

***Der Antichrist*¹**

“The Christian resolution to find the world ugly and bad has made the world ugly and bad.”
— Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom*, aphorism 130

Friedrich Nietzsche was right! In his 1888 book *Der Antichrist* (*The Antichrist*) — the provocatively ambiguous title possibly referring to the apocalyptic “antichrist” or more likely to Nietzsche himself as the fierce “antichristian” — what this notorious author said about the superficialities, immaturities and weaknesses of Christians was and is largely and embarrassingly true. This man, whose father and both grandfathers were Lutheran ministers, was obsessed throughout his rather difficult and solitary fifty-six years with a vision of human greatness.² The question that churned in his mind and burned in his heart and about which his philosophical reflections revolved concerned the character of the ideal human being — what kind of life was justified and truly worth living, especially in the midst of a chaotic and meaningless world?³

Unfortunately, his observations of Christian believers — whom he classified with others he referred to as “sheep,” “little gray people,” and “shallow ponds”⁴ — disqualified them in his mind as representatives of an authentic humanity. For him, their lackluster lives were virtually indefensible and unworthy

¹ This paper was inspired by a brief article by S. M. Hutchins, “Fully Living Sacrifices: Where Nietzsche Was Right About Christians,” *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity* 20 (July/August 2007): pp. 4-5.

² Nietzsche lived from 1844-1900.

³ William F. Lawhead, *The Voyage of Discovery: A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1996), p. 446; Norman Melchert, *The Great Conversation: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy*, 4th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2002), p. 543.

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: Fourth Part*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed., trans., intro., and notes Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), pp. 377-78. Nietzsche also calls Christians “vermin,” “cowardly,” and “effeminate,” and “saccharine” (pp. 648-49).

of emulation in light of the rigorous challenges posed by the modern world. If, indeed, Nietzsche felt as he did about the reasonably robust character qualities of nineteenth century European Christians, what might he have to say about twenty-first century evangelicals living in North America? We can only imagine the severity of his criticisms of our anemic generation of born-again, Bible-believing Christians today. We wonder, in other words, what he would say about us!

In this paper, then, I would like to wrestle with the truth that is present in Nietzsche's criticisms about Christians and their present day applicability. I would also like to use his comments as goads to reconsider the magnitude of the maturity of Jesus Christ Himself, and to spur us on to deeper levels of growth and development as His followers who ought to reflect in a rather profound way what it means to be fully and truly human in Him under God.

Christian Nihilism

“Thus it happened in those days ... my vital instincts ... founded a radical counterdoctrine, slanted esthetically, to oppose the Christian libel on life.”
— Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* §5

The notorious Friedrich Nietzsche condemned Christianity venomously and, as he said, he raised “against the Christian church the most terrible of all accusations that any accuser ever uttered.”⁵ Others before and after him have certainly offered harsh criticisms of Christianity such as Desiderius Erasmus (1466/69-1536) in his *In Praise of Folly*, Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55) in his *Attack on Christendom*, and contemporary author Peter J. Leithart in his work *Against Christianity*.⁶ The difference, however, is that these three authors sought to deconstruct the church as her loyal opponents for ultimately constructive purposes. They have been or are *against* the church *for* the church. On the other

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed., trans., intro., and notes Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), §62, p. 655. Subsequent citations to this work will be indicated in the body of the text with section and page number in parentheses.

