole goal for the faith. This way lies the fulfillment of my earlier suggestion for a dialectical synthesis to properly join the atonement aspects of the gospel to the larger promises of eternal and divine purposes, the meaning of life. Since God has eternal purposes, any hindrance for its fulfillment must be removed. Genesis 3 Christianity (the cross of Christ) removes the hindrance; but the ultimate goal can only be reached with a higher provision (a resurrected, enthroned Jesus). Atonement (Genesis 3) needs the flowerbed of divine purpose and meaning (Genesis 1-2 and so much more). Lord, so teach us the complete lessons of Your Incarnation—Jesus’ death, resurrection, AND exaltation with Holy Spirit outpouring!