

Reflections on Luther (The Last Medieval Protestant)

A Critique of our Culture of Pietism

In this essay, I first review some of the themes of the J-Curve book related to Luther, then look at how Luther's theological vision created Pietism, the beating heart of our Protestant churches, and how that is impacting the church today.

Luther's Rediscovery of Faith-Only

To fully appreciate Luther's insights on justification by faith, it's immensely helpful to link it to Luther's discover of Total Depravity, not just in Scripture, but in his own experience. When Luther looked inward at his own obedience, he kept finding more and more sin. His Flesh—like ours—was bottomless. Overcome with self-preoccupation, he realized “we are bent in and curved in upon ourselves.”¹ If we are frozen in our sin, if our Will is completely captured by our Flesh, then God must act from the outside.

If salvation depended on Luther's doing, then confessing all his sin was critical. Luther describes the angst he experienced:

I often repeated my confession and zealously performed my required penance. And yet my conscience would never give me assurance, but I was always doubting and said, “You did not perform that correctly. You were not contrite enough. You left that out of your confession.”²

Luther rediscovered that God accepts us not because we are good (by our love), but because Jesus is good (by our faith). Neither are we justified by a mixture of faith and love. *We are justified by faith alone*. In thesis twenty-eight of his “Heidelberg Disputation”, Luther summarized the priority and purity of faith: “The love of God does not first discover, but creates, what is pleasing to it.”³ In other words, God doesn't find love in us; he creates love in us as we look in faith to Jesus. Faith is the energy for love. We can never begin with ourselves. Luther found that deeply liberating: “Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.”⁴

Before Luther rediscovered that faith (resting) comes before love (doing), he thought he had to get right with God in his own strength. That's because, when it came to salvation, the medieval church merged faith and love by combining our sufferings (the J-Curve) with Jesus's suffering. When we merge faith with love in salvation, we don't just muddy the waters—faith loses. Faith must be pure. If saving faith isn't pure, we re-create the works righteousness of the Judaizers. That was Luther's struggle.

¹ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, ed. Wilhelm Pauck (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 112. See my discussion in *J-Curve*, 73.

² Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, in *Luther's Works*, gen. ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), 27:13. See my discussion in *J-Curve*, 72.

³ As quoted in Gerard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 112.

⁴ Martin Luther, *Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings*, in *Luther's Works*, gen. ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964), 34: 337. This paragraph comes from my discussion in *J-Curve*, 75.

Before he became Pope Benedict XVI, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger articulated the sharp divide in salvation between faith-only and faith + love. When Ratzinger was asked about the possibility of reconciliation between Catholics and Lutherans, he said that Luther's re-discovery of justification by faith removed our love (our doing) from salvation. Ratzinger articulated the medieval Catholic position that merged faith and love:

Love, which lies at the center of the Catholic faith, is dropped from [Luther's] concept of faith. . . . Luther's insistence on 'by faith alone' clearly and exactly excludes love from the question of salvation. [for Luther] Love belongs to the realm of 'works' and, thus, becomes 'profane.'⁵

Luther's Focus on Faith for the Whole Christian Life

Luther saw (correctly) that justification by faith had implications not only for salvation but for the whole of the Christian life. That explains the profound effect on me of reading Luther's "Introduction" in his commentary on Galatians in 1983 in a Bible study led by my father, Jack Miller:

At our first meeting, we read Martin Luther's introduction to his commentary on Galatians. I was transfixed. I knew justification by faith, the unbelievably liberating truth that God declares us righteous because of our faith in Christ, but something about how justification had captured Luther's soul arrested me. I had grasped the importance of justification by faith for salvation, but I had not thought about its implications for sanctification (the process of becoming like Jesus). I remember coming home, putting Luther's introduction on the kitchen table, and telling Jill, "If the church really gets this, it will change things." I sensed this was a game changer. I suspected that justification by faith could transform my identity as a person...⁶

Many others, including John and Charles Wesley, the founders of Methodism, have been influenced by Luther's "Introduction". In our day, Tim Keller, likely under the influence of my father, Jack Miller, updated the language of Luther's "Introduction." My father began to focus on Luther and Galatians more when he was a professor at Westminster Seminary and was involved in the Norman Shepherd controversy (1979-1983). In fact, it was the Shepherd controversy that drove Dad back into Luther. A summary of that conflict has been written in a forthcoming biography of my father, *Cheer Up! A Biographical Study of the Life and Ministry of C. John "Jack" Miller: A Twentieth Century Pioneer of Grace* by Michael Graham (P&R, 2021).

