



Observations and Reflections on
**The Future of
Church**



**A 12-part series of observations and reflections with
Rev. Dr. Cynthia Bourgeault and Christopher Page at www.contemplative.org**

During Lent 2011 in Victoria British Columbia, Canada eight church clergy, academics, and spiritual teachers (including Cynthia Bourgeault) shared their thoughts and insights over six Wednesdays on "The Future of Church". Christopher Page created a synthesis of twelve observations that emerged from these presentations and Cynthia Bourgeault will offer her reflections on these points over the coming weeks.

Observation # 1: The church is in the midst of a massive cultural sea change. This paradigm shift is altering everything around us and we in the church are not at fault for the devastating impact it is having upon our institution. The decline in the church is not primarily the fault of mismanagement, bad theology, or lack of good will. We are caught up in forces much bigger than we can control.

Cynthia's response: This strikes me as an enormously helpful and non-judgmental way of framing the situation, encouraging us right from the outset to "think outside the box." It really is a fascinating time to be alive as not only change itself but the *rate* of change keeps accelerating beyond anything the world has ever experienced. From global warming to the worldwide web, it's all about dynamic equilibrium in a fragile and interconnected world. This may be new to traditional theological formulations, but it's right at the heart of the Jesus message. As Fr. Bruno Barnhart so brilliantly put it in his book *Second Simplicity*: "The gospel's secret power, often hardly glimpsed by Christianity itself, is the gathering up of all our passion, our entropic centrifugal energy, our very outward thrust and vital compulsivity, secularity, and carnality into this divine energy that ever flows outward from its hidden Source." If it happened once, it can happen again. And we will find our way by turning toward it, not by running scared.

Observation # 2: The shift we are currently navigating is generally described as a move away from rationalism, propositional faith, and institutionalism. People are no longer seeking intellectual answers to questions or rigid institutional embodiments of those answers. They are looking for a deep experience of God and profound inner wisdom to support them in living authentic and integrated lives. We can no longer assume institutional loyalty. The days when we could rely on loyalty to the church and general agreement to a uniform body of dogmas are gone. It is not adequate to demand

Observations and Reflections on The Future of Church

allegiance, or simply keep announcing our convictions confident people will eventually sign up.

Cynthia's response: That may indeed be how things look from the viewing platform of most of the Lenten Series speakers—i.e., the mainstream liberal Protestant establishment. But there seems to be no dearth of folks out on the religious right eager to sign up for rationalism, propositional faith, and institutionalism, while those seeking a deeper experience of God and an accompanying inner wisdom have existed in every generation. What's really happening, it seems to me, is that the “middle” has dropped out of mainstream Christian experience: those unspoken but hugely influential “lower left and lower right quadrants” (in Ken Wilber's terms) over which the church until recently presided as a combination of cultural cement and social networking agency. Upward mobility, social respectability, cultural literacy, “old boys' club” placement services, patriotism, civic duty, and a chaplainly blessing upon the affairs of state: all this was part of the great cultural-spiritual mainstream over which the church held undisputed sway.

That is mostly swept away now—a casualty of the cultural tsunami described in Observation #1 (first installment of this series). Not only does the role itself no longer exist in an irreversibly pluralistic, mobile, and secular society, but even in its former unassailable niche as ethical and moral pace-setter, the church now generally lags far behind in basic standards of inclusivity and civil rights widely established in secular society itself.

It seems to me that there are really two options for moving this dinosaur gently along the evolutionary track. One is to ‘fess up to the fact that this middle ground has always been an important part of the church's missionary ground and radically get on board with the social networking program in terms understandable in today's cultural reality. The other is to pare down and focus on those folks thirsting for authentic spiritual formation and actually deliver the goods, cutting through centuries of doctrine, dogma, and institutional solipsism to the profound transformational wisdom still flowing from the living heart of Jesus. That is the trajectory, of course, that I am myself the most keen on exploring.

The third possibility, of course, is to attempt to shrink the world back to its former cosmological and theological dimension so that the church's cultural cement might yet again hold everything together. But this route, while being actively sought in some corners of the corners of institutional Christendom, does little service either to Jesus or to our planet.

Observation # 3: Although the institutional expression of faith is in precipitous decline throughout North America and Europe, faith is not in decline. The majority of people still believe in God and have deep spiritual longings. They simply would not think of looking to the church to satisfy their spiritual hunger.

