

*Getting to Know Jesus in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

# *The Divine Presence*

## *"I AM"*

"In him was life; and the life was the light of men . . . the true Light, which lights everyone who comes into the world." ~ John 1:4,9



*"For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light."*  
~ Psalm 36:9

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# *The Divine Presence*

"If I penetrate to the depths of my own existence and my own present reality, the indefinable *am* that is myself in its deepest roots, then through this deep center I pass into the infinite *I am* which is the very Name of the Almighty." ~ Thomas Merton

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# **“I AM”**

## **Our Categories Give Us Our World**

*Whether we are:*

*Theists, Atheists, Agnostics*

*Idealists, Materialists, Phenomenalists*

*Realists, Essentialists, Nominalists, Nihilists*

*Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists, Jews*

*Ascetics, Aesthetes, Sensualists, Legalists, Libertarians, Libertines*

*Liberals, Conservatives, Centrists, Center-Left, Center-Right*

*Capitalists, Communists, Socialists, Fascists, Anarchists*

*Heterosexual, Homosexual, Transexual, Asexual*

*Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual, Transgender*

*Masculine, Feminine, Androgynous*

*Rich, Poor, Begging, Thieving*

*Mr. Mrs. Ms. or Miss*

*We must admit:*

## **Our Categories Give Us Our World**

The possibilities are seemingly endless—we can mix and match as much as we see fit! Such *worldviews* give *form* and structure to experience...

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Consciously or unconsciously, we define ourselves and others...  
*Categories* within categories... Cultures within cultures... Layers upon layers... *Our name is legion for we are many...*

"Precept upon precept; line upon line . . . here a little, and there a little; that [we] might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken" (Isaiah 28:13, KJV).

But has it always been this way? Under Popes and Monarchies, western culture seemed more uniform, perhaps... More stable... More circumscribed... Our available categories relatively limited... Our use of them more strictly choreographed... God was in his heaven and all was right with the world...

But perhaps this is just a superficial impression. Maybe there was a relative stability and uniformity— at least we can imagine it that way in retrospect —but even if that was the case, this order would seem (to the modern mind, at least) to have been largely imposed from the top down by a power elite whose *worldview* did not really do justice to reality. In any event, that world is gone and its passing seems to have been marked by the protestant reformation and the subsequent transition from monarchies to democracies.

Progress? Age of enlightenment? Perhaps... But this new-found freedom resulted in an even greater proliferation of social and cultural *categories*— which resulted in a corresponding proliferation of *worldviews* and *worlds* —so that, increasingly (especially in this technically astute, socially networked, *post-modern* age), each *individual* seems to have the option of constructing and defending a

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unique vision of the world. But this raises some seemingly unanswerable questions: In this hall of mirrors,

- *What is truth?*
- Which world is real?
- Is God, in fact, dead?
- Must *the phenomenology of spirit* finally be reduced to *the will to power*?

### For God So Loved the World

"Problems cannot be solved at the same level of awareness that created them." ~ Albert Einstein

As the quotation, above, suggests, it is unlikely that answers to the preceding questions will be found in moralistic rhetoric, hermeneutical wrangling, or other conceptual gymnastics. But for those who have an ear for it, answers can be found in *the "I Am" presence* which transcends all social, cultural, and political categories. This is not just the *thought* that "I am", but the *aware Presence* that is prior to thought—the *profound sense of Being* that is encountered in *alert stillness*, between each breath we breathe; and in *deep silence*, between each heartbeat... Indeed, this is *the One* who is *with us always*—*the One* who is given *that we might have life and have it more abundantly*:

John 3:16 [paraphrased] For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son [to the world], so that everyone who [trusts in and relies on] him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17

"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the

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world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Those who [trust in and rely on] him are not condemned; but those who do not [so trust] . . . are condemned already, because they [do not trust] in the name of the only Son of God ["I Am"].

John 10:7 Then said Jesus unto them again, Verily, verily, I say unto you, I Am the door of the sheep. 8 All that ever came before me are thieves and robbers: but the sheep did not hear them. 9 I Am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture. 10 The thief comes not, but to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I Am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly (KJ2000).