What was so helpful for me in Luther's "Introduction" was knowing that since we are justified, we are empowered not just for salvation but for the whole Christian life.

In *J-Curve* (75), I reflected on this at length:

Luther realized that faith not only had priority in salvation, but shaped the entire Christian life. His sermons—which were, in effect, his instructions for everyday life—focused on repentance ("I can't") and faith ("Jesus can"). He realized we never outgrow the cross; by faith we start

⁵ "Luther and the Unity of the Churches: An Interview with Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger," *Communio* 11 (1984): 219.

⁶ This paragraph comes from my discussion in *J-Curve*, 42.

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our life as Christians, and by faith we repeatedly come to the end of ourselves. Faith is foundational for both salvation and sanctification.

Luther and the J-Curve

Luther was a remarkably rich thinker, with one foot in the Middle Ages and one in the Reformation. He valued the medieval emphasis on a “fellowship of his suffering”, calling himself a “theologian of suffering” in his “Heidelberg Disputation”.⁷⁸ Later in life, Luther realized that the law gives us direction to live as Christians (the third use of the law). However, cruciformity didn’t play a significant role in his preaching.

Luther has a rich theology of the cross, but in general, the J-Curve remained at the periphery of his main passion: preaching the law (“I can’t”) and gospel (“Jesus can”). That singular vision left little room for a theology of sanctification integrated with the Pauline theme of the J-Curve. As he matured, Luther increasingly saw the danger of lawlessness, but he never consistently grounded sanctification in the J-Curve with its dynamic of living in Christ.⁹ Practically, in his sermons, per Carl Trueman, Luther emphasized Law and Gospel almost exclusively.

You can see the missing J-Curve in Luther’s life. As he aged, he became increasingly bitter when others, especially Jews, rejected the gospel. He wrote a diatribe, “The Jews and Their Lies,” so awful I can’t bear to quote it.¹⁰

I don’t want to create a caricature of Luther that doesn’t reflect what a remarkable man he was. For instance, two decades before his diatribe, he wrote a moving pamphlet on loving Jews. Likewise, his pamphlet *Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague* (1527) called pastors and church leaders to stay and care for the sick and dying in Wittenberg, Germany, at great risk to themselves. And Luther himself stayed behind. Nevertheless, he consistently struggled to love his enemies. His reaction to the 1525 Peasant Revolt was similar to his reaction to the Jews in 1543.¹¹

The Rise of Lutheran Pietism

The neglect of the J-Curve in Luther’s preaching (though not necessarily in his writing, especially in his earlier years) and his heavy emphasis on the continued present experience of law (repentance) and gospel (faith), created a strong emphasis among devout Lutherans on the need for continual renewal. That translates into experiences of brokenness and faith as the “normal” for the Christian life. A renewal of this emphasis in the late 1600s was led by Lutheran theologian Philip Speener (1635-1705), the father of Pietism. Pietism is essentially Luther’s preaching vision of a continual rediscovery of my inability (law) and God’s ability (gospel).

⁷ See Carl Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life: Cross and Freedom* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 61–66, 95–97, 173–74.

⁸ See Ronald K. Ritgers, *The Reformation of Suffering: Pastoral Theology and Lay Piety in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany*, *Oxford Studies in Historical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 111–18.

⁹ This section comes from J-Curve, 76.

¹⁰ See the discussion in J-Curve, 76.

¹¹ For a balanced discussion on Luther and the Jews see Carl Trueman, “Luther and the Jews,” audio recording on “The Reformation,” Westminster Theological Seminary, available on iTunes.”

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Speener influenced Count Zinzendorf, the founder of the Moravians (1700-1760), but his greatest influence was on John (1703-1761) and Charles (1707-1788) Wesley, the founders of Methodism, who both brought Pietism to America.¹² Even today, Pietism is the beating heart of American and British Christianity, with its strong emphasis on 1) personal conversion, 2) ongoing ever-deepening commitment to Christ, 3) a deepening commitment to an obedient and holy life, 4) a love for and study of Scripture, and 5) evangelism and missions.

