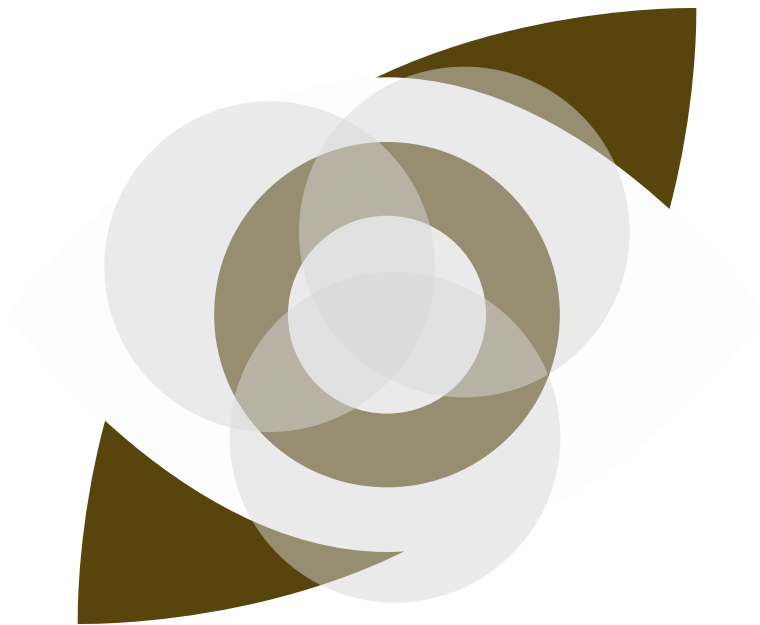


The log in our eye



An attempt at catholic self-reflection

I. INTRODUCTION

'First remove the beam out of your own eye, and then you can see clearly'

I acknowledge the irony of all this. Here is a judgy article about problems in the church which uses Jesus' own words about not judging others for a title. Yes but, that is why I say that the log is in "our" eye. Whose eye? The eye of Jesus himself. Who am I to say this? Well, I am a member of his body. Or, so I identify. And as appalling as it is to say, there is a log in the eye of this body. There is even a beam in the eye of Christ. I'm not trying to be provocative. I'm just trying to accurately describe our condition. This image should not be any more shocking than the thought that Jesus considers us as his body in the first place. Also, I think that the idea expressed another way would be agreed upon almost universally: the church has serious problems. Moreover, they are problems which she herself cannot see.

So then, this piece is an honest attempt to do what Jesus prescribes: not to look at specks in the eyes of others, but to first take the log out of our own eye. At least, I'm saying that we should mark its presence. Yes, I want to talk about a problem (problems?) in the church. The scope is impossibly broad: the catholic (whole, global) church. Furthermore, I want to talk about problems that are, as the analogy suggests, virtually invisible to those of us that are a part of this body. But before I begin, I want to acknowledge that I'm as much a part of this problem as anyone. I'm a participant in this body. I'm just like a skin cell in a particular spot sending out signals about what I can sense. Still, it's not lost on me that Jesus' words do not refer to a collective exercise but an individual one. And, I can't pretend for too long that this piece really is genuine, collective self-reflection. I'm just one person, and so are you. You have to decide whether or not these thoughts are relevant for you in your space and time and in your community. Again, take this signal for exactly what it's worth to you.

II. THE PATIENT

Before attempting to describe this log that is in our eye, I want to describe this body of ours. Who are we? We're the church. We're God's people who have come to know God through faith in his son, Jesus. Easy enough, right? In a way? It's simple in a sense, but unfathomably deep in another, of course. Do we really know God? How do you know that you know God? How do you know you that know the Son? How do you know that you really believe? How do you know that you are not deceived?

I think the uncomfortable reality is that none of us know *absolutely*. Paul writes to the Phillipians,

"But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God."