Cynthia's response: Ouch! What a zinger that last line is!! But like the lad in that old fable, “The Emperor's New Clothes,” it names a truth that can be completely liberating

Observations and Reflections on The Future of Church

once we let it out of the bag. If so many people “simply would not think to looking to the church to satisfy their spiritual hunger,” where *are* they looking? That’s pretty easy to see: to retreats, meditation workshops, wisdom schools (mine fill up instantly, a couple of years in advance), mystery schools, vision quests, spiritual direction programs, interSpiritual Institutes such as Ken Wilber’s Integral Life or the Spiritual Paths Foundation), internet courses (the wildly successful Spirituality and Practice e-courses, for example), virtual monasteries such as Sr. Joan Chittister’s newly launched “monastery of the heart, and grass roots contemplative orders and organizations such as Contemplative Outreach, The World Community of Christian Meditation, or our own plucky little Contemplative Society. They’re signing up for embodied experiences such as yoga retreats or Sufi zikr and whirling; they’re flocking to a proliferating network of “Open Centers” where spiritual ideas can be freely presented and pondered in an atmosphere of open inquiry and respect. The bottom lines seem to be that most people hunger for genuine spiritual formation (not doctrinal imprinting) in an atmosphere of embodied practice, non-sentimental but profound mystical devotion, and open, interSpiritual inquiry that draws respectfully on the transformative wisdom of all the great spiritual traditions. And if even this is too arcane, they run marathons, go skiing, or hang out at the Sunday market.

And I have to admit that for me, too, when I’m not scheduled to preach or celebrate, I do the same.

The big problem, of course, is the lived experience of a very large number of folks out in the world is that the church blocks the view, hog-tying genuine spiritual yearning in an intricate tangle of doctrinal ownership and theological nitpicking. If you’re following the response to Christopher’s observation #4 (to be posted soon), you’ll see what I mean. Why do we keep doing this to ourselves? What part of “contemplative,” “embodied,” “immediate,” “non-ideological” do we not understand? Why would we rather be “correct” than connected?

Observation # 4: Faced with decline, the institution of the church is permeated by fear. Some in the church are fearful for the preservation of their cherished institutions and buildings. Others fear that their familiar theological formulations are being threatened. Fear is never a good starting place for opening to the movement of God’s Spirit.

Cynthia's response: You’ve hit the nail on the head with that one! In fact, modern neuroscience now confirms what the mystics and contemplatives have insisted since time immemorial: that fear completely shuts down our capacity for Spirit-led responsiveness and even wrecks havoc on our basic common sense. The data now emerging from The HeartMath Institute and other places depicts graphically how any fear response immediately lights up the neural pathways straight to the amygdala, the most ancient and primitive part of the human brain (commonly known as “the reptilian brain” because guess whom we share it with?), where it stimulates a series of very rigid and repetitive behaviors in response to the “fight or flight” signal. Not only are we out of touch with Spirit; we aren’t even using the more evolutionarily advanced parts of our human brain!

Observations and Reflections on The Future of Church

Learning to stay open, stay engaged, stay receptive in the face of sweeping change (rather than going to fear-responses) is a classic fruit of spiritual practice. It's ironic that in the plethora of retrenchment strategies now engulfing the church, that this profound resource at the heart of the church's own mystical treasure chest is so little acknowledged or utilized.

Observation # 5: The pervasive fear in the church is paralyzing. It inhibits genuine conversation and keeps us fixated on finding solutions, rather than launching into bold new adventures of faith. There is no way to move forward until we come to grips with the reality of fear. Dealing with fear requires deep personal and corporate spiritual practice. Only transformed people will have the ability to be a transformed church.

Cynthia's response: This is so, so true. If "perfect love casts out fear," the opposite is sadly but equally true: "perfect fear casts out love." And it shuts down just about everything else as well. Fear is always a tip-off that one is living at the egoic level of consciousness (or in the corporate mode, the "we-goic" level): that anxiety-prone hardwiring of the immature human mind that sees everything from its own self-interest and perceives through separation and scarcity. The only "cure" for fear is spiritual practice, which gradually heals this artificial split in the field of consciousness and restores the direct perception of abundance and connection. All other approaches to fear simply mask the symptoms, generally through reliance on illusory power and control to "fix" the external situation deemed to be broken.

Ironically, this healing of fear is at the very heart of the Jesus message, over which the church claims custodial rights but about which it knows so very little. "Do not be afraid, little flock: it is my Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom," Jesus assures his followers in those immortal words of Luke 12: 32. And throughout his entire ministry, he teaches, models, and ultimately offers himself up in the kenotic (or "letting go") practice which not only surmounts fear but transforms it.

Imagine what might happen if a whole group of Christian were to simply drop their terrified insistence that the church as we know it must survive and were instead to give themselves to that "deep personal and corporate spiritual practice" that makes it possible to fall through fear into perfect love. What might happen next? Whatever form it might take, it would certainly be REAL: a powerful new unleashing of the Jesus energy, no longer as that "mighty fortress" and "bulwark never ceasing" of times gone by, but as the river itself, ever flowing.