### **Language Is Ambiguous**

Language (in general) and spiritual modes of discourse (in particular) are often ambiguous and Jesus' teachings are no exception. At times they seem intentionally cryptic and were— more often than not, it seems —grossly misunderstood. His frequent references to himself, for example, seems to have given his critics the impression that his teachings were self-serving—that he was seeking his own glory. Indeed, his repeated use of the phrase, "*I Am*", as reported in the gospel of John, must have seemed to them like shameless self-promotion which— given its association with the name of God in Exodus 3:14 —bordered on blasphemy. Jesus responds to such criticism as follows:

John 7:16 Then Jesus answered them, "My teaching is not mine but his who sent me. 17 Anyone who resolves to do the will of

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God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own. 18 Those who speak on their own seek their own glory; but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and there is nothing false in him. 19 "Did not Moses give you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law. Why are you looking for an opportunity to kill me?"

They were, indeed, looking for an opportunity to kill him and, a few chapters later, they thought that they had him dead to rights when he said, "The Father and I are one" (John 10:30).

This claim followed on the heels of several of the aforementioned "*I Am*" expressions which, as indicated above, are provocative enough in their own right. They are itemized, below, compliments of *Henry Morris* at *icr.org*. The first five are as follows:

*"I am the bread of life" (John 6:35, 48, 51).*

*"I am the light of the world" (John 8:12).*

*"I am the door of the sheep" (John 10:7, 9).*

*"I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11, 14).*

Then comes his assertion that, "The Father and I are one" (John 10:30), followed by three more "*I Am*" expressions:

*"I am the resurrection, and the life" (John 11:25).*

*"I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).*

*"I am the true vine" (John 15:1, 5).*

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Egoic minds are, indeed, self-serving and self-promoting—imagining as they do that the whole world should revolve around them. And perhaps it is natural that it would seem to such minds that Jesus had a similar agenda—albeit one of megalomaniacal proportions:

John 10:31 The Jews took up stones again to stone him. 32 Jesus replied, "I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you going to stone me?" 33 The Jews answered, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God."

But looking ahead a few chapters, it does not appear that Jesus is necessarily claiming or desiring anything for himself that he does not also claim and desire for everyone else—if only they are willing to receive *the Word of God* as he receives it and are willing to know themselves *to be* in the way that he knows himself *to be*. For if they are willing— *indeed, if we are willing* —he prays for both them and for us as follows:

John 17:18 As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. 19 And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth. 20 "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one...



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As such, it seems unlikely that Jesus intended to set himself apart and glorify himself, personally, in contradistinction to the rest of humanity.

### Seeing Beyond Worldviews

But wait a minute. Our categories give us our world, do they not? And is it not the case that if we can control the categories through which people see the world, we can also control them? How, then, do we know that Jesus' teaching isn't just another power-play? Is he not, by virtue of his teaching, attempting to control our categories? And if he succeeds in controlling our categories, is he not circumscribing our worldview? And what might his motive be if not to secure power and glory for himself? And even today, if we can control the way in which his teachings are understood and applied, are we not similarly attempting to *take charge*? Are we not attempting to secure power and glory for ourselves—at least among those who are willing to follow our lead (i.e. those who are willing to say "Lord, Lord" in more or less the same way that we say, "Lord, Lord" — cf. Matthew 7:21-23)? How can we show that Jesus' teaching is different? Indeed, how can we show that *this representation of Jesus' teaching* different? Why is this not just another worldview? Why is this not just another power-play?

To be sure, many people— associated with many different groups and institutions —are happy to invoke the name of Jesus as they promote themselves and their particular worldviews. They honor him with their lips, but their heart is far from him (cf. Matthew 15:8). They are quick to say, "Lord, Lord," but not only do they not enter the kingdom, they do their best to prevent others from entering, as well (cf. Matthew 7:21 and 23.13). Indeed, it has been incredibly easy (and very *tempting*) for later generations to project their misunderstanding of his teaching (not

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to mention their *intentional distortion* thereof) onto the person of Jesus. In contrast to the scribes and pharisees who, in their pursuit of power, opposed him (fearing that his popularity threatened their position), later generations— looking back at him in an idealized way, his name having triumphed —are eager to hitch their wagon to his star as they attempt to secure power and glory for themselves (showing themselves, in the end, however, to be like the scribes and pharisees after all).