So we can't, in an absolute sense, judge even if we, ourselves are in the household of God. How then should we begin the task of identifying if others, whole groups of people even, ought to be considered as part of the church? Who should be considered 'Christian?' Of course, there have been many attempts to describe essential Christianity. We could reference the work of many saints into antiquity and various creeds and catechisms. There is also no shortage of modern studies on the subject. Many of these result in the production of some kind of list of doctrines that must be known and believed in order for one to be saved, to know God. Here is a sort of example: 'you must believe [this] about the trinity.' Easy, right? We all readily comprehend the trinity. Another might be, 'you must hold to this view about what scripture is and its veracity.' I have seen that thinking too long on this one can lead a person to dive deep into epistemology and ontology or simply to deconstruct. Lastly and especially emphasized among protestants, we have, 'you must know that none of your works can save you,

only by faith can anyone be saved.' Ok, we can believe these things. But, to merely believe that these are true is, in some sense, meaningless. James in his epistle says, "even the demons believe and shudder." The most lost in all of creation believe and know (know more clearly than any of us) these things, these doctrines. Surely, demons have better theology than the most perceptive and well-studied theologians on the planet. Similarly, Jesus said to the Pharisees, "you diligently study the scriptures thinking that in them you have life. But, you refuse to come to me to have life." So then, salvation is not about believing in doctrines. It is about believing in a person: Jesus Christ. We place our faith in him and his ability to present us as acceptable to his father. As the one who was lifted up with Jesus said, "Remember me when you enter your kingdom." Immediately, he was met with the Lord's commendation, "Today, you will be with me in paradise." How advanced was that man's soteriology? How firm was his concept of the trinity? We cannot know. But, we know that as Paul quoting the prophet Habakkuk says, "the righteous shall live by faith." It's only through a real, personal faith in Jesus that we are able to truly live. By faith, we relate to him as his bride and to God as sons and daughters. That is what it means to be Christian.

Broad, isn't it? Maybe deceptively so. By this definition there are many who could be believing in Jesus. The next question is, even if you are believing, how do you know you are believing in the actual Jesus and not another Christ? Some might say again that doctrine, specifically Christology and an understanding of the attributes of God, will identify the true Jesus and, subsequently, those who are believing in the true Jesus by virtue of their answering this question correctly. But, I disagree. Surely, the Jesus that I can comprehend at my best isn't the full, real Jesus. And, I'm sure that every Christian has misconceptions about Jesus that could render him a false Jesus. So, many would instruct us to identify the primary or cardinal truths that simply cannot be denied about Jesus. If these are denied, then you have a false Jesus. But even if you accept that there are cardinal or essential truths about Jesus and superfluous ones, that does not mean you are now actually believing in the person you can identify. Consider, again, the demons. The demon possessed man more easily recognized Jesus than the greatest born of women (and Jesus' own cousin), John the Baptist. So first, I'll ask: what is the

essential condition of at least encountering the real Christ? I would say that the reality of meeting the actual person of Jesus is not a function of how much you know about him. Like an interaction with any person, it is solely based on them coming to you or you coming to them. And, in the case of Christ, as Jesus himself says to Peter, all such revelation of the Son is from God. And, as Paul says, “we love him because he first loved us.” So, Christ comes to you, he calls you, and you respond. An infant relates to his mother, but knows very little about her. He does not know her name, her likes or dislikes, or her origin. Instead, he exercises a perfect and natural dependence. He, in full innocence and faith, relies on her for his good. He trusts her. There are things which he recognizes about her based on what he feels: her smell, her touch, her voice. But, his knowing these things does not legitimize his knowing her or her knowing him. If he were deaf, and did not know her voice, she would not be to him any less his mother. So it is with our relation to God. And, we did not have to be born for God to know us. As Paul says, God has set apart his people from before the world began. For the conscious person though, our knowing God and our actual believing in Christ will of course involve being acquainted with something about Christ, namely, his gospel. After all, Paul writes to the Corinthians about those who would attempt to deceive them with a different gospel and a different Christ. So, there is a real danger of being deceived, of not knowing the true Christ. An infant because of his ignorance, can mistake another for his mother to his own detriment. However, we see examples of people believing in Jesus after hearing the true gospel without receiving the Holy Spirit. And, what should we say about the Christology of the saints of the Old Testament or the repentant Ninevites? What was the nature of their relationship with the Spirit? These things are not so easy to set into a concrete formula. God communes with people according to his own will. He is not summoned. And so, I will not attempt to draw a line around any concept of the ‘essential’ gospel. Instead, I’ll comfortably leave this work where it is and move on to a question that I think is more accessible to answer and more pertinent to our discussion of the Church and this log in her eye.