⁶ Leithart, for example, criticizes “Christianity” as a “privatized, spiritualized, intellectualized, depoliticized form of religion.” See Peter Leithart, *Against Christianity* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2003), p. 124.

hand, Nietzsche attacked the faith and institutional Christianity in order to destroy it. He philosophized, as he said, with a “hammer,” and was not merely a man, but “dynamite.”⁷ His goal was to decimate Christianity and usher it into utter oblivion. Nietzsche viewed all things Christian as “the highest of all conceivable corruptions” and the “one immortal blemish of mankind” (§62, pp. 655, 656). In his mind, it “has been the greatest misfortune of humanity so far.”⁸

As you can see, even though Nietzsche was raised as a Christian and was even the author of some noted devotional poetry, as he grew up, he underwent a radical change of heart and turned against the faith with seemingly limitless passion. After his mega-change, he deployed his considerable intellectual powers — at age twenty-five he was appointed professor of classical philology at the University of Basel even without having completed his doctorate — in a fierce attack on God and the church and has earned the reputation of being the chief enemy of the Judeo-Christian tradition in the entire history of the West — a contemporary Judas Iscariot, if you will.

Consequently, if you read Nietzsche and you should, you ought to read Nietzsche cautiously with wisdom and discernment. If, as Nietzsche said, “one does well to put on gloves when reading the New Testament” (§46, p. 625), likewise the Christian reader can almost feel unclean when reading Nietzsche’s works. He or she would do well to delve into his material prophylactically. Pray up, therefore, before you venture forth into his books.⁹

⁷ *How One Philosophizes With A Hammer* is the subtitle to his book, *Twilight of the Idols*. Nietzsche’s statement, “I am no man, I am dynamite” is from *Ecce Homo*, “Why I am a Destiny,” §1, in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. and ed., Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1969).

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, §47 in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed., trans., intro., and notes Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 552.

⁹ Nietzsche’s works contain some very helpful insights on many subjects, like this piece of advice on choosing a marriage partner. “*Marriage as a long conversation*. When marrying, one should ask oneself this question: Do you believe that you will be able to converse well with this woman [or man] into your old age? Everything else in marriage is transitory, but the most time during the association belongs to conversation” (*Human, All-Too-Human*, §406).

The question that intrigues me regarding the tragic, terrifying, strident, troubled, powerful, intense, intoxicating, charismatic and prophetic figure of Friedrich Nietzsche is this: why did he become so adamantly opposed to the Christian faith? What was it about Christianity that infuriated him so and turned him resolutely against God and the church?

Chances are high that as with most things human, the reasons for Nietzsche's intense animosity are multiple and complex. Nevertheless, I do think there was a *fundamental* reason why Nietzsche viewed all things Christian with such disgust. That reason, ironically enough, was because of his inextinguishable *love for life*. Yes, that's right, Nietzsche took his stand over against the church so vehemently because of his insatiable *love for life and all aspects of reality, including its challenges and hardships*.

The influence of the romantic mood of mid to late nineteenth-century Germany, his commitment to philosophical materialism, and his own cultivation of a vision of secular existentialism were some of the reasons why Nietzsche's deepest affections were reserved for the earth, for the human body and its emotional and physical passions, for art and culture, and overall, for a robust and exuberant YES! to life and human existence. Through the mouthpiece of Zarathustra, Nietzsche beseeched his comrades to "*remain faithful to the earth*."¹⁰ He "baptized," as he said, this understanding of the highest of all possible faiths and human ideals with name *Dionysius*, the Greek god of wine and intoxication, known also as Bacchus to the Romans.¹¹

On the basis, then, of his deep love and reverence for life and with the goal of overcoming the apparent vanity and futility of life in the world, Nietzsche cultivated a view of a truly great, creative human being who would be the poet of his own virtuous nature. He dubbed such a personality the *übermensch* or the

¹⁰ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, prologue 3, p. 125. Zarathustra was a prophet, religious poet and founder of the Indo-Iranian religion of Zoroastrianism, 6th century B. C., one of the first in Nietzsche's mind to proclaim the dualistic opposition between "good" and "evil."