As indicated above, *language is ambiguous*, but there are two particular ambiguities that make it especially easy for us to associate ourselves and our worldviews with Jesus of Nazareth. We quite naturally assume, as we read the gospels, that his references to himself— especially his use of the expression "*I Am*" in the gospel of John —are, as far as we are concerned, merely (or *primarily*) references to himself as a historical personage on a historical mission— a person who also happens to be *the only begotten Son of God* (aka *the second person of the Trinity*). Subordinate to this, but closely related, is our further assumption that any references to "my word" or "my words" refer merely (or *primarily*) to the words reportedly spoken by him (or to the words that allegedly apply to him) that we find recorded in the scriptures. And while all this is plausible enough from a particular *point of view* (i.e. a particular *worldview* that idealizes the Bible as "the inerrant word of God" and that projects the conclusions of later theological speculation back onto the life and teachings of Jesus), the end result is that these two *icons*— *Jesus* and *the Bible* —are simultaneously powerful enough and ambiguous enough to attract and accommodate a wide variety of (more or less) *self-promoting* prophets and *conflicting* worldviews. But rather than attempting to sort through

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all these as we search for one that is *true*, let us see if we cannot discover a deeper and more authentic significance in Jesus' references to *himself* and his *words* that will lead us beyond particular *worldviews*— and beyond the power struggles implicit within them —to *the Way, the Truth, and the Life*, that Jesus said, “I Am” (John 14:6). We shall attempt to do this by strategically paraphrasing a series of texts from the gospel of John in hopes that they will speak to us in a fresh and authentic way. To the extent that we are successful, we will be in a much better position to ascertain *the relative value* of the various *worldviews* we encounter. Like the prisoner who was released from *Plato's cave* and who— having left the cave, and having seen *the form of the Good* —decides to go back into the cave out of concern for the other prisoners, we too may choose to re-engage the world and debate, on some level, *the shadows on the cave wall* (but we won't mistake these shadows for *reality*); we, too, may once again consider the relative value of various *worldviews* (but we won't mistake these *worldviews* for *the Truth*).

### Two Dangers

Before proceeding with this enterprise, however, the reader should be aware of two dangers:

**1)** like Jesus, himself, we may open ourselves up to the charge of blasphemy (the reasons for this becoming apparent, below); and **2)** we may risk *actually blaspheming*— in a manner of speaking, at least — insofar as we are liable to mistake the relative for the absolute (e.g. the *egoic mind* for *the mind of Christ*—or a particular *worldview* for *the Truth*).

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While, at this point in history, the first of these two dangers is not a huge concern— unless, of course, we are beholden to a particular church or related institution for our paycheck and/or our sense of personal identity —the second of the two may be related to the Jungian concept of *inflation* and should not be taken lightly. Indeed, whether we ourselves suffer from this kind of "inflation" and are engaging in a kind of megalomaniacal "self-promotion" OR whether we are promoting a particular "world-view" as if that *worldview* were, itself, *the Way, the Truth, and the Life* that is sought— whether we do either of these things —*a certain prospect of judgment* looms over us as the thoughts and intents of our hearts are exposed to the light:

Hebrews 4:12 Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13 And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

Nevertheless, while we would do well to pause for introspection, at this point, we should not imagine that any attempt to avoid *the light of life* would be a virtue:

John 3:19 And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20 For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21 But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

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John 8:12 Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

Ephesians 5:13 . . . but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, 14 for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

### **Recognizing the Light of Divine Presence**

Let us proceed, then, (by means of some *strategic paraphrasing*, as before noted) to consider whether Jesus of Nazareth may have intended *neither* to point to himself, in the flesh (i.e. to his social or historical persona) *nor* to make theological pronouncements about his unique standing (as *the second person of the Trinity* or the long awaited *messiah*), but that he was instead pointing to the *Divine presence* that is also *in us*—*the Divine presence* which is both *deep within* and *high above* that which we normally take ourselves to be. Moreover, let us consider, in addition, whether his references to the importance of hearing and obeying his word(s) [or the Father's word(s)] were not merely (or primarily) references to his literal words (or words about him), as recorded in the scriptures, but rather to the possibility of recognizing and abiding in his *Divine presence* and of becoming attuned to *the still small voice* which is *the Word of God* in our hearts, *here & now* (cf. Hebrews 4:12, quoted above, and the reference to "the sword of the Spirit" in Ephesians 6:17; cf. John 16:13). For if we have access to the same *Divine presence* and *living Word of God* that Jesus shared with his disciples, rather than taking refuge in *worldviews*, however plausible (or consoling; or personally empowering), let us instead take this

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opportunity to enter into life— *the abundant, eternal life that Jesus offers* —here & now:

John 17:3 [paraphrased] And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ [the Divine Presence] you have sent. 4 I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. 5 So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed. 6a "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world.

