

**I AM THE WAY, THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE; JOHN 14:1-14; MAY 14, 2017;
THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

Most scholars agree today's statement by Jesus that he is "the way, the truth and the life" is the pinnacle of the "I am" sayings in John's gospel (I am the door, I am the Good Shepherd, I am the bread, and so on). When Jesus adds the second part of that statement, "no one comes to the Father except by me," he makes it into a formula.

If Eastertide is the season during which we encounter the Risen Christ then today's "I am" statement is one more iteration of those ongoing revelations. But is it a revelation if we don't know what it means?

Jesus says he is going to prepare a place for his followers so that they will all be together again. Thomas complains we can't know where Jesus is going if we don't know the way. Philip, perhaps speaks for all of us and says, 'don't make it so complicated Jesus, we don't need the way, the truth or the life – just show us the Father, then we'll believe.'

Things haven't changed much. Of all Jesus' pronouncements perhaps none have generated as much criticism as, "I am the way, the truth and the life." For evangelicals, this statement on face value proclaims all we need to know; but for mainline Christians it is seen as a bludgeon to assert Christian superiority over other religions.

But mainline Christians, for their part, have offered few informed, alternative understandings of this text. If it's not the definition of Christian superiority, then what is it?

I want to offer a way of seeing how this "I am" statement of Jesus functioned in the early church and how it might speak to us today; I'll do this by looking at two movements of Christian faith in America making headlines and the books about them that are getting lots of attention.

Exhibit A: Last week Tom Ashbrook's NPR show "On Point" was about the Christian church in the US. For the first time, statistics about the practice of the faith in the United States are in decline. What makes this worthy of interest is that the American Christianity has long been used as the counter-argument to the thesis that the secularization of society leads to the demise of religious belief.

Europe appears to confirm that thesis with dwindling numbers of Christians and empty state churches. But now, the US, too, seems to be going through its own cooling off of religious commitment.

The catalyst for "On Point" was a book David Brooks called "the most discussed and most important religious book of the decade, entitled *The Benedict Option* by Rod Dreher. Dreher makes a searing critique of contemporary society. Change is so rapid, social institutions have no time to adjust. The most successful people today are flexible and rootless; they can live anywhere and believe anything. This new reality is unstoppable because the forces driving it – capitalism and technology – are unstoppable. The question is what happened to the America where faith, family and community formed an integrated whole. Dreher's remedy is for believers to retreat into a communal monasticism.ⁱ

Compare that with Exhibit B – a religious movement, evangelicalism, that seeks to restore a unified family, faith and community, albeit, one from the 1950s, not through strategic retreat but political engagement. Donald Trump’s election was made possible by the highest number of evangelicals – 82% – ever to vote for a president. Trump rallied this support by saying he was “their last chance.”

The book that helps understand this phenomenon is by Frances FitzGerald entitled, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America*. FitzGerald traces contemporary evangelicals back to the first Great Awakening in the 18th century. She describes evangelical religion as ‘revival religion’ driven by the rise and fall of the sense that civilization is in peril. When that anxiety is strong, evangelicals see the coming of the end times and build religious empires around mass revivals or as Garry Wills said ‘getting saved in a hurry.’

What makes this movement uniquely American is our national ‘do-it-yourself’ ethos that relies on innovation, ingenuity, and an entrepreneurial frontier spirit. Applied to religion, this becomes ‘do it yourself salvation’ – a perfect fit for Yankee ingenuity. Who needs ecclesiastical authority? Evangelical spirituality prefers improvisation over prescription, spontaneity over tradition, and emotion over reason.ⁱⁱ

Enter: “I am the way, the truth and the life.” That statement served as the banner for Christian imperialism during the 19th century when a literal interpretation of the bible fueled a mission movement to proselytize the world. “I am the way, the truth and the life” seemed justification enough to save people from inferior religions.

But when we started reading the bible with historical, literary and textual criticism we discovered its original intent was often different from what a literal reading suggested; so what became mainline or progressive Christianity realized much foreign mission was, in reality, a program imposing Western culture and values on non-western societies under the guise of saving souls.

Until the late 19th century it would be hard to condemn these zealous missionaries – indeed, we are the heirs of their ambition to relieve poverty, disease and hardship. Hindsight is 20-20. It’s easy to look back from 2017 and see what history hadn’t yet revealed to them.

What we found with a critical reading of the bible, is that “I am the way, the truth and the life” served as an important differentiator for the early church.

The earliest churches were comprised mostly of Jews. This is not surprising because Jesus was a Jew, a rabbi, and preached in synagogues from the Jewish Torah, the prophets and the psalms.

I mentioned last week that if you were one of these early Jewish-turning-Christian-believers – there was not yet much of an established church or policies and procedures for confirming new believers. We take such things for granted. But in the primitive church for someone who was teetering between his former synagogue and his new church the theological differences were not all that clear. Some, even felt that to be a Christian one must first become a Jew. Then when gentiles entered the church in large numbers things got even more confusing.