¹¹ The name *Dionysius* with its celebratory connotations is the source of such contemporary English names as Dennis, Denny and Denise.

superior self or “overman.” With the great German writer and polymath Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), Nietzsche shared this vision of a paradigmatic kind of person who was able to conquer his own weaknesses and overcome the ruling nihilism of existence so as to make life rich and purposeful. This kind of individual, in Nietzsche’s words “would be strong, highly educated, skillful in all bodily matters, self-controlled, reverent toward himself, and who might dare to afford the whole range and wealth of being natural, being strong enough for such freedom; the man of tolerance, not from weakness but from strength, because he knows how to use his advantage, even that from which the average nature would perish; the man for whom there is no longer anything that is forbidden — unless it be *weakness*, whether called vice or virtue (§50, p. 554).

Nietzsche’s disillusionment with the church arose at least in part because he perceived that it was opposed to and rejected such a finely tuned human personality in the *übermensch*. “Christianity,” he said “... has waged war against this higher type of man” (§5, p. 571). Furthermore, Christianity’s apparent hostility toward and disdain for life, its seemingly enthusiastic NO! to the world as a whole, its negation of the body and its diverse desires, its indifference to deeply significant aesthetic and cultural enterprises — these things together explain why Christianity *nauseated* Nietzsche so greatly. He opposed the church and its teachings with every fiber of his being, in short, because of the church’s *Christian nihilism*.

Nietzsche struggled against nihilism with all he had in an attempt to make life on this planet worthwhile. Simultaneously, the church taught that life on this planet was, in fact, worthless, and should be negated in light of the otherworldly Christian hope of eternal life in heaven above. As one Christian author put it in a noted 2002 book, “Life on earth is just the dress rehearsal before the real production ... life is just preparation for eternity.”¹² Christianity, which should save us from nihilism, has instead given in to it and is guilty of the greatest

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nihilism of all. Indeed, Nietzsche's "this worldliness" combined with the church's "otherworldliness" constituted a volatile formula destined to explode.

Christian nihilism? That, you say, does not make any sense whatsoever. It's a contradiction in terms. Isn't such an expression oxymoronic, something akin to a "healthy tan" or "government organization" or "Microsoft Works"!¹³ Christianity is supposed to make life meaningful, but this suggests that Christianity turns regular, daily, human life into a zero, into nothingness, into a negation of the value of human existence. Precisely. In so far as the church condemns, slanders and besmirches the life of the world, according to Nietzsche, we have reason to believe in the essential nihilism of the Christian religion. In Nietzsche's reckoning, "the practice of the church is hostile to life," that God himself is "the enemy of life," and that "Life has come to an end where the 'kingdom of God' begins."¹⁴ The Christian denunciation of life in this world in longing for immortal life in another, better world, along with an imposing, ethical rigorism was dangerous and destructive. It ultimately meant that human existence in this world had little if any value at all. These were Nietzsche's complaints throughout his career and were the central themes even in his very first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*.

From the very first, Christianity spelled life loathing itself, and that loathing was simply disguised, tricked out, with notions of an "other" and "better" life. A hatred of the "world," a curse on the affective urges, a fear of beauty and sensuality, a transcendence rigged up to slander mortal existence, a yearning for extinction [death], cessation of all effort until the great "Sabbath of Sabbaths" — this whole cluster of distortions, together with the intransigent Christian assertion that nothing counts except moral values, had always struck me as being the most dangerous, most sinister form the will to destruction can take; at all events, as a sign of profound sickness, moroseness, exhaustion, biological etiolation [to make pale and feeble]. And since according to ethics (specifically Christian, absolute ethics) life will always be in the wrong, it followed quite naturally that one must smother it under a load of contempt and constant negation; must

¹³ See the largest list of oxymorons ever collected online at <http://www.oxymoronlist.com/>. Accessed August 30, 2007.

¹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed., trans., intro., and notes Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), §1, 4, pp. 487, 490.

view it as an object not only unworthy of our desire but absolutely worthless in itself.¹⁵

Nietzsche was convinced that since the church placed the center of gravity not in this life in this world but in the life of the world to come, it deprived human experience in the here and now of its center of gravity. If real life is there, not here, this view aroused suspicion on the part of Christians of various activities that seem to promote life in this present world. Such efforts were belittled as secular, temporal, material, worldly, etc. In practical terms, the idea that there is no longer any *sense* in living became “the ‘sense’ of life” (§43, p. 618). Christians, in other words, found their meaning in asserting that this life has little if any meaning at all. This is, indeed, what some of our songs and slogans seem to say.