It is worth remembering that Jesus is said to be "a prophet like unto Moses" (cf. Deuteronomy 18:18-19; Acts 7). Not only is his description of himself, in verse 6a, above, somewhat reminiscent of the role of Moses, in the Exodus, his repeated use of the "*I Am*" expressions most certainly calls to mind Moses' encounter with God in the burning bush:

Exodus 3:13 But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" 14 God said to Moses, "I am who I am." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.' "

But in contrast to the children of Israel, in Exodus— who are characterized as a rebellious and stiff-necked people —the disciples are said to have kept God's word:

John 17:6 "I have made your name ["I Am"] known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave

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them to me, and they have kept your word. 7 Now they know that everything you have given me is from you;

This is also in marked contrast to the scribes and pharisees:

John 7:19 “Did not Moses give you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law.

The disciples, however, being both hearers and doers of the word (cf. James 1:22; Matthew 7:26-27), now know with certainty that Jesus' teaching is not just another worldview— that it is not some conceptual scheme intended to bring honor and glory to him —but that it is, indeed, from God. This also calls to mind another verse from chapter 7:

John 7:17 Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own.

There is no question, then, of merely "adopting" some abstract doctrine or worldview on the word of some itinerant preacher, however charismatic, and then mistaking some combination of *group think* and *confirmation bias* for a demonstration of its truth. Rather, when the word of the Lord— *the Divine presence "I Am"* —is both heard and hearkened to, *the Truth is obvious* and it is seen to be in no way dependent on the turn of events. Indeed, *the Divine presence "I Am" is the condition for the possibility of any turn of events*. One may simply

*“Taste and see that the LORD is good”* (Psalms 34:8).

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Moreover, it is also obvious— to those who *resolve to do the will of God* in this way —that Jesus is not seeking his own glory, but the glory of the one who sent him:

John 7:18 Those who speak on their own seek their own glory; but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and there is nothing false in him.

Thus, in Chapter 17, he continues to pray as follows:

John 17:8 for the words that you gave to me [in the stillness of the Divine presence] I have given to them, and they have received them [in the stillness of that same Divine presence] and [they now] know in truth that [the Divine presence "I Am"] came from you; and they have believed that you sent me.

Moreover, just as Jesus had earlier affirmed his *oneness* with the Father (John 10:30), in the latter half of this chapter he prays that his disciples, including those of subsequent generations, will be also *be one—one* with God, *one* with him, and *one* with one another:

John 17:17 [paraphrased] Sanctify them in the truth; your word [the Divine presence "I Am"] is truth. 18 As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. 19 And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth. 20 "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me [the Divine presence "I Am"] and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given



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me [i.e. the glory of the Divine presence] I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. 24 Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I Am, to see my glory, which you have given me [i.e. the Divine presence "I Am"] because you loved me before the foundation of the world. 25 "Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. 26 I made your name known to them ["I Am"], and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and [the Divine presence "I Am" may be] in them."

In light of this prayer, then— if we are truly hearing and obeying his words —we are:

- sanctified through the truth...
- sent, by Christ, into the world...
- one with Christ and the Father...
- sharing in the glory of Christ...
- indwelt by Christ and the love of Christ...

It should be stressed, at this point, that those who attempt to "hear and obey" the words of Jesus in their own strength and according to their own understanding, will sooner or later realize the futility of their efforts (cf. Romans 7). But those who recognize *the "I Am" presence and walk in that light*— those who *resolve to do the will of God, both in Spirit and in Truth* —realize the freedom described in Romans 8:

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John 8:31 Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word [abiding in the Divine presence "I Am"], you are truly my disciples; 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

Romans 8:1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus [the "I Am" presence] has set you free from the law of sin and of death. 3 For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, 4 so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh [the egoic mind] but according to the Spirit [the mind of Christ].

