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Reclaiming the Gospel for the Wounded

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foreword by GREGORY BOYLE

# INTRODUCTION

The history of Christianity is one of cultural appropriation. The religion of “the Way” was birthed through the vision of a Palestinian Jewish carpenter who ministered primarily to the sick and the oppressed. But three centuries later, in the Western Roman Empire, powerful oppressors adopted the Christian faith, granting it an elevated cultural status. In the hands of Constantine I, Christianity was transformed into a component of political citizenship, and the state-sanctioned church awarded a monopoly on the administration of divine grace. In America, this type of Christianity was marshaled to justify the oppression of enslaved people, a heavily redacted version of Christianity that demanded servitude and obedience from the enslaved. But enslaved Africans in America reappropriated Christianity as a religion of hope that offered escape, not in a world to come, but through literal freedom from bondage in the here and now. Today, Christianity must be reappropriated again by reclaiming it from the clutches of theological traditions that have perpetuated the victimization of people, our bodies, the land, and the relationships around us. The Christian faith must be returned

to the people to whom it rightfully belongs and for whom it was intended—those who are wounded and who have been sinned against.

*Jesus of the East* is a guidebook for those seeking to wrestle the historic faith of Christianity back from a tradition shaped by oppressors. This work of reclaiming the Christian faith draws on the historic tradition found in Eastern Christianity, which focuses on the liberation of people rather than on God's punishment for original sin. It also draws on Minjung theology, an indigenous Korean theology developed by and for the common people that focuses on the need to remedy *han*, or intense woundedness. This book is not an apologetic for Eastern Orthodoxy, or for any other denomination, but rather an argument for a way of reimagining theology around Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps today more than ever, this is where the focus of theology should be placed. In our #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, immigrant-fearing world, Christians must abandon the faith of the conquerors and colonizers and return to a faith that brings healing to the hurting, and wholeness where damage has been inflicted by oppressive forms of Christianity. These forms of oppressive religion have condoned the presence of sexual predators among the clergy while also seeking to claim the moral high ground by advocating for unborn fetuses. They have refused to ordain women and LGBTQ+ people but have supported men who abuse their power in relationships with women, persons of color, and persons who do not identify in sexually binary or heteronormative ways. They seek to proclaim the "truth" of Christianity, but are easily given to false narratives, "alternative facts," the denial of scientific evidence, and blatant and continual lies.

We are approaching a breaking point in our religious dialogue. With the turn to secularism and the separation of church from state during the nineteenth century, some religious institutions came to fear the loss of Christianity's influence. However, the demise of Christianity may come not from an increasingly secular world, but

from the type of Christianity that presently exists. Perhaps a better question than *whether* Christianity will survive in today's age is the question of *which kind* of Christianity and *whose* Jesus will be passed down to our theological descendants.

Many in the West feel disdain for Jesus—not the Jesus who reflects the ideals of American life, confirms our cherished beliefs, and does not oppose our ways of living and believing. Rather, they feel contempt for Jesus the Palestinian Jew and itinerant teacher who healed the sick and preached a message of resistance against the political and religious status quo of his day. Their contempt is for the one who lived among the poor and outcast and criticized the established religious order for demonizing and segregating the most vulnerable and those in need. Their contempt is for the Jesus whose life is marked by sorrow, pain, poverty, empathy, and struggle against the forces of this world. This Jesus has become a scourge to our existence and a scapegoat on whom to pour out our fear and hurts. This Jesus is difficult to follow because he does not provide practical advice, such as guidance for finances or family life; he is not a teacher of Christian self-help or systematized theology. He is the rabbi of the oppressed and shunned, the physician of the uninsured, the liberator of the incarcerated—a living, breathing, hurting person whose life and thinking are foreign to much of Christianity in the West.

Yet I cannot help but see this Jesus among us, among the poor and disenfranchised, among the outcasts and wounded. I see him in the acts of kindness, empathy, and forgiveness that occur when people grapple with their own brokenness and seek also to provide healing for others. I have seen this Jesus in our communities and have witnessed the ways in which he brings healing to our divisions, how his vision for humanity helps us to see ourselves, each other, and the world differently, and how he offers the ability to sustain this form of existence. This Jesus provides a promised peace beyond the mere cessation of conflict, a peace that is summed up in

the word *shalom*, meaning “well-being” or “welfare.” But this Jesus of the poor is entirely strange to many of us in the West because in our Western culture, an alternative form of Jesus—a Jesus who came to save sinners but who has abandoned the sinned-against—has won out in the contest to define Christian faith.