This world is not my home,
I'm just a passin' through,
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue.

You can have all this world,
Just give me Jesus.

Nietzsche also believed that the church's moral values were nihilistic in their life-denying character even though they were presented in the holiest and loftiest and most spiritual and pietistic of terms — be poor, be mournful, be meek, be merciful, be sweet, be kind. The kind of person they produced was “the domestic animal, the herd animal, the sick human animal — the Christian” (§5, 17, pp. 571, 585), people, who like Christ, were pale, weak, base, bland, and failures in the end. Nietzsche also believed that the Christian demand to be perfect required that a believer “draw in his senses, turtle fashion, to cease all intercourse with earthly things, to shed his immortal shroud” so that his true essence as “pure spirit” would emerge (§14, p. 581). In essence, the church's moral vision called Christians to what has been called “angelism.” Discipleship virtually encourages believers to become “apprentice angels” who must renounce their embodied nature as physical beings in an attempt at a purer form of

¹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, §5, trans. Francis Goffing (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1956), pp. 10-11.

spirituality. In Nietzsche's estimation, such demands forced human beings in to an unnatural state of "self-violation" (§38, p. 611) since such a condition was contrary to the real nature of human nature. The gospel, therefore, in Nietzsche's estimation was "'ill tidings,' a *dysangel*" (§39, p. 612), or in short, bad news. Come to Christ so you can become what you aren't. It was a message that destroyed humanity.

Consequently, Nietzsche equated the Christian and the anarchist, saying that "their aim, their instinct are directed only toward destruction" (§58, p. 647), especially of human nature and also of the highest conditions of prosperity and exuberance. The notion of God, therefore, was not merely an error, but an actual "*crime against life*" (§47, p. 627). Nietzsche was convinced there was a desperate need for a radical reversal in ethical thought. Trans-valuing all traditional Christian values — from a weak, "herd" to a strong, "master" morality — became one of his major philosophic projects. He wanted morality to fit with reality in order to produce the noblest kind of people in this present world.

Nietzsche was right, right?

Now my claim in the first sentence of this presentation was that Friedrich Nietzsche was right, right?. Or was he? It seems to me he was a mixed bag and the answer is *sic et non*, both "Yes" and "No" simultaneously!

On the negative side, to the extent that Nietzsche's judgments stemmed from his naturalistic/atheistic worldview, we would have to conclude that what he had to say was wrong. While we can appreciate Nietzsche's gusto for this life and this world, to the extent that it rested exclusively on nature and nature alone is both insufficient and false. Likewise, his attempt to transvaluate all values on the basis of his thorough-going naturalism is inadequate and faulty as well. If atheism is wrong, then Nietzsche's criticisms of Christianity based upon it are also wrong, along with his alternative metaphysical and ethical perspectives.

Yet on the positive side, Nietzsche seems justified in his complaint against the church's *Christian nihilism* that was (and is) based a number of New Testament texts that can be easily misinterpreted to say that life on earth is of little, if any, value. For example, how have we and how should we understand the

following passages that seem to affirm Nietzsche's accusations that Christianity and the church besmirch and slander the world?

Blessed are the **poor in spirit**, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
— Matthew 5: 3

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. **But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven**, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.
— Matthew 6: 19-21

If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must **deny himself**, and **take up his cross** and follow Me. **For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it**, but whoever **loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it**. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? For what will a man give in exchange for his soul? — Mark 8: 34-37

He must increase, **but I must decrease**. — John 3: 30

Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; **for I go to prepare a place for you**. If I go and prepare a place for you, **I will come again and receive you to Myself**, that where I am, there you may be also.
— John 14: 1-3

Jesus answered [Pilate], "**My kingdom is not of this world**. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, **My kingdom is not of this realm**."
— John 18: 36

Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while **we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal**. — 2 Corinthians 4: 16-18

Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, **keep seeking the things above**, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. **Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth**.
— Colossians 3: 1-2

All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were **strangers and exiles on the earth**. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And

indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, **they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.** Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them.