The difference between these two "walks" cannot be put into words that the egoic mind can understand. In some ways, it's like riding a bicycle. You just keep trying until, at some point, you realize that *no effort is necessary*:

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

### **"I Am" Not What You Think**

If you merely "think" about all this, it will doubtless seem incredible and you will miss the point entirely. Moreover, it must be stressed that for

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the egoic mind to attempt to usurp God's place— for it to suggest that “*I Am God*” —is, indeed, both absurd and blasphemous. But it is another thing entirely— in the stillness of *the Divine presence* “*I Am*” — to recognize that God's life and our life is *one*. For insofar as we— by the grace of God and through the power of the Holy Spirit —are put to death in the flesh (i.e. crucified with Christ) and are made alive in the Spirit (i.e. raised with him in newness of life), it is perfectly appropriate to say that we *one with the Father*. Indeed, we are dead and our lives are hid with Christ in God (cf. Colossians 3:3). As such, *we have the mind of Christ* and are participants in the Divine nature, enjoying eternal life, *here and now* (cf. II Corinthians 2:16; II Peter 1:4; John 3:36). Quoting the *Roman Catholic Catechism*:

795 Christ and his Church thus together make up the "whole Christ" (*Christus totus*). The Church is one with Christ. The saints are acutely aware of this unity:

...

Our redeemer has shown himself to be one person with the holy Church whom he has taken to himself.

Head and members form as it were one and the same mystical person.

A reply of St. Joan of Arc to her judges sums up the faith of the holy doctors and the good sense of the believer: “About Jesus Christ and the Church, I simply know they’re just one thing, and we shouldn’t complicate the matter.”

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## **It's Not Personal**

**person (n.)** early 13c., from Old French persone "human being, anyone, person" (12c., Modern French personne) and directly from Latin persona "human being, person, personage; a part in a drama, assumed character," originally "mask, false face," such as those of wood or clay worn by the actors in later Roman theater.

~ <http://etymonline.com/index.php?term=person>

In light of this, as we continue to reflect on a variety of scriptures pertaining to our union with God in Christ, let us see if we cannot come closer to recognizing *the Way, the Truth, and the Life* of which they speak by assuming that when Jesus alludes to *the "I Am" presence*, he is not suggesting that we put him on a pedestal, personally, and worship him—the historical Jesus of Nazareth, as such. To be sure, our devotion to him as *the only begotten Son of God* —the archetype of *Man in the image of God* —is, in retrospect, perfectly appropriate. But to imagine that he thought of himself in this way and desired this kind of veneration can be very misleading.

“...from now on know we no man after the flesh: yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet from now on know we him no more” (II Corinthians 5:16).

Our veneration of him as a historical personage is merely the first step in a process through which we may, by the grace of God, come to consciously recognize and participate in *the Divine presence "I Am"*.

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On the other hand, *God forbid* that we should we imagine that Jesus is suggesting that we put ourselves on a pedestal and worship our own egos. Rather, what he is suggesting is that we see through our false, mind-made (*personal*) sense of "self" and recognize ourselves as we are *in Christ* — *chosen in him before the foundation of of the world* (prior to *the story of "me"* and prior to any and all *worldviews* which can only be relative and provisional *points of view*—never *the Truth, perse*). We are repeatedly told that we must be willing to leave all this behind if we would follow him:

Matthew 10:37 He that loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. 38 And he that takes not his cross, and follows after me, is not worthy of me. 39 He that finds his life shall lose it: and he that loses his life for my sake shall find it (KJ2000).

Matthew 16:24 Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. 25 For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. 26 For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul (KJ2000)?

Mark 8:34 And when he had called the people unto him with his disciples also, he said unto them, Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. 35 For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it. 36 For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and

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lose his own life? 37 Or what shall a man give in exchange for his life (KJ2000)?

Luke 9:23 And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. 24 For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it. 25 For what is a man profited, if he gain the whole world, and lose himself, or suffer loss (KJ2000)?

Luke 14:26 If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brothers, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. 27 And whosoever does not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple. 28 For which of you, intending to build a tower, sits not down first, and counts the cost, whether he has enough to finish it? . . . 33 So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsakes not all that he has, he cannot be my disciple (KJ2000).

Luke 17:20 And when he was demanded by the Pharisees, when the kingdom of God should come, he answered them and said, The kingdom of God comes not with outward observation: 21 Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you. . . . 33 Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it (KJ2000).

John 12:25 He that loves his life shall lose it; and he that hates his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal. 26 If any man serves me, let him follow me; and where I am, there shall also my

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servant be: if any man serves me, him will my Father honor (KJ2000).