Accordingly, when it comes to the question of evaluating whether a person is truly believing in Jesus, I find that the authors of the New Testament consistently direct their

hearers to examine their faith not according to their knowledge but by their fruit. James says that the kind of faith that is not accompanied by works is a “dead faith.” Jesus himself says, “you will know them by their fruit.” In calling out false teachers, the apostles repeatedly cite their opponents’ sensuality and impure motives as evidence of their falseness. So, what are we to do with that? On a personal and even a communal level, it feels doable to put such an understanding into practice by examining our own lives and the lives of those around us. We can test ourselves and evaluate each other, exhort and admonish one another. To do these things is the plain instruction of the New Testament. But, what are we to do about the global church? How do we make assessments about the genuineness of the faith of syncretistic Christians who practice Santería in the Caribbean, or 7th generation Greek Orthodox Christians in Central Europe, or the myriad of flavors of Evangelical Christians who pepper the American South and Midwest? Is this even a question that we should attempt to answer? And, are our attempts to answer this question actually inhibiting our ability to make this motion on the local level which is what is instructed, biblical and achievable?

Those are, of course, leading questions. What I’m really saying is that the task of identifying who is ‘in’ or ‘out’ of the global church is not only unproductive but fundamentally un-Christian. As an example from the Protestant perspective, the task of determining whether (capital C) Catholics are ‘in’ or ‘out’ of true Christianity is not a Christian motion, but a political one. Moreover, it is a motion which would inhibit a person from acknowledging and loving the Catholic who is his actual neighbor. And, I don’t mean political in the sense of having to do with the government or civil affairs, nor do I mean to refer to the specific American concepts of the left and the right. By political, I am referring to the practice of groups and the people who comprise them to accumulate power and exert influence. I’m referring also to the corresponding structures which are built to those ends. In name, these structures serve our need for cooperation. But in reality, they are about the business of control and domination. They exist in and through our institutions, our governments, and our religions. It is a very natural, although terrible, tendency of man to organize himself in this way. It is, by way of allegory, to become Babel or Egypt or Rome. It is the great tragedy of God’s project working

through national, ethnic Israel that Jerusalem became a Babylon. They did not submit to God's direction, but instead did what was right in their own eyes, striking hands with the impure and the violent to rob widows' houses and oppress the poor. In Ezekiel's prophecy, God commissions his servant to mark everyone in Jerusalem who sighed and groaned at such injustices. We are in a similar situation today. Accordingly, I will not attempt to identify who is 'in' or 'out' of the church. Despite the stated goal of this section, I will not try to define clearly who is in this body. I am speaking to you only if you are listening. If you are concerned about the state of God's kingdom on earth, if you sigh and groan at the injustices which are evident among us, if you feel a gnawing, agitating pain in your eye and are interested enough to identify the cause, then I would like to talk with you.

III. THE DIAGNOSIS

So to what can our condition as the church be likened? Do we have just one disease or multiple? If it is multiple, how are they related? How can we measure our health as a body? Can we? First, I think it would be good to delineate between the symptoms of our condition and the condition itself. And, I would say that the symptoms are apparent.

- A. Discord. Queue the obligatory mention of the ridiculous number of protestant denominations. Queue up the history of wars and murders committed over differences of opinion on baptism or justification or saints or anything. Bring up modern day divisions that would have members of one church holding protests outside of other churches. We are divided from our neighbors, even those who profess Christ, by political party, age, race, and class. We also divide according to commitments to various ideologies and practices such as homeschooling, style of preaching, or cultural preferences like clothing or music. Churches use marketing to attract congregants and to differentiate themselves from other churches. This 'othering' makes competitors of those who, in Christ, should be regarded as brothers. The solution becomes not to understand and to be at peace with each other, but to win arguments against each other, to win more and

more to one's side. This kind of division and hostility are bound up in the heart of man. But, this is not how the church has learned Christ. In his high priestly prayer, Jesus asks for us to be one even as he and his father are one. We fall despairingly, comically short of that.