— Hebrews 11: 13-16

Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

— 1 John 2: 15

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which **the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up** [or “discovered,” marginal reading of the NASB based on other ancient Greek manuscripts]. Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which **the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat!** But according to His promise **we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.**

— 2 Peter 3: 10-13

On the basis of these passages and others like them, an interpretive tradition has arisen in the church over the centuries in which the importance of life in this world and of this world and its life have been undermined. As a consequence, the focus of attention has been placed on spiritual matters in the context of an otherworldly mindset and hope. Biblically speaking, Christians, it seems, are obviously right in their negativity towards earthly human existence and the broad range of everyday activities in physical world. Time on earth is a time of testing and preparation (i.e., the dress rehearsal, prep for eternity), and believers are justified in their emphasis on a disembodied form of super-spirituality in a heavenly orientation. Correct?

Had we but world enough, and time,¹⁶ we could study each of these passages individually in order to test their traditional interpretations.¹⁷ Since the space and time to do this kind of exegesis is lacking, in response let me say

¹⁶ From the first line of Andrew Marvell’s *carpe diem* poem, “To His Coy Mistress.”

¹⁷ See Appendix A offers a re-interpretation of some “problem” passages in this regard and is taken from Michael Wittmer’s book *Heaven is a Place on Earth* which. Additional material is available at: <http://grts.cornerstone.edu/wittmer/>. Accessed September 3, 2007.

three basic things. First, the otherworldly interpretation of these texts originally developed under the misguided influence of the dualism of the reigning Platonism and neo-platonism that formed the intellectual framework of the early church during its first few centuries. For this reason, Nietzsche said that Christianity was “Platonism for the people,” and many Bible-based Christians are in fact, platonists unaware. The cultural and philosophical contexts in which passages are interpreted are so important and influential!¹⁸

Second and following, the immediate contexts of these passages, the interpretive influence of the framework of the total biblical narrative of creation, fall and redemption, and the content of several important theological doctrines such as Christ’s incarnation and resurrection can cause a significant shift in our understanding of what these texts mean. For example, could it be that in 2 Corinthians 4: 18, the temporal things seen and the eternal things not seen aren’t statements about the inferiority of the earth and the superiority of heaven respectively. Rather, these phrases refer to transitory character of present suffering and the everlasting reward that awaits us if we are faithful?

A careful look at all these verses in a new framework just might change our minds about their meaning. It might affect how we view ourselves and this world. It could adjust our perspective on the integral relationship that intimately connects God, humanity and creation in a significant, three-way relationship.

Third, if Nietzsche based his unrelenting attacks on Christianity on the church’s misinterpretation of Scripture, then to explain these passages and the overall way of God more accurately will not only enable us to answer Nietzsche, but can help prevent like-minded, partially correct Nietzschean antichrists from arising in the future.

Behold, then, the influential character of hermeneutics and homiletics on the way the Bible is interpreted and how Christ and Christianity are presented. What a profound influence teaching and preaching has had on our self-understanding as believers and on the character of the Christian life! How

¹⁸ See Nietzsche’s preface to his *Beyond Good and Evil*.

carefully we must read and explain what God has revealed to us about Himself, ourselves, and what life here and now as well as there and then is all about.