Indeed, the kingdom of heaven is compared to a hidden treasure and a pearl of great price:

Matthew 13:44 Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field; which when a man has found, he hides, and for joy thereof goes and sells all that he has, and buys that field. 45 Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking fine pearls: 46 Who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it (KJ2000).

In the words of T.S. Eliot, *the Divine presence "I Am" is*

Not known, because not looked for  
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness  
Between two waves of the sea.  
Quick now, here, now, always—  
A condition of complete simplicity  
(Costing not less than everything)  
~ from *Little Gidding*

Let us recognize, then, once and for all, *the "I Am" presence* as both the image of God *in us* and the image of God *in which* we are said to have been created—the light that lights everyone that comes into the world (John 1:9). As St. Paul himself writes:

“...from now on know we no man after the flesh: yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet from now on know we him no more. Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creation:

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old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. And all things are of God, who has reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ” (II Corinthians 5:16-18, KJ2000).

“[Who] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:15-17).

### **Be Reconciled To God**

As suggested by the verses from II Corinthians and Colossians, above, this way of understanding our life in Christ and our relationship to the Father is not unique to the gospel of John. Just as Jesus is understood to be the Son of God and *at one* with the Father, it is also suggested in the book of Acts— in a sermon reportedly given by Paul in front of the Areopagus in Athens —that we, too, are children of God and *at one* with the Father, if we but knew it:

Acts 17:27 . . . indeed [God] is not far from each one of us. 28 For 'in him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.'

All that separates us from *kingdom of heaven* is a counterfeit reality—an imaginary projection of the carnal mind which fabricates a complex illusion through which we are impoverished, imprisoned, blinded, and oppressed. Jesus proclaims deliverance from this illusion:



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“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19).

And just as Jesus and his disciples, in the gospels, proclaim the *good news* that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (also suggesting that it is "within us" or "among us" — cf. Matthew 3:2; Luke 17:20-21), so St. Paul proclaims *a ministry of reconciliation* and entreats people on behalf of Christ, *be reconciled to God*:

II Corinthians 5:19 . . . God was [in Christ] reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. 20 So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

Far from being pretense or wishful thinking, this promise of reconciliation is for real. It holds good for anyone who recognizes *the Divine presence* and *abides* therein! In light of this *good news*, then—this growing sense of *reconciliation* and *awareness of oneness* —let us paraphrase a few more key verses from the gospel of John which point to the REALITY of *the Divine presence "I Am"*.

### **Lord, Show Us the Father...**

In John 14, Jesus indicates to his disciples that he is going to the Father and that they know the way and will follow him. But Thomas and Philip object:

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John 14: 5 [paraphrased] Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” 6 Jesus said to him, “[the Divine presence 'I Am'] is the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through [the 'I Am' presence]”.

While this verse often brings to mind such slogans as, “one way”, and the verse, “there is no other name under heaven . . . by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12), it should be stressed, in this context, that the “name” of Jesus— i.e. *the “I Am” presence* —is truly universal and we dare not count anyone “in” or “out” of the kingdom based on professions of faith, sectarian *bonafides*, or the lack thereof. And just as this name was revealed to Moses to confirm the authenticity of his mission to liberate Israel from her Egyptian bondage (Exodus 3:13-14), so Jesus shares this name with his disciples to confirm the authenticity of his ministry— and theirs —to proclaim the good news of the kingdom and the liberation of the world from the bondage of sin and death. Thus he prays:

John 17:6 “I have made your name [“I Am”] known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. 7 Now they know that everything you have given me is from you;

John 17:18 As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.

And thus he answers Thomas:

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John 14:7 “If you know [the 'I Am' presence], you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

Indeed, this also hearkens back to chapters 4 and 8, as well:

John 4:23-24 “The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”

John 8:31 Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

It is worth repeating, however, that an authentic knowledge of this name is not to be found in the mere thought, “I Am” — or in the mere verbal repetition of these or any other words or phrases — nor is the “keeping of” or “continuing in” his Word a legalistic endeavor (see *Getting to Know Jesus in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Chapter 4 and 7). Rather, this knowledge involves both 1) recognizing the “aware presence” or “alert stillness” that is prior to our thoughts and prior to our verbal expressions— prior to *all that we ask or think* —and 2) a resolve *to do the will of God by abiding* in that presence: \*

“Surely the righteous shall give thanks to your name; the upright shall live in your presence” (Psalms 140:13)

[\* cf. John 15:4-5; Ephesians 3:14-21; James 1:22; Matthew 7:26-27; John 7:17].