I am deeply thankful for the impact of Pietism on my own life and well as that of the world-wide church. Pietism has sustained spirituality in the church by constantly bringing it back to the centrality of “abiding in Christ”—one of the great themes of Pietism. “Revival” means those five elements listed above come alive or “revived” in the church. The 19th century camp movements of the Methodist and Baptist revival preachers were all rooted in Pietism. If you vacation on the East Coast of the United States, you can see the remnants of Pietism in all the former seashore camps. Our family vacations in Ocean City, New Jersey, where the major streets are named after prominent Methodists revival preachers, Asbury and Wesley. The 19th century explosion of Protestant missions (1815-1915) led to the world-wide church expanding from 10% to the 30% of the population, respectively. This massive shift was, in part, effected by the revival movements of Pietism.

Just as an aside, it is challenging to assess Pietism because it is so deeply imbedded in the DNA of evangelicalism with multiple manifestations that make it difficult to easily characterize. Even my own Reformed world, which has been rightly critical of the abuses of Pietism (the Keswick movement’s two-stage Christianity and perfectionism), is deeply influenced by Pietism at a lay level. Most devout Reformed evangelicals have Pietist value systems.

My critique of Pietism’s theological vision focuses not so much on errors in Pietism, but on *missing* elements. Like Luther’s preaching, it does not have a theological vision of love. Of course, the process of constantly returning to the cross for repentance and recommitment has had the effect of leading to new lives of obedience and love. Wherever the Spirit of Jesus is, there is love. But love was never *structurally* part of the Luther-like faith experience. In Luther’s “Introduction”, love just happens when we discover the passive righteousness of Christ. It misses the J-Curve as the primary structure of Christian obedience. Consequently, Pietism has often drifted into legalism when it does the Christian life.

It is true that Pietist leaders occasionally articulate a vision of cruciformity associated with love. But dying with Christ tends to be focused on missions, not so much on love. So some Pietists will use Paul’s J-Curve in 1 and 2 Corinthians which Paul applies to the proclamation of the gospel, and less on Philippians where Paul focuses on the work of love. In general, love tends be muted, and is seen as “application.”

Here’s the heart of my critique: Pietism tries to get more of Jesus by getting more of Jesus. That’s what Pietists call the “deeper life.” It tends to be weaker on the horizontal aspects of the Christian life—love. It tries to deepen its knowledge of God (vertical) by trying to find ever-deeper experiences with God, Christ, and the cross. As such, it tends to be very experience-

¹² See Wikipedia article on Pietism: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pietism>

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focused, constantly hunting for personal experiences with God. It's really not that far away from Luther's preaching project of law and gospel.

But God is a person and doesn't want to be used or treated as an object. God (and us, who are created in his image) wants to be loved, obeyed, enjoyed, listened to, and talked to. Many Pietists affirm that, but practically speaking, they tend to make experience the center. I suspect that American culture's deification of emotions and emotional experience is rooted in Pietism, which was so unbelievably dominant in the 19th century. (Around 1900, one third of college students across the country had pledged to be involved in foreign missions in what was called the Student Volunteer Movement!) Once you make emotional experience the center, then you simply must secularize it (strip it of God), and then you've got our modern obsession with feelings, what philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue* calls *emotivism*.¹³ My preferred term is *feelism*, where feelings are sacred and inerrant, a kind of modern holy of holies.

Feelism, of course, is all about me and how I'm doing. Pietism, likewise, can be very self-absorbed, which makes sense if *feelism* is just Pietism secularized. Because Pietism's spirituality is disconnected from love, it focuses on my growth, my spirituality, how I'm doing. That inevitably leads to a kind of spiritual narcissism or some form of legalism where you create standards to measure yourself by, a "spiritual" Failure-Boasting chart, the very opposite of the J-Curve. But even worse, that self-absorption weakens your ability to love your enemies, or just difficult people. Many Christian leaders are so mission-focused that they are not particularly good at simply being present with people.