- B. Adulteration and isolation. There are many evils and injustices in the world today that are, in a sense, occurring outside of Christ's body. It is the explicit purpose of this article (refer again to the title) to set those aside for now and focus on issues in and of the church. But, in response to evil in the world, there are common life patterns to which certain groups in the church have shown a pre-disposition. One of these is retreat or exit. This is the 'Benedict Option.' This is the isolation of the church from the world. It is an attempt to be not of the world by not being in the world. It is destructive in a way that is hard to see. Still, the one who is absent in the Lord's work is akin to the one who destroys it. Meanwhile, the other impulse is to adulterate, to accommodate, or to lose one's own soul in an attempt to gain the world. Christ, in his sermon on the mount, warns against about both of these tendencies. He directs us not to become like salt that has lost its saltiness and is therefore indistinguishable from the sand on the road, and he warns us not to become like a light that has been hidden so as to become useless and obscured. Today as in the past, there are traditions that will drive themselves into such isolation in the name of purity that they will almost completely lose their sense of mission and form cultures that behave and function as insular, echo chambers. Often held together by charismatic, respected leaders, these are the accepted cults of the Christian religion. On the other hand, there are traditions that habitually regress into worldliness and assimilate themselves out of who they are as Christ's bride. These turn into little more than social clubs with Christian decoration. I do not find that these tendencies occur along a 'right' or 'left,' a 'conservative' or a 'liberal,' axis or according to any geographical faultline. I have seen that these kinds of movements can mix and often occur in response to each other and to the broader forces in the culture by which Christians often, acting like everyone else, set their orientation.

C. Abdication of the responsibility coincident with freedom. Our marriage to Christ has afforded to every individual direct access to God by his Spirit. Why then are there all of these podcasts and Q&As and broadcasts in which celebrity pastors tell listeners how to live out every minute detail of their lives? Can I celebrate Christmas? What songs should we sing in church? Can I go to a gay wedding? I'm not saying we should not receive counsel or teach each other, but Christian, why are you asking a man you do not know these questions? He is not your pastor. Is he even anyone's pastor? Who does he know intimately so as to teach them personally, guide them, and correct them? Maybe no one. Certainly not you. I say this as someone who has benefitted very much from the words of Piper and Baucham and MacArthur just as I have benefitted from the words of other saints like Luther or Aquinas or Kierkegaard. But, John Piper can't live my life for me. And, it wouldn't be good if he could. We have become so concerned with finding *the* answer to every question that we've forgotten how to wrestle with God and to walk by his Spirit for ourselves. In a related way, Christians have also become profoundly complacent on the local level. We have as a matter of course yielded our Christian responsibility to an officially sanctioned and groomed, professional, Christian class: the preacher, the missionary, the evangelist, and the humanitarian. And so, the job of the 'Christian' in many spheres today is to live exactly like the world. Our marching orders are to make as much money as we can, live comfortably with a clean conscious knowing that for the pure all things are pure, expecting God's blessings given to us in Jesus to feature in our daily lives. We are called to pursue our careers and build up our church communities. We devote ourselves to raising godly families who will continue this work into the future. We are directed to come to church every Sunday to hear such messages from the preacher about where to fix one's attention and how to give to the ministries associated with this activity, thereby empowering the parts of the body that will go out to the poor, the ignorant, and the hurting in Christ's name. Congregants are thus left to tend to their own wellbeing and personal lives. They are to be hospitable to neighbors who are like-minded, foster the relationships that will increase their respectability in the church, and strive for a

life that is prosperous and correct at the end of which people will say, “that was a life well lived.” ...What? How did we get to such a place that this is the promoted vision of the Christian life? This is not the kind of life the apostle, Paul, commends to his readers saying,

“You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.”

We have been called in freedom to the law of love. Despite outward appearances, if we find ourselves biting and devouring each other, it is because we have refused to take up this call to freedom in the Spirit.

But, are things really all that bad in the church today? One might say that, “Yes, I live comfortably. Yes, I try to earn a good living. Yes, I benefit from the teaching of the good Christian leaders close to me and far away. Yes, I support ministries that I believe in. So, what? I’m doing all of this in God’s will, and I’m not transgressing any commandment. I am, in fact, living this life as an expression of the freedom I have in Christ guided by the Spirit.” Are we, though? Truly, I’m prompting myself for examination as much as anyone else. And over and over again, God’s people have run with both eyes closed straight into the second commandment: ‘do not take my name in vain.’ It is so easy to build up a Babel and call it Jerusalem. It is so easy to draw near to God with our lips and our professions, while our hearts are nowhere near him. It is so easy to be lukewarm. Hear Jesus’ words to the rich young ruler, “Go and sell all that you have and follow me.” I do not mean to speak just about money. Hear again our Lord, “if you love father or mother, son or daughter more than me, then you are not worthy of me.” Paul said that if there is no resurrection and all this belief is false, then Christians are most to be pitied. Are we living in such a way that if this were all a lie, we will be the ones who