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Such worship is not the exclusive domain of any particular church or spiritual tradition. Rather, *whosoever will may come...* Simply *be aware* of the *awareness* within which these words appear. Simply *notice the light* within which *you see light* and make that your first priority (cf. Psalms 36:9-10). Breath awareness and inner-body awareness are also extremely helpful. While such exercises may seem pointless to the those who are lost in the conceptual labyrinths of theological abstraction, they are widely associated with moments of clarity like the one that marked the beginning of the prodigal son's homeward journey (Luke 15:17-19).

"If it's so simple", some may object, "why do we not see it sooner?" The answer is that we do see it well enough, on one level, but on another level we are not yet willing to forgo our prodigal adventures; we are not yet willing to *take up our cross*; and we are not yet willing to lay aside the forbidden fruit—i.e. the *knowledge of good and evil* that separates us from the garden of God and *the tree of life*. *The Way* it seems, is hidden from those who are wise in their own eyes, but it becomes increasingly manifest in and to those who are able to look at life simply and innocently:

Matthew 11:25 . . . Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; 26 yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.

Indeed, unless we become like little children, we cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven (cf. Matthew 18:3). And however smart we may be (however subtle our *worldview*), until the light of the world is seen and given precedence— until *the "I Am" presence* is recognized and

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honored as Lord —we are like fish swimming around in search of water; we are like obtuse woodsmen who cannot see the forest for the trees:

John 14:8 Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” 9a Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know [the Divine presence 'I Am']?”

*“Philip!”, Jesus seems to be saying, “C’mon Man! How many times do I have to say this?”*

9b Whoever has seen [the Divine presence 'I Am'] has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father’? 10 Do you not believe that [the 'I Am' presence is] in the Father and the Father is in [the Divine presence 'I Am']?”

### **The Written Word Points to *the Living Word***

If it seems, at times, that we have taken too many liberties in our paraphrasing of these texts, perhaps they can be read more conservatively without losing the cutting insight. Just keep in mind that Christ *IS the Way, the Truth, and the Life — the living Word of God*. We have reverence for the scriptures because they point us to Christ, but let us not become so obsessed with *the letter* that we miss out on *the life-giving Spirit*:

“You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life” (John 5:39-40, NKJV).

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“It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (John 6:63).

Let us take care, then, not to mistake the map for the territory; nor the word “water” for the substance that quenches our thirst. The primary value of the written word is its capacity to point us to *the Living Word*. The paraphrasing suggested above is intended for those who have read the scriptures carefully and prayerfully— perhaps even with tears in their eyes —but who remain hungry and thirsty:

“Listen! I Am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me” (Revelation 3:20).

“Let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift” (Revelation 22:17).

In John 14, we find that Jesus has, indeed, shared his knowledge of the Father with the disciples and that, while they have responded in good faith, they nevertheless remain dependent on his external guidance. He explains, then, that he must (apparently) go away so that they can, in fact, *be with Him* more fully:

John 14:1 “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. 2 In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

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We may be tempted, at this point, to think of Jesus as a metaphysical carpenter—heading off to “heaven” to do some work there while we hold down the fort here... But we are forgetting, perhaps, that the body of Christ is the temple of God and each of us are members, in particular (I Corinthians 12:27). Perhaps what Jesus is saying, is more along these lines:

John 14:1 Let not your heart be troubled: you [trust] in God, [trust] also in [the Divine presence "I Am"]. 2 In my Father's house are many mansions [each of us being a unique dwelling place of God] ...if it were not so, I would have told you. [Because you are so dependent on my external guidance] I go [in order to make room for the Divine presence "I Am" within you]. 3 And if I [leave you, on the outside], I will come again, and receive you unto myself [on the inside]; that where I Am, there you may be also [as you more fully recognize and abide in the Divine presence "I Am"].

Of course, even the idea of “inside” and “outside” is misleading, for recognizing and abiding in Him, we become one with Christ, in the Father, through the power of the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus said that we would:

John 14:16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. 17 This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. 18 “I will not leave you orphaned; I Am coming to you. 19 In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you

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will see me; because I live, you also will live. 20 On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

Thus he prays to the Father:

John 17:18 As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. 19 And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth. 20 “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will [trust] in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one...

In this way, we are not only reconciled to God, but we become ministers of reconciliation, as well (cf. II Corinthians 5:19).