So Jesus' "I am the way, the truth and the life and no one comes to the Father but through me" was a tremendous help to an emerging social organization competing in a religious marketplace, so to speak, seeking to consolidate its membership.

What might the Jesus formula mean today? Obviously, there are still those in the evangelical wing of the church who take that statement to mean what it says – the only way to God is by becoming a follower of Jesus – regardless of the wisdom of other religious traditions. This view still sounds like those 19th century missionaries but given the light shed on the bible from higher criticism it requires an ideological willfulness that is chauvinistic if not racist.

But to conclude that the pinnacle of the "I am" sayings belongs only to the past just because we don't like the way it's been applied to the present is equally closed-minded. The question now is how does this revelation of Jesus' core identity work for us today.

While I don't buy Dreher's recommendation that the church retreat from modern society, I do agree with much of his conclusion that in our fast moving culture where technology and money are the forces that drive and shape our lives, the result is a startling, maybe irreversible, erosion of a relationship-based world in which home, family, community and career had the feeling of coherence and meaning.

In our high tech, high achieving, highly efficient world people and relationships are reduced to the functional, transactional and increasing lack the nurturing and humane. If 'cogs in a machine' is an outdated metaphor perhaps we could be described as apps on a smart phone or codes in a software program – that is, containers of useful information and services.

The big shift Dreher says took place during the Enlightenment from a world in which creation was good because God made it and called it good to a world which is good only if it has value and usefulness to me making common moral standards and agreement difficult to achieve.

But if the church chooses not to retreat from but engage society then how? Perhaps those 1st century believers discerning the call of Jesus apart from other voices offer a way. Yet, today the other voices are not those of other religions, for they too are combatting the same erosion of society; rather we are talking about the voices of a society that threatens to leave us behind if we do not capitulate to the next of generation of technological advances that reshape the way we think, work and interact.

What does "I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father but by me," mean today? Like those 1st century believers trying to root their faith and lives in a nurturing, supportive community after being rejected by their synagogues, we too are faced with rooting our faith and lives in a rootless, fast-paced society that depends on the demanding but fickle mistress of technology that self-destructs through obsolescence every two years. We get more kick for our addiction to technology with each new generation of micro-chips but the risk is giving up more of our humanity.

"I am the way, the truth and the life" is a map and compass in a societal wilderness, a lifeboat on what Dreher calls the sea of "liquid modernity" that has become an engulfing, destroying flood.

Years ago, Madeleine L'Engle, who actually preached from this pulpit once, told a story about a young friend of hers, for whom she was, on this Mother's Day, a mentor and maternal figure; her friend was planning to drive across the country by herself. Because her young friend was also battling addiction she expressed concern that she would be alone in so many unfamiliar towns where she had no friends or system of support.

But her friend reassured her and said, "Don't worry about me. Wherever I go, wherever I end up spending the night, there will be an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting where I will be welcomed by people who are on the same journey as I am; people who understand me and the daily struggle I face in an alcohol saturated society; people who practice and live by the Twelve Steps and for whom the "Big Book" is their bible. Don't worry about me," the young woman said, "I'll be just fine."

Madeleine L'Engle said perhaps what you're thinking, "isn't that what the church is or *what the church should be* – a community in this wilderness of a world where people know you before you walk in the door because you share common, universal values that you didn't invent but that are embodied in the life of a man called Jesus. Shouldn't any of us be able to walk into any church, anywhere, and be greeted with the kind of affection and understanding that comes from sharing a common struggle to live by a golden rule in a severely tarnished world.

I am the way – *do unto others as you would have them do unto you;*

I am the truth – *anyone who gives themselves away for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will find themselves;*

I am the life – *I will take you unto myself so that where I am you may be also.*

Those are promises we can count on. Promises that will never be obsolete or replaced but are the same yesterday, today and tomorrow.

We come from over thirty zip codes in this congregation. We're as modern and mobile as any church family I know; and we have new faces and visitors among us every Sunday.

What we share in common, what we are here to get, transcends those everyday realities and gives us deep community, caring relationships and loving encouragement to follow the way, the truth and the life of Jesus. That's what makes the person sitting next to you, whether an old friend or someone you've never seen before, a sister or brother; someone with whom you have a bond; like Madeleine L'Engle's friend who walked, for the first time, into a AA meeting in a church basement in Cleveland, and knew she was home. Amen.

ⁱ Joshua Rothman, “The Seeker: Rod Dreher thinks we’ve lost our religion. Do we want it back?” *The New Yorker*, May 1, 2017, 46

ⁱⁱ Garry Wills, “Where Evangelicals Came From,” *The New York Review of Books*, April 20, 2017, 26.