Medieval Roots to Luther's Pietism

Just as an aside, Pietism predates Luther. In the late Medieval period (1300-1500) there was an outpouring of devotion to Jesus. Examples of that movement are Brother Lawrence's *Practicing the Presence of God*, and Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*. At times, it drifted into mysticism, but Luther was not at all antagonistic to this movement; and, in fact, he was significantly impacted by it.¹⁴ That is, he did not reject it out of hand—nor should he have. In that sense then, Luther is not the last Medieval Protestant, but the Protestant that preserved aspects of Medieval affection for Jesus.

To be clear, I deeply value that Medieval love for Jesus, but as soon as you make relationships and love secondary and think of love as merely application, then your only way of measuring your relationship with God is your feelings about him. I believe that's why Medieval mystics were so prone to spiritual depression, calling it the "dark night of the soul". Once you start looking at your feelings and hunting for feelings about God as a way of measuring of your faith, then you turn inward and become self-entangled. I wonder if Luther's ongoing battle with spiritual depression is related to that. I've seen that happen to even mature Christian leaders, where they begin to hunt for dramatic experiences with God and lose true, person-to-person fellowship. Likewise, Mother Teresa struggled with spiritual depression.

¹³ See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. 3rd edition. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 23-36.

¹⁴ See Ronald K. Ritgers, *The Reformation of Suffering: Pastoral Theology and Lay Piety in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany*, *Oxford Studies in Historical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

The Collapse of Pietism

These days, Pietistic Christianity is collapsing in the face of the onslaught of Secular-liberalism. More than one parent whose child has walked away from the faith has told me, “He just needs to see that Jesus is all he needs” or “She is still running away from God.” I completely agree with both comments, but taken in isolation it’s a Pietistic way of looking at a person that misses the power of Secular-liberalism and the weaknesses of Pietism.

First, the attraction of *Secular-liberalism*. It’s two-fold vision of *secular* and *liberal* is crushing the Pietist core of Christianity.

1. *Liberalism* offers our youth a world (purportedly) filled with an accepting, non-judgmental attitude where you are free to pursue the full expression of yourself (think: sex!). That combination of unlimited human freedom and inclusive, affirming community, while false, is nevertheless, immensely attractive.
2. *Secularism* offers our youth the “truth”: science has disapproved Christianity’s myths. Like all religions, Christianity is man-made and functions like a panacea for people not able to come to grips with the modern world.
3. *Secular-liberalism* has constructed an entire narrative: not only is Christianity judgmental and narrow (vs. liberalism); it’s also just an old fairy tale that unscientific people believe (vs. secular). Not surprisingly, Secular-liberalism calls the era of its birth “the Enlightenment.”

Pietism has several weaknesses:

1. Pietism’s definition of the person is largely negative: “we are sinners saved by grace”. That is absolutely correct, but it lacks Christianity’s positive vision of the person of Jesus and the whole pattern of dying and rising with Jesus. *A sin-guilt paradigm (as true and wonderful as that is) isolated from the warmth of the person of Jesus and a call to love by following in his pattern of dying and rising, can come across as cold and judgmental.*
2. Without the J-Curve, witnessing is separated from love. Paul continually weaves together love and sharing the gospel (see 1 Corinthians 1-2, 8-9, and Philippians 1-2). Of course, Christians are aware that we need to love as we witness, but it’s not a theological vision; it’s an add-on, something you need to remember and not intrinsic to the nature of the gospel lived out, like you see in 1 Corinthians 2:1-5.
3. Because Pietists tend to look at faith through a feelings lens (as in the comments above from parents), Pietism doesn’t take seriously enough the power of the *Secular-liberal* assault. For example, I plead with pastors to have a sermon series on why pre-marital sex will destroy relationships. A series of articles by Secular-liberal authors (all advocates of pre-marital sex) in *Atlantic Monthly* in 2010-2012 brilliantly laid out how destructive pre-marital sex was, far better than any sermon I’ve heard. In fact, I’ve never heard a sermon that makes a case for why pre-marital sex is wrong, and yet sex before marriage is almost the norm among evangelicals. I know of multiple evangelical parents who’ve not challenged their children who’d entered in sexual relations before marriage.
4. Pietism’s biggest weakness is a lack of vision for beauty formation in Christianity regarding love. If you isolate Luther’s faith vision from the historic J-Curve, you become good at detecting idols, but weak at drawing people into the perfection and beauty of a Jesus-shaped life. You become good at seeing bad, but bad at seeing good. To be clear: our current vision

of *the good* is wonderful, but incomplete. The J-Curve recovers the original narrative content to Christian morality and creates the opportunity for a new vision of beauty and love.¹⁵