have lost the most? What I mean to say is that I believe that we have deluded ourselves. We have created this system of 'Christianity' by which we intend to alleviate our conscience all the while making every provision we can for the flesh. We make every provision for comfort, for sensuality, for selfishness, for our own prosperity and security, knowing nothing of the true peace and freedom that is available to those who will have faith in Christ, who will serve God and not Mammon. We cannot serve both, not even a little. It is either love or hate; it is either master or stranger. And, I believe that instead of living our own spirit-led lives with a good conscience and a sincere faith, we have again become agents of the powers. As long as that power will write the name, "Jesus" on his forehead and his hand, we find it acceptable, even necessary to bow to him. And the consequences of this are the symptoms of our condition. They are also the evidence of our illness. Yes, things in the church are really that bad. In truth, we are devouring each other while carrying on our face the worst kind of false gentleness and grace. We subsidize and justify the murder of the orphan and the foreigner and the poor in our cities and abroad. We teach and preach not to edify, but to file members into our camp and to win percentage points of converts and adherents. We love our own to build our strength and we despise the other while he lay in need on the road.

What then is this illness? I say the illness is idolatry. It is the sickness that was diagnosed of Israel from Sinai to Jerusalem to Babylon and back again. And, it is still with us today. By way of this protracted metaphor of the body, it is Cancer. Instead of each member of the body living and serving in the way God intended, we have rapid and ultimately destructive cell growth. Our cells do not wish to love and relate to each other, but in pride elevate themselves to dominate and to conquer. Ears replicate themselves in the spleen and feet push on the heart to converge and conform and they divide and divide and divide and divide. The pernicious character of this condition is such that the disease's progression can actually seem like healthy growth. We can easily confuse our filling the pews, building seminaries, and winning elections for activity that builds Christ's kingdom. When we feel our sickness or rather its symptoms, it is easy enough to blame the affect on external factors: the other or the enemy, the specks

we see outside. And, so we never address or even see the column in our own eye that is killing us.

All of this leads to the following conclusion: **the Christian religion has itself become a meta-institution** which undermines the legitimate practice of Christianity. And, it is this institution which has become the object of our idolatry. Christianity is not unique in becoming an institution in this respect. Organizational webs that could be similarly described have sprung up from other religions, ideologies, and histories. But, for Christianity to be thus described is I think the most ironic and the most tragic. Contrary to the modern concept of the prudish, straight-jacketed, puritanical Christian, true Christianity is a philosophy of radical freedom. Listen to Paul's words to the Philippians, "All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained." Paul knows that each person in his address has the Holy Spirit. He does not expect nor want absolute conformity from his readers, but he wants them to each follow God. Elsewhere, Paul asserts his own credibility on the same footing albeit cheekily saying, "I think that I too have the Spirit of God." What other way of thinking would entrust to its followers such autonomy and freedom? The Christian revelation is that each of us were called like Adam, to exercise dominion, first over oneself, and then over the creation. Trying to exercise dominion over another person de-humanizes them. It deprives them of the task which God assigned to them: to rule. And, we are each to rule not in the pretense of our own authority nor in the authority of any external power but according to the authority that Christ himself announced to his disciples, that authority which he received after the triumph of his resurrection. I wish it were not so, but the systems and structures that we have made in the name of Jesus are actually tearing his body down and separating us from him and from each other.

At this point, one might say that this is no revelation and that the institutional church is hardly the invisible 'log in the eye.' They might easily acknowledge its harm, but because everyone knows that a big, bad institutional church is a problem, they could not consider this a malady to which we are blind. The evidence I have in response:

whenever it comes to addressing the issue of the institutional church, all we seem to do is either play musical chairs with the heads of the hydra or branch off and create new wings of the larger meta-institution monster. The Reformation, as it turns out, did not so much tear down the corrupt structures of the church as it did expand and transmute them. And so, regarding solutions, where does that leave us?