In an episode of the Canadian sitcom *Kim's Convenience*, Mr. Kim and his son, Jung, are not on speaking terms because of a familial conflict that began when Jung was convicted of a crime and subsequently dropped out of high school. Jung has since become an assistant manager at a car rental service, where he is a spokesperson for a campaign to recruit more ethnically diverse employees for his company. The company has produced life-sized cardboard cutouts of Jung to advertise this new marketing strategy, and Mr. Kim comes across one of these cutouts on the sidewalk. Although initially taken aback by his son's image, Mr. Kim decides to alter this image to advertise the products of his own convenience store. When neighborhood children vandalize the cutout, Mr. Kim is forced to repair “Jung,” turning him into a cardboard Frankenstein held together by duct tape. Regrettably, Mr. Kim's relationship to the cardboard likeness of Jung is more tender than the one he has with his own son. Eventually, the cardboard-imitation Jung falls into a state of disrepair and Mr. Kim is forced to abandon it in a dumpster.

We in the West have inherited a cardboard cutout of Jesus, a thin fabrication rather than the living Jesus of history and the Gospels. This Jesus has emerged victorious in the struggle to define Christianity and has been written into both the history and the theology of Western culture. Many will eventually see that the Jesus of the West is a flimsy imitation, a prop for ideas that do not hold up to scrutiny, and will toss this imitation Jesus aside. But what will serve as a replacement when this imitation Jesus is abandoned?

In order to describe the “Jesus of the East,” I first need to tell the story of how the “Jesus of the West” came to be, and why the

Jesus of the West provides only a lifeless semblance of the historical Jesus. I will outline the ways in which the Jesus of the West is *already* the reigning champion in Western culture, and will examine some of the theological propositions and most cherished beliefs of Western Christianity that have been accepted as theological truth. Many of these ideas are still debated in academic circles, but where they have been put into practice, in the arena of the church and the public square, they are now largely unchallenged. We will see how the Jesus of the West is an imitation Jesus taped together by complex and sometimes convoluted theological doctrines that seldom encompass the real life and teachings of Jesus, much less the reality of living in this world.

The ubiquitous call within evangelical churches is for sinners to accept Jesus and be forgiven. This is also plain to see in most Western Christian traditions. The Book of Common Prayer used in the Episcopal Church features prayers for the forgiveness of sin: "Almighty God have mercy on you, forgive you all your sins."<sup>2</sup> Our worship, prayers, and theology have all been shaped around an image of a Jesus whose primary mission is to save sinners.

In contrast to the Western church, the Eastern church fathers primarily held a view of Jesus not as someone who staved off God's wrath, but as a healer of humanity who brought people back into divine communion with God. They portrayed Jesus as a mediator who turns humans toward God through revealing God's faithful and enduring goodness, rather than as a sacrifice offered to turn God back toward humans. According to the Eastern fathers, God never gave up on or became angry at humanity. It was always the other way around: humanity was ashamed of its own acts of distrust and violence, and as a result turned away from intimacy with a tender and loving God. Yet God never abandoned humanity, and even joined humanity in our greatest experiences of pain and shame.

The reconciliatory and restorative aspects of Eastern theology share commonalities with Korean Minjung theology. Minjung theology had its genesis in the identification of the oppressed Korean people with the suffering of Jesus and with the people to whom he ministered, literally “the crowd” (Greek *ochlos*). In the Gospels, the crowd are the common people whom Jesus addressed, came to be with, and served, and to whom he brought healing. The experience of woundedness in Minjung theology is encapsulated in the unique word *han*, or “unresolved suffering.” As we examine the life of Jesus, we will see how *han* emerged in his life and in the lives of those around him. The concept of *han* will help us ground our view of Jesus in real-world concerns, rather than in myths, fictions, or ideas created for the sake of theological gymnastics.

In chapter 1, I outline Western visions of the kingdom and Jesus and demonstrate how these visions serve the purposes of those in power rather than those of the people Jesus came to serve. Chapter 2 explores the idea that the Western Jesus is supported by a mind-body dualism that originated in gnostic thought and is still taught today, prompted by the legacy of Enlightenment thinker René Descartes. Chapter 3 outlines the mission of Jesus, who sought to holistically heal the wounds of the oppressed, rather than provide an otherworldly escape. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how the enfleshment of God ultimately united humanity and God.

Chapter 4 explores the resistance to Jesus’ mission, a resistance rooted in a system of scarcity that sought to both enslave people and turn them into commodities for trade, and to deny their identities as divine image bearers. In chapter 5, I argue that scarcity is ingrained in our Western theology of the cross, which is based on the belief that God had to make a sacrifice of God’s Son in order to redeem humanity. In contrast, the vulnerability and abundance of God’s love provide an alternative vision to the system of scarcity. The incarnational suffering God is the balm that heals the damage

and brokenness brought on because of death. In chapter 6, I explore how Jesus' life overcomes death, which is the consequence of and not punishment for hurtful actions. Lastly, in chapter 7, I describe a truly just and renewed world and relate stories of restored humanity that emerges when we see Jesus of the East in our midst.