5. In my opinion Pietism's historic anti-intellectualism has gotten much better in the last fifty years. Multiple factors have contributed to this shift: the influence of Francis Schaeffer, the necessity of responding to the onslaught of Secular-liberalism, and the growing number of evangelical scholars with PhDs. Nevertheless, the values of Pietism have been relatively comfortable alongside of the Enlightenment. There has been almost a division of knowledge between Pietism and Secular-liberalism that allowed the two sets of truth to co-exist together for 300 years. Pietism took care of the spiritual world, and Secular-liberalism with the world of facts and science. This is an extreme example, but that allowed John D. Rockefeller to teach Sunday school (as a Pietist) and blow up his competitor's pipelines during the week (per Darwin's *Survival of the Fittest*). It's very common among evangelical scholars, especially in the Northeast where I live, to affirm theistic evolution. For example, Gordon College's biology department are ardent promoters of theistic evolution.

Concluding Reflections on Pietism and Secular-liberalism

The following statements have multiple exceptions and require much nuancing, but I believe that the two dominate forces shaping the West since 1700 are Secular-Liberalism and Pietism.

Pietism, is now losing in historic ways. Secular-Liberalism is similar to Pietism in that is a multi-headed hydra that grips our secular culture's DNA so powerfully it is hard to pull back and see.

Nevertheless, 19th century liberalism, Communism, and modern Progressivism all share Secular-liberalism's DNA of 1) antipathy to Christianity, 2) a vision of a better future, 3) a secular vision of Luther's constant call to repentance, and 4) secularization of Jesus' radical call to love the weak.

¹⁵ For more on this, see *J-Curve*, 146.

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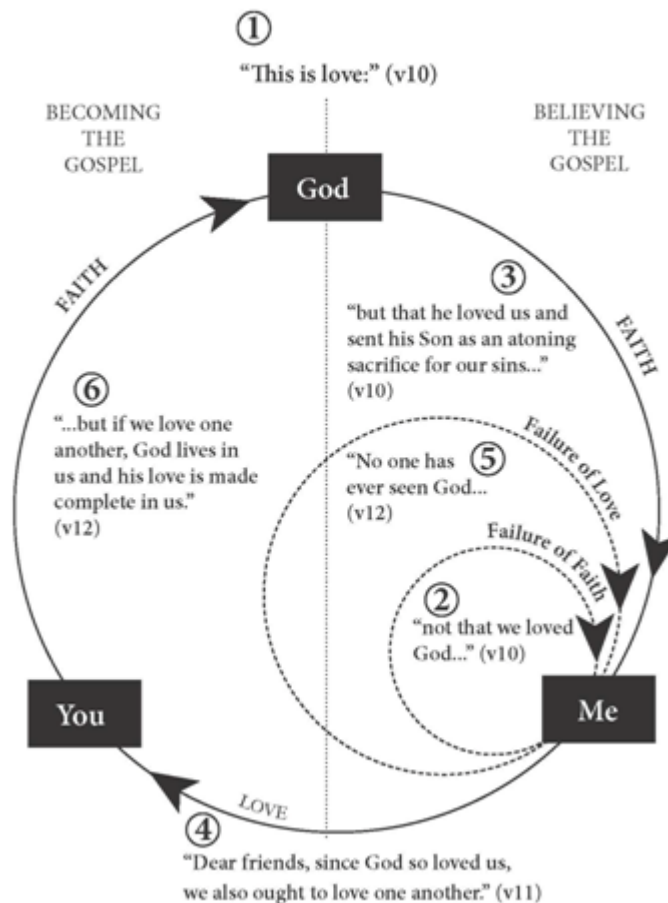
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The Circle Chart—A Critique of Pietism

This chart uses 1 John 4:10-12 to critique Pietism’s tendency to grow deeper in faith by growing deeper in faith. That is, Pietism, following Luther’s preaching emphasis, doesn’t have a significant doctrine of love, where our learning to love others (the horizontal) draws me into fellowship with God (the vertical). Pietism’s main horizontal interest is evangelism and missions (which is very important), but it neglects the apostle John’s insight from 1 John that “if we love one another God lives in us and his love is made perfect in us.”