### **Conclusion: Abiding in the Divine Presence "I Am"**

By virtue of our existence as human beings— created *in the image of God (i.e. created in Christ)* —we have a very intimate point of contact with God (and with *the Spirit of God* and *the Word of God*). This point of contact is *the Divine presence "I Am"* (aka *the mind of Christ* or *Christ-in-you*).

It is worth repeating, at this point, that our emphasis on *the "I Am" presence* has nothing to do with "self-promotion" or having a "me first" attitude. Rather, it is about the dethroning of the *egoic* mind, by the grace of God and through the power of the Holy Spirit—about



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becoming increasingly *selfless* in contemplation of *the Divine presence* that is *always with us, here and now*.

“You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I Am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from [the Divine presence “I Am”] you can do nothing” (John 15:3-5).

When we truly abide in Christ, we have effectively exchanged our will for God’s will. It is only when we *die* in this way— our life being hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3) —that the joy of our salvation is truly realized and we become obedient from the heart (Romans 6:17; cf. Hebrews 8:10). Reminiscent of the verses in John 15, quoted above, it is at this point that we begin to

“bear fruit for God . . . not under the old written code, but in the new life of the Spirit” (Romans 7:4,6).

### **A Practical Postscript**

Perhaps you are intrigued by the idea of abiding in *the “I Am” presence* but remain burdened by *the story of “me”—the running mental commentary* that continuously dogs your trail. Remember that *the Way, the Truth, and the Life is not what you think*. Rather, it is an intuitive realization that is both deeper and higher than the *mind-made sense of self* that you normally (mis)take yourself to be. Learn to distinguish between the various *trains of thought* that occupy your

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mind and the “aware presence” (or “alert stillness”) in which they both arise and disappear. Learn to feel the spacious awareness that is prior to thought—in the stillness between the out-breath and in-breath, for example, or in the silence between each heartbeat. *Realize that you are that spacious awareness!* And whenever you have opportunity, simply notice *the light of the world* — the Divine light in which we see light (cf. Psalm 36:9; John 1:9).

Finally, when you read about God or Christ (or *the Spirit of God* or *the Word of God*) in the scriptures, don’t imagine some *strange force* or *alien being* that exists totally *other than* and *apart from* you, but notice once again *the aware presence and alert stillness* within you and around you—*notice the field of awareness that encompasses the whole of your experience, inside and out*. And rather than fixating on the past or the future as the source of/or the solution to your problems, make *the gift of God— here and now* —your first priority. “*Now is the accepted time . . . Now is the day of salvation!*” (II Corinthians 6:2). *Now and only now* can you realize *the Divine presence “I Am”* (present tense). *Now and only now* can you realize that we are, indeed, reconciled to God *in Christ*—and that, indeed, we live and move and have our being *in Him* (cf, II Corinthians 5:16-18; Acts 17:27). Remember:

Luke 9:23 [paraphrased] . . . “If any want to become my followers, let them deny [their imaginary, mind-made sense of self] and [facing reality] take up their cross daily and follow [the Divine presence "I Am"]. 24 For those who [out of fear and wishful thinking] want to save their [imaginary] life will [in the process] lose [their real life], and those who lose their [imaginary] life for

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[the sake of the Divine presence "I Am"] will save [their real life].

25 What does it profit [those who wish to save their imaginary life] if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves? (cf. Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:35; Luke 17:33).

If life has seemed— heretofore —*unsatisfactory* and *insecure*, do you really imagine that you will find redemption or security in the future? If so, perhaps these lines will give you pause:

When I consider life, 't is all a cheat.  
Yet fool'd with hope, men favour the deceit;  
Trust on, and think to-morrow will repay.  
To-morrow 's falser than the former day;  
Lies worse, and while it says we shall be blest  
With some new joys, cuts off what we possest.  
Strange cozenage! none would live past years again,  
Yet all hope pleasure in what yet remain;  
And from the dregs of life think to receive  
What the first sprightly running could not give.

~ John Dryden

In this moment paused— rather than clinging to the story of “me” (along with all its regrets, resentments, and wishful thinking) —learn simply *to be...* *Learn simply to be present with that which is present* and leave tomorrow in God's hands (cf. Matthew 6:26 - 28, 31 - 34). This may seem difficult, at first, but *rest assured*— for those who *take up their cross* in this way —*the kingdom of heaven is at hand...*

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