I came to these convictions not in one torrent of revelation, but through a gradual intellectual and spiritual journey that started in high school and continues today. Profound crises of faith and thought led me to difficult conclusions about God and this world, but also to important texts and ideas that cleared my path. After reading an intriguing work by the Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan on "the intelligibility of redemption," I concluded that the cross might not be an absolute necessity to accomplish the mission of God in the world.<sup>3</sup> Even though God used the cross as an instrumental means to help humanity face our violent way of "othering" people, an unbalanced fixation on the cross neglects the crucial events of the incarnation and the victory over the cross that occurred in the resurrection. My research led me to several conversations with Methodist theologian Andrew Sung Park on the profound sociological subject of *han*. It was this concept of woundedness and the idea of sin as "sickness" that led me back to the Eastern fathers, and especially to Irenaeus of Lyons. I was also directed to this path by many conversations with the Canadian theologian and patristic scholar Bradley Jersak.

In entering any classroom, church, or speaking venue, I am mindful that peoples' cherished beliefs are precious to them, even when they may be incorrect, because those beliefs form the foundation of their view of the world. Some may experience a challenge to these beliefs as a personal violation, an assault on private space. I wish to enter this conversation with respect and humility. What I am asking is not that you, my reader, change your mind, but that you consider these ideas as a possible way out of our current dilemma.



There are deep divisions among the peoples of this land, divisions that have grown out of a history of woundedness that we have not even begun to address. No matter which political party controls our nation, no matter how much we “put God back” in our schools, no matter how much we pray, we will not find healing until we treat the sickness that afflicts us and not just its symptoms. I ask that you consider the ideas in this book. Try them on, as you might a new sweater, and see if they fit with your experiences of the world and life. I ask that you imagine with me the possibilities of what can be.

I hope that, through these pages, Christians will see Jesus with new eyes and therefore become co-creators of a world that dispels the myths of the past, fully embracing the *euangelion*, or good news. Just as Jesus in the first century sought, through his work and preaching, to correct the prevailing perspective of who God was for his time, so Jesus of the East serves as a corrective for our religious attitudes and beliefs. Theology, doctrines, and religious beliefs are not static. Despite what some think, they are not written in stone, but are written on the heart (Romans 2:15; 10:9). Theology, literally “conversation with God,” evolves and grows through discussion and debate, but many Christians have inherited stagnant doctrines from the church and have continued in and contributed to systems of injustice, misogyny, racism, and violence. Because these interpretations remain dominant and seem to work for many, they have rarely been challenged outside academic circles. If these doctrines and beliefs are not replaced, they will continue to perpetuate the wounds of our society and our world.

In whatever way you come to this book, may we have a conversation in which you and I acknowledge each other’s humanity and the image of the divine in each other. We are all fallible, and our ways of seeing are partial and imperfect. My desire is that we come to the table with this in mind, and with hope and compassion for one another.

# Minjung

## 민중신학

People's theology—*ochlos*, ὄχλος (Greek), crowds, multitude, people, those to whom Jesus ministered, the sick, the poor, the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the shunned, the oppressed, the sinned-against. Emerged from the experience of Christians in South Korea.

# 1

## VISION

*For it is impossible for anyone to heal the sick, if one has no knowledge of the disease of the patients.*

—IRENÆUS OF LYONS, *Libros quinque adversus haereses*

In the parched Judean desert, somewhere near the Dead Sea and Jordan River, a lone Palestinian Jewish man dwells, seeking to confront his personal demons. His face, caked with a mixture of dirt and sweat, is as cracked and parched as the ground. The birds of prey sweep around him and loiter in the shadows of the shrubs, waiting to see if he will become carrion. Along with the small animals that scurry about, they provide uneasy company, their sounds the only ones he hears except for the breath of an occasional breeze that offers respite from the scorching heat.

The ascetic Essenes also inhabit these harsh lands, where they have sought retreat from the godless world. But Jesus has come to this place to bathe himself in all the temptations the world has to offer. His first temptation is a demand to demonstrate his might by turning

the rocks that litter the landscape into food to satiate his own hunger. His stomach groans, his rib cage visible through his thin sienna skin.