Figure 6.1, The Circle Chart, 1 John 4:10-12



Circle Chart Explanation

1. **"This is love..."** John is going to explain to us the structure of love.
2. **"...not that we loved God..."** This circle represents the failure of love, of our inability to move towards God. Luther’s great discovery that is at the center of the Reformation is that we can’t begin with ourselves in the move towards God. God must make the first move. So, we don’t begin with our love for God, but God’s love for us.

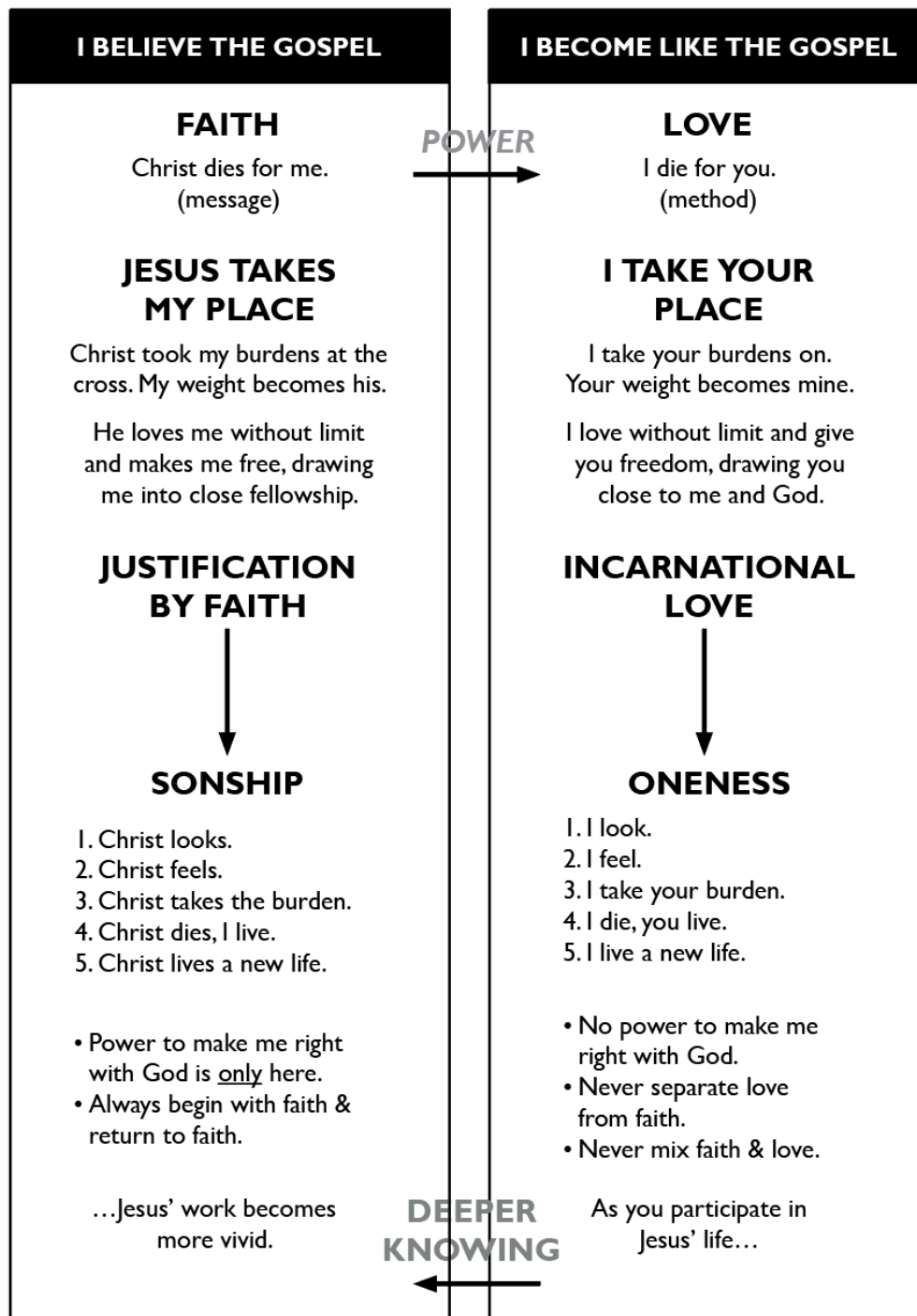
3. **“...but that he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”**
 Only because Jesus bears our sin, bearing the weight of his Father’s wrath, are we liberated. At the heart of our faith is a bloody sacrifice of the Son of God. The word "atoning sacrifice" (*propitiation*) means *absorbing wrath*. Jesus absorbs his Father's wrath. The receiving of God’s love we call “faith”. Paul the Apostle’s summary of this is Galatians 5:7, “...faith working through love.” Faith (receiving God’s love) is the energy or power for faith. This is incredibly liberating because the foundation of your life is God, not you. So I believe the gospel. I need to do this again and again through my whole life.
4. **“Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”** No one debates this. Jesus’ act of self-giving now creates a shape or structure for us to follow. His pilgrimage becomes ours. But how do we do the rest of the Christian life?
5. **“No one has seen God at any time...”** At first this seems to come out of the blue, but John is right on point. The question is, having begun with faith (#3), how do we see God? How do we deepen our relationship with God? What is the content of spirituality? How do we do the Christian life? The more rational tradition in Protestantism has tended to focus on moral teaching. This is good. The ten commandments are a wonderful grid, giving shape to our moral life, but that can easily forget Jesus and drift back into moralism and legalism. The other tradition is Pietism, which deepens its faith by re-focusing on the work of Christ as the foundation. It tries to build its faith by building faith. This is also good, but by itself it can be very self-focused, and drift into spiritual pride and narcissism. The person keeps on looking inward to deal with sin in order to know God’s love better. So I draw a circle (#5) trying to reach God but failing.
6. **“...but if we love each other, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.”**
 The New Testament claims again and again, that having begun with faith, the route to deeper intimacy with God is through a dying love (John 14:21, 23). The journey that we began in Step 4 is actually a critical key to deepening your fellowship with God. As you live a life of dying love, you enter into the dying-resurrection life of Christ and God’s love is made complete in us. You can’t begin with Step 6. If you do, you’ll drift back into the problems of Step 2, where you try to move to God in your own power. But having begun with faith (Step 3), now a life of dying love (Step 4) draws you into deeper intimacy with God. This is such a passion for Paul that he “wants to know the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings becoming like Him in His death” (Philippians 3:10-11). In fact, Paul is bold enough to say that “I fill up what is lacking in Christ’s sufferings for the sake of his body, the church.” (Col. 1:24). We shudder. What is lacking in Christ’s sufferings? My death. Jesus’ death for my wife, my church, for China, is finished. But for my wife, my friends, for China,