IV. THE CURE

I do not have the cure. That is the whole point. You are to take responsibility for yourself and embrace the freedom you have in Christ, utilize your gifts and discernment empowered by the spirit in your community, and live according to the knowledge that Jesus is coming back soon at which time he will require an account of you as an individual. You are to love God and neighbor for yourself. You are to grow in wisdom and insight of every kind for yourself. You are to live the life God assigned to you by the power of the Spirit who raised even Jesus from the dead to life everlasting. Our refusal to take up this charge is what has given life to the machine of the institutional church. It has set up itself as the object of our worship and service instead of God, and in order to resist it...

I cannot tell you what to do.

V. WHAT I WANT TO DO

Ok. I realize that might be unsatisfying. But, I meant every word of it. And, what I am about to describe now is not a prescription. It is not even a recommendation. It is just a description. If, in your being led by the Spirit of Christ, you find some of this useful to reference or even adapt into practice, then praise God. But, you won't be able to blame me on judgement day, ok? I'm just telling you my own resolutions. These are largely based on the example of the early church as shown to us in the New Testament, but

they are still specific and personal to me. What you do is on you. If you'd like a name for this set of principles, call it, with respect to the practice of Christianity, **Ecumenical Anarchism**.

- A. I will be uninterested in politics (methods and devices to control other people)
- B. I will not recognize levels of organization above the local church
- C. I commit to know and love my literal neighbors, especially those who profess Christ
- D. I will advocate for local church leaders to embrace their role which is to know and lead their congregants
- E. I commit to know and submit to local church leaders
- F. I will advocate for the divestment of my local church's assets. Property (buildings, money, food) should instead be in the possession of individuals who are then empowered to practice generosity
- G. I will advocate for church service and activities to be more visible, public, and grounded in community
- H. I will advocate for the appointment of deacons to help in the administration of charity and for the coordination of other tasks
- I. I will not view seminary as required for church leadership
- J. I will advocate for leaders to be made and tested in the local church
- K. I will commit to sacrificial participation in building God's kingdom (giving, serving, hospitality, etc.) and cease offloading these responsibilities to those in professional ministry
- L. I will advocate for leaders, evangelists, and teachers to equip the saints themselves for these things, for the work of the ministry
- M. I will focus on local needs and opportunities. These will primarily be geographically local, but can also include that which is local to the circumstances of the particular church and/or individual
- N. I will not have a consumer mindset about church; I will resist demographic based segregation, service and program marketing, and flippant membership. I will advocate for leaders to avoid this consumerism which feeds the church systems themselves rather than the body of Christ

- O. I will resist ceding the responsibility of this stewardship to the powers whether from governments, from denominations, or from any other kind of external structure. I will not allow distinctions and divisions in these spheres to prevent me from fellowshiping with and loving the people around me, especially the Christians in my community.

VI. OPEN QUESTIONS

Since this is reflection and not prescription, I will be open with the questions that I have as I write this. These could be seeds, I think, of further discussion on the local level.

- A. How does a local church scale if congregants increase (church planting, church growth, etc.)?
- B. How should a local church respond to large scale or global needs?
- C. What problems are outside of the purview of the local church? What is better left to individuals or other kinds of organizations?
- D. How can church leaders in different communities collaborate, even organize?
How can meeting in public facilitate that?

VII. CONCLUSION

Can we let go of our Christian systems for the sake of Christianity? In our marriage to Christ, we have wandered by the very means we intended to stay bound to him. Can we come back now by giving ourselves up to him? We must let God, as a surgeon, excise this log out of our eye. We must let God cut into us to remove the cancer. We must even lie naked and exposed before God. He must dictate the terms of our relation to him and to each other. This log is a beam. It is structural, it is stable, it is very natural to lean and depend on. But, we must surrender it. We can only be brought back to Christ by surrender in faith. God will do it. It is he who sanctifies us, and with Him all things are

possible. His bride can be sanctified, she can be filled with light to see clearly, she can be faithful, she can love him and be brought into his presence. And, she will be.

“The lamp of the body is the eye. Therefore when your eye is good, your whole body is also full of light; but when it is evil, your body also is full of darkness.

Therefore see whether the light that is in you isn’t darkness.

If therefore your whole body is full of light, having no part dark, it will be wholly full of light, as when the lamp with its bright shining gives you light.”