In addition to satiating his own hunger, he could also feed the masses. It would be an easy solution for people who are hungry for the bare necessities, people easily swayed by the grandeur and spectacle of “bread and circus.” If he would translate his power to turn stones to bread into commensurate political power, he could do so much good—but at the same time, so much harm: a grand showman in the political arena of their minds.

Jesus dismisses this temptation, declaring that he feasts only on the eternal truth of God’s word.

Yet another vision. Jesus is brought up to the holy temple, the most sacred of places, the center of the universe, the tallest pinnacle in the land. He is confronted by the true test of his faith, a demand that he surrender his life and plunge toward his death. Surely God will catch him. His heroics would prove the world wrong about YHWH’s seeming inability to defend Israel, God’s people. God’s existence would be undeniable. The salvation of the Messiah would also mean the salvation of the kingdom of Israel. Everyone would see the power of YHWH, the LORD almighty, the one who can save all from doom. If he braves this feat, he could show the world in an instant all that God can do—vanquish enemies, provide riches, restore wealth, dispel the doubts of heathens. There would be no more confusion as to which God and which faith was true. All doubt would be erased.

Jesus again dismisses this temptation, pointing out that these proofs of God’s power are ultimately empty.

In the shimmering heat, Jesus’ eyes behold another vision. He is taken to a high mountain, to a vantage point where he can gaze upon the whole world. Monotonous shifting sand dunes rise to reveal a vision of a world of wealth and prestige, of kingdoms that received their power from the evil one. Like the land of Egypt, these

empires have amassed their possessions on the backs of their people. The power of these kingdoms is within his grasp, simply waiting for him to take hold of it, calling him to receive their fame and false promises. He need only keep his might from crumbling, delicate sandcastles slipping through his hands. This temptation is to join in the work of all dictators and despots.

Jesus dismisses this final temptation by declaring that there is only one whom he will serve—not the forces of evil, not the ruler of the kingdoms, but the one who sustains him.

The desert is relentless, reminding him of its vastness in all these possibilities—avenues that he could pursue, but that would lead to disaster for the entire cosmos. Hunger pangs mirror his deep desire. The longer he stays in the desert, the deeper the longing burns into his being—longing to create a new way of life with the world, a new relationship with creation itself. As he looks out into the Judean landscape, he sees a vision of a kingdom built not on the backs of the poor, nor on deals with the wealthy, but formed through restoring broken lives and mending those wounded by the religious and political machinery that plagues them. His calling is to bring together people who can dress the wounds of others while also receiving care for their own wounds. These wounded healers will come to see each other as he sees them, not as tools in a system or as cogs in the machinery, but as a name and face, a person and a story.

By day, the sun beats on his brow as he sits in meditation and prayer, his back hunched over and his head hung low. He becomes an indistinguishable feature of the landscape, like a rock or a shrub. He pores over each word of the Torah as if they were written anew and being read for the first time. He takes them apart and digests them one by one, their meanings transformed as they enter his body, no longer letters on a page but words absorbed into his flesh. Words are kneaded like dough that will be baked in the oven of God's mouth for Jesus to hungrily feed on.

The nights cool the land and allow him to sleep. He dreams of his people. Their faces flash through his mind, their sorrow and their pain. These images fill his heart and head. They give form and structure to his words, stanzas to his poems, paragraphs to his prose. He will craft his message for them, for their ears, a strange message they will hear but not quite decipher until they enter into friendship with him, learn what he has learned, and experience what he has experienced. He will seek the same—to listen and be changed.

And so the desert becomes a place of provision. He witnesses oases springing up after a storm quickly passes, quenching his parched lips. In emptiness he sees life, poured out for him even in the harshest conditions, just as it is provided for the beasts and plants that inhabit the land. Like the people of Israel long ago, he learns abundance in the desert, how to survive in a land that is foreign and prone to the harshest of conditions.

After forty days, he rises from fasting and meditation to begin his work. He sets his sights on the Jordan River, where he will bathe in the history of humanity and quench his thirst in the story of his people. He will be washed as the *ben adam*, the Son of Man, not to condemn humanity for sin but to cleanse them as one disinfects a wound. He will emerge from the waters with them and take them to his new world. His entrance into the stream will be a way to guide them to a different country, another nation. He will carry them into the waters and lead them out into another kingdom, a kingdom built not only by him, but together with them.

Until then, this vision will germinate in his heart. It waits to take root, grow, and flower.

## **BETWEEN TWO WORLDS**

With a squeak of tires, the plane landed on the tarmac at Hà Nội. Forty-four years had passed since my parents and I left our native

land of Vietnam. This trip with my wife, her parents, and a handful of friends was my first time back to the place we had fled.