Have we been gypped? Have *you* been gypped? What kind of example have we set as believers before watching world? Are we sheep, little gray people, shallow ponds? Are *you* a sheep, a little gray person, a shallow pond? Are we all easily led, colorless and mere puddles as persons? Might there be some room for improvement in the way we understand what Scripture teaches and in how we lead our lives? “There has been something very wrong,” writes journalist S. M. Hutchens, “about the way the gospel is so often interpreted among us — wrong because it is not the will of God that we be the weak and passive things, the welcomers of shame and of death and of inferiority and imperfection that we so frequently are, the excuse being that we are put into this world to decrease and die.”¹⁹

If weakness and passivity are our badges of spiritual honor; if we somehow deem shame, death, inferiority and imperfection to be Christian virtues; if we believe our goal is to decrease and die, then where did these ideas come from? We just might need to overhaul our Christian paradigm! We don’t want to do this in the ungodly direction of a Nietzschean *übermensch*, super human, or overman, but in a biblical way that significantly enlarges our vision of Jesus Christ and what it means to be like him.

Jesus Christ

They were utterly astonished, saying, “He has done all things well.” — Mark 7: 37

Somehow a rather lackluster portrait of Jesus has insinuated itself in the minds and imaginations of many people in many walks of life. Who is responsible for this bland perspective on Christ? Certainly not from those who knew him! As Dorothy Sayers states, “Not Herod, not Caiaphas, not Pilate, not Judas ever contrived to fasten upon Jesus Christ the reproach of insipidity; that final indignity was left for pious hands to inflict.”²⁰ Sadly, much of the blame may be laid for

¹⁹ Hutchens, “Fully Living Sacrifices,” p. 4.

anemic views of Jesus at the feet of Jesus' devoted followers who have somehow emasculated him and diluted his reputation.

We who are steeped in deep piety are not exonerated from this charge, having ourselves frequently turned Jesus into a Precious Moments figurine, a Thomas Kinkade painting, and matched him up with the most maudlin of melodies and lyrics of the worst of worship and contemporary Christian music. Sentimentalizing and saccharinizing Jesus is a sin.

Contrariwise, I can't help but think that should we confronted with the physical presence and person of Jesus Christ the God/Man, like the Roman soldiers who were trying to arrest Him in the Garden of Gethsemane, we would most likely draw back and fall to the ground. He's good, but He's not safe (C. S. Lewis). When He comes again, He will be on a white horse with a sword protruding from His mouth with which He will smite the nations. As Sayers says of Jesus elsewhere, "To those who knew Him ... He in no way suggested a milk-and-water person; they objected to Him as a dangerous firebrand."²¹

Christ the Firebrand! Christ was a firebrand, indeed! Controversy and suspense surrounded him even before he was born, certainly while he was alive, and it has continued after his death right up to the present. His actual paternity was a matter of suspicion, and his birth attracted the attention of peasants and dignitaries alike (even angels). Within two years of his nativity, one insecure politician pursued a program of infanticide to prevent his possible rise to power. By the age of twelve, he was already confounding the religious leaders of the land with his questions and insights, as he manifested the signs of a special divine calling. His developing wisdom and maturity astounded all who knew him,

²⁰ Dorothy L. Sayers, "Introduction" to *The Man Born To Be King: A Play-Cycle on the Life of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990, originally published in 1943), p. 30.

²¹ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1949, 1974), p. 7.

even as he simultaneously labored for almost a two decades as a master carpenter (*tekton* = builder, one who works with wood and stone). When he was thirty years old, he aligned himself with the morally rigorous ministry of a prophet of strange dress and a bizarre diet by submitting to his call for repentance and baptism. From then on, he taught with unmistakable authority, performed amazing signs and wonders, and gathered to himself an unlikely crew of followers quite diverse in background and temperament. Eventually, one betrayed and another denied him. They all abandoned him at his greatest moment of need at the time of His death.