to know Christ, I have to live a life of dying love. So, the normal Christian life is being drawn into Christ's dying-resurrection life. You become like the gospel.

Believe and Become Like the Gospel Chart

This chart shows the symmetries between Faith and Love.

- Right side of the chart makes the left side come alive.
- Because faith is the foundation for love, *power* flows from the left side to the right.
- Because the weight of love draws you more deeply into faith, the right side *deepens* the left side.
- Left side is Jesus' incarnation. Right side is my incarnation for you.
- Left side: Jesus loses his freedom for me. Right side: I lose my freedom for you.



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Summary: So, I believe and become like the gospel. If I just believe the gospel (left side of the chart), I can drift into either moralism (to help me know what to do) or pietism (where I just try to get more of Jesus, but it becomes a “Jesus for me”). If I just become like the gospel (right side of the chart), I can tend to drift into legalism (doing good to be accepted by God) or depression (the weight of my sin drags me down) or penance (where I try to work my way back to God). The beauty of both believing and becoming like the gospel is that the atonement is not only the foundation of my life but the shape – both are cruciform. My life looks like His. So instead of suffering in love being strange, it is the normal Christian life. Instead of “why do bad things happen to good people?” I now think “how can I enter into the dying life of Christ in this relationship?” The act of a dying love draws us into the dying-resurrection life of Jesus.