We decided to begin our journey in the north, the region not of my birth but of my ancestry. My father's family had moved south to be a part of a war between brothers and sisters and countries near and far. For some, this war is a long-faded memory, but it still holds much trauma for me and for many others. As writer Viet Thanh Nguyen reflects, "All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory."<sup>1</sup> Vietnam is a battleground of memories.

Before Saigon fell, we left by plane in the dark of night. Because my father was a lieutenant colonel in the South Vietnamese Army and my mother worked at Trans World Airlines, we had relatively little trouble making it out with the first wave of refugees. Many others were not as fortunate. Some who exited on boats never made it to a safe shore. Vessels were seized by pirates, people were taken into slavery, their bodies used to appease the gods of punishment and suffering. But that was the history of our people, of many conquests, and wars, and of fleeing. I do not know how deeply the war entered my soul as a four-year-old boy. Did the trauma of war leave a mark on me like the bombs that scarred our land, just as my grandfather's imprisonment by the Communist government left an indelible mark on my father? Were the wounds of my parents passed down to me, not like old recipes, but like disgraceful things one hides away, never to be discussed?

But on that day over four decades later, I returned to the land of my ancestors, to the north, where my father and his parents come from. It was not until toward the end of our tour that a bitter-sweet feeling settled in. I was no longer Vietnamese, but Việt Kiều, a foreigner, a Vietnamese person living abroad, a point made by Vietnamese nationals after they heard my American accent.

"You're Việt Kiều?"

“Yes,” I would respond with slight embarrassment.

I am now Vietnamese American. Between two worlds, I am not a citizen of one country, nor am I entirely accepted by the other. In the United States people still ask, “Where are you from?” I respond, “From Houston.” But this question is intended to draw attention to my difference, as if we did not share the same love for barbecue brisket, the same excitement when the Astros won the World Series, and the same flooded roads and houses three years in a row.<sup>2</sup>

I am an inbetweenener. That is exactly the way that Jesus calls his disciples to live, existing between one vision of the world and another. Jesus was not a patriot of Rome, nor was he a teacher of Jewish orthodoxy. He was crucified for being both a traitor and a blasphemer. Jesus had no allegiance to the empire of Rome or to the earthly Zion. Neither were his home. Rather, he longed to dwell with his people, to live among those who needed him and loved him. He who eternally danced with the Father and Spirit now entered another dance, not with humanity in general, but with specific humans in particular. He became brother and friend, teacher and student, co-conspirator and comrade. He ate with them, laughed and cried with them, struggled with them, and bled with them. Their voice was his. He could not be separated from them. Yet he was always foreign, always a stranger in this world.

This is the reality I face as a person caught between two countries, peoples, and cultures. I am bound to and cannot be torn apart from the place where I live, but I am also constantly viewed as different. Jesus and his followers lived in the same way, as foreigners.

When Christians are unwilling to feel out of place in their culture, they are not really practicing the Christian religion. In building our own “safe spaces” in churches and bookstores, in academia and other institutions, we are only trying to ease our feeling of foreignness by creating a land and culture of our own. By using insider language to separate “us” and “them,” we are attempting to



anesthetize ourselves to the painful reality that the world in which we are living is *not* ours. We do not own this land. We do not own this world. Notions of dominion are fictions of the mind. The painful reality is that we are all called to live as foreigners.

The belief that we own this land has especially ravaged North American Christianity. The original identity of North American Christians was as pilgrims and refugees, but it became that of colonizers and conquerors of the land. In recognizing that this place truly does not belong to us, many of us face a gnawing and painful reality. Until we have come to the unsettling realization that the prized possessions of land, soil, borders, and boundaries are not solely ours, we will find no liberating comfort. Until we face this reality, those Christians who resist it will fight and tear at whatever they can to keep their impermanent identities intact. This is what drives much of Christian identity in North America—the need to cling to a reality that does not really exist, the myth of a Christian land and a Christian world.

The great gift of life is to exist as a participant in a life and world that is not entirely our own. It is a constant invitation to love what is not our own, and thereby receive the possibility and joy of love returned. We are part of an intricate tapestry of relationships: with others, with the earth, with animals, with the air. We can no more claim ownership of any of it than we can claim ownership of the sun and stars. But many of us are driven to make possessions and people our own, to grasp and grab, just as the Edenic couple took hold of the forbidden fruit despite already having received all the other ripe produce of the garden. In doing so, we fashion forms of government and systems that control and dominate. We live as if this life itself is not enough to satisfy us and meet our needs. We live as if the opportunity to eat and be full, to love and be loved, to know and be known is not enough, as if we need more. We do need all these things in order to survive, but what will come from all our effort?