Jesus challenged the authority and character of both politicians and religious leaders, calling an elite Roman ruler a crafty “fox” on one occasion, and castigating the Scribes and Pharisees as “hypocrites.” For some, he hung out with the wrong crowd and allegedly ate and drank too much. Toward the end of his life, he had the audacity to clear the temple precincts of its entrepreneurial corruption with bravado. He also showed himself more than capable of handling the verbal challenges of his enemies with remarkable intellect. To top things off, he often applied messianic and divine titles to himself, and claimed to deserve the same kind of love and glory due only to God. He also taught that his death would be a sacrifice that would defeat sin and evil, and that he would rise in conquest of death three days later. All that took place just as He had said it would. A month or so afterward, he ascended into heaven to the right hand of God’s throne from which he rules everything in heaven and on earth with unquestionable authority and power. In his book *The Unfolding Drama of Redemption*, English scholar Graham Scroggie has written this summary of Jesus’ superlative character.

Not only is it true that “never man spake like this man”, but more, never man was like this man. Prudent in avoiding danger, yet courageous in facing it. Patient under wrong, yet indignant at injustice. Meek and lowly, yet self-assertive. He respected authority, precedent, and the past, yet He was bound by none of these things. A dreamer of dreams, yet He was intensely practical. Tolerant of publicans and sinners, yet He was intolerant of sin. Though He longed for sympathy, yet He took no pains to soften the truth though it cost Him the loss of followers. He who had an

eye for details saw the universal reign of God at hand. ... His character was perfect in unity, symmetry, and proportion.²²

Who, then, was Jesus and what was he like? Colorless? Wishy-washy? Never. Notorious? Controversial? Indeed. Intelligent? Gifted? Absolutely. Tenderhearted? Kind? Most certainly. As Sayers concludes, “He was emphatically not a dull man in His human lifetime, and if He was God, there can be nothing dull about God either.”²³

God-incarnate. That Jesus is both God and man, that is, the God-Man (and in neither nature dull nor boring) is the mystery of the incarnation. This great theological word literally means “in the flesh.” It conveys the idea that Jesus Christ as a person was the perfect and permanent union of humanity and deity without either of these natures being impaired.²⁴ The incarnation is significant, not only because it makes God known to people, but it also makes people known to people. It not only unveils and validates our humanity but it also certifies the goodness of creation and our engagement in it. In Christ we see what God is like and what human beings are supposed to be like as well. The church’s historic belief in the complete deity and full humanity of Jesus Christ has been well articulated in these definitive terms of the Nicene Creed (A. D. 325).

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, ☐the only Son of God, ☐eternally begotten of the Father, ☐God from God, light from light, ☐true God from true God, ☐begotten, not made, ☐of one substance (Being) with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation ☐he came down from heaven, ☐was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary and *became truly human*. ☐For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; ☐he suffered death and was buried. ☐On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven ☐and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

²² W. Graham Scroggie, *The Unfolding Drama of Redemption*, 3 volumes in one, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), p. 130.

²³ Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?*, p. 7.

²⁴ Taken from *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (1997), s. v. “Incarnation.”

The perfect and perfected man. The perennial Christological heresy of denying the full and complete humanity of Christ has resulted in our failure to recognize his perfection and swamped our task to follow Him in His human greatness. God the creator has placed in all his human creatures a powerful and unrelenting drive or will to live and to live fully — to increase, to grow, to flourish, to thrive, to become beautiful, whole and complete so as to fill the places and serve the purposes God has called us to in the world as His creation.²⁵ God formed us to know, to be wise and understanding, to be thinking, intelligent, thoughtful, inquisitive, curious, wonder-filled kinds of people who find the ordinary extraordinary. He created us to love, to be people of great passion and desire for all kinds of great things — animal, mineral, vegetable, to care and have concern for people, places, and things, to be emotional and get excited, and for ordering all these affections and feelings in a right and proper way under Him. He made us to make things, to use our imaginations, to be creative, to achieve, to accomplish, to be *tektons*, if you will, to enjoy and promote art, science and technology, all aspects of the work of our hands and mind to the glory of God and benefit of others. He not only gave us souls, but bodies as well, to eat and drink, sleep and eat, work and rest, to grow vigorous and strong, to be male and female, men and women, to marry and be given in marriage, to be husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, to have sons and daughters, be family, be friends, to live lives full of days.

Jesus Christ possessed this kind of maturity and perfection as a human being in life (excepting marriage) and His great maturity and perfection as a person is what was lost when He offered Himself to God on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins and the redemption of the world. “We forget,” Hutchins asserts, “that Christ, before he offered himself as a sacrifice, lived, thrived, grew great so as to fill the whole space in the world given him by the Father, so that he

²⁵ Hutchens, “Fully Living Sacrifices,” p. 4.

might be the perfect sacrifice, whole, mature in every respect, in the full vigor of early manhood, strong and fully accomplished.”²⁶

What made Christ’s sacrifice such a sacrifice was that it entailed the loss of such a great and valuable person, the forfeiture of such a tremendous human being, the giving up of such an excellent individual in matters of intellect, heart, soul, hand, and body. If the death of Socrates was a great loss to the human race, then Christ far more. As followers of Jesus, we ought to be mature like him in the voluminosity of our humanity in these ways and more. When God calls upon us to give of ourselves or give up ourselves sacrificially, it ought to be a diminutive version of Christ’s own offering of Himself and a regrettable loss.

Christians

“... the disciples were first called *Christians* in Antioch.”
— Acts 11: 26

To be a Christian means to be a “little christ,” a “smaller anointed one,” if you will.²⁷ To live as He lived means that we should be exemplary human beings, in mind and body, beautiful, whole, talented, integrated, complete, and mature. To sacrifice ourselves for God, Christ and the kingdom as He sacrificed Himself does not mean that we must be stupid, unintelligent, dispassionate, unaccomplished, weak, inferior, passive, pale, sickly, incomplete, and whimpering people. To say that this is what involved in sacrificing ourselves for Christ’s sake — in essence, to undergo a thorough process of dehumanization — would make us unworthy ambassadors of the grandeur of the God/Man we claim to represent.

To be a *faux* sacrifice for Christ would cause us to be *justly* despised by the non-Christians and anti-christians of the world. We should expect nothing but *ridicule* if in the name of Christian discipleship we deny our identity as God’s

²⁶ Hutchens, “Fully Living Sacrifices,” p. 4.

²⁷ Thanks to Dr. Philip Mitchell for mentioning this to me recently. The “ian” in *Christian* is a diminutive suffix which, when added to the end of a noun, means “little” or “smaller” in regard to the noun to which it is added; or it means something or someone who is of or related to that noun, as a *Bostonian* is to Boston, or as a *Christian* is to Christ).

image and likeness and the value of our incarnationally-affirmed humanity. We will be appropriately *condemned* if we think that Christian living and service forces us to reject a proper life-giving and life-shaping interaction with God's good creation under the mistaken notion of Christian nihilism. We will be properly *slandered* if we reject "the highness and the glory and the excellence and the resplendence and the strength that all of us are called upon to achieve in accordance with what we have been given."²⁸ In other words, we will be rightly and reasonably *condemned* a la Nietzsche when we are called upon to sacrifice ourselves on Christ's behalf *if we are not fully living sacrifices*.

Barring God-given injuries, disabilities or weaknesses that He has administered to help make us great, "We are not called to sacrifice — because Christ was not called to sacrifice — as poor, injured, whimpering, parasite-ridden, sick, half-mad things, but as paragons of our kind: beautiful, whole, and accomplished." A true sacrifice, therefore, is "the giving and receiving of a beautiful and worthy thing [namely, our robust Christian lives], nourished and enlarged by the goodness of creation, as God intended it to be — not religion as suicide, or the gift of something sick or blemished."²⁹ Is your life the kind that causes the Gentiles to blaspheme? Would it open or shut Nietzsche's mouth?

²⁸ Hutchens, "Fully Living Sacrifices," p. 5.

²⁹ Hutchens, "Fully Living Sacrifices," p. 5.