Observation # 6: The church will not recover its nerve, its creativity, or its authenticity simply by instituting fancy new gimmicks, implementing flashy programs, trying to get more organized, or working harder. The way forward is through the development of meaningful spiritual practices, a renewal of corporate spirituality, and a profound shift of consciousness in the way we do church. These deep inner changes will only be achieved

Observations and Reflections on The Future of Church

by creating space for an awareness of the presence and action of God to emerge in our midst.

Cynthia's response: Amen, brother! More than seventy years ago the Quaker mystic Thomas Kelly penned these prophetic words:

“Continuously renewed immediacy, not receding memory of the Divine Touch, lies at the base of religious living. Let us explore together the secret of a deeper devotion, a more subterranean sanctuary of the soul, where the Light Within never fades, but burns, a perpetual Flame, where the wells of living water of divine revelation rise up continuously, day by day and hour by hour, steady and transfiguring. The ‘bright shoots of everlastingness’ can become a steady light within, if we are deadly in earnest in our dedication to the light and are willing to pass out of first stages into maturer religious living. Only if this is possible can the light from the inner sanctuary of the soul be a workaday light for the marketplace, a guide for perplexed feet, a recreator of culture-patterns for the human race.”
(*The Light Within*, p. 31).

If that Light within truly exists, there is only one authentic way to find it, and it is just as you have named it: “*creating space for an awareness of the presence and action of God to emerge in our midst.*” If we don’t trust that the light actually exists, if we resign ourselves to being no more than the caretakers of a “receding memory of the Divine Touch,” then we might as well close up shop right now and go join the crew at the Sunday market and soccer practice. At least there’s fresh air!

Observation # 7: People want to learn spiritual practices. They want wisdom for the journey of life. If the church is going to meet these real desires, we must put aside our obsession with the institution and explore the presence and action of God’s Spirit at work in our lives, in our churches, and beyond the church in unexpected places throughout the world. Where we find God’s Spirit at work, we must cooperate with and celebrate that work, even when it seems unusual and unsettling to our established ways of doing church.

Cynthia's response: Just like Jesus did it.

Observation # 8: In order for us to cooperate with the work of God’s Spirit, we must loosen our grip. If the church wants to move forward in the current environment, we can allow no place for stultifying rigid hierarchy or oppressive control. Clergy must learn to let go. We need to relax our structures, allow for fluidity, flexibility, openness, and diversity.

Cynthia's response: “Loosen our grip” sounds right—this is, in fact, the heart of Jesus’ revolutionary kenotic teaching. But are you talking here about style or content? When you recommend that “Clergy must learn to let go,” are you talking about a way of hanging onto structures and dogma, or the structures and dogma themselves? Does “fluidity, openness, and diversity” mean in your book to relax the Nicene creed as the benchmark of Christian belief, to say it’s okay to believe that Jesus was just a wise teacher, not a unique manifestation of the very being of God, to say that the resurrection never really happened, to allow each parish to ordain their own spiritual leadership and develop their own liturgies? Where do you draw the line in “letting go?” “Stultifying, rigid hierarchy” and “oppressive control” is really a straw man tactic, end-running the question of whether there is a need for hierarchy and control at all, and if so, who makes the call.

There is actually a core perceptual issue underlying this conundrum, a conundrum that cannot be spotted theologically but only phenomenologically (from what Ken Wilber would call “right quadrant” or objective perspectives). And that is this: the greatest spiritual teachers in all traditions—Jesus included among them—have told us that we need to loosen our grip on “identification” as the means of establishing our identities. “Identification” means to attach your mind to an idea, an ethnicity, a religion, a story of yourself, any kind of descriptor, as a way of establishing and defending your identity. It is a tendency built right into the hardwiring of the mind itself, and most of us simply can’t conceive of how we’d have either “identity” or “motivation” without it.

But this was exactly Jesus’ complaint about the Pharisees: not that they were “rigid, stultifying, or controlling” (after all, they were the political liberals of their time!), but that they thought they “owned” the story: they knew who they were, they knew what was right and wrong, they knew how the story was supposed to turn out. They were, in Jesus’ way of looking at things, “rich.”

As the church now hovers at the cusp of two ages, we are caught in an anguishing and virtually invisible double-bind. Identification is our spiritual and practical *modus vivendi*. We call ourselves “people of the Story,” “people of the Book.” We think it’s perfectly normal to establish our faith by a set of identifiers—i.e., propositional statements—such as the Nicene Creed—which establish our ownership of the story and our field of expectations. Closer to home, identification with our denomination, or our local parish church, is a main strategy for membership building, generating enthusiasm, and stewardship (it’s virtually the whole program of evangelism). What we don’t want to see is that the fundamental reason we can’t “loosen our grip” is that we have used tightening our grip as our primary strategy of Christian “identity formation,” and we fear that letting go of identification means plunging ourselves into chaos, apathy, and “anything goes.” How can we simultaneously let go and hang on?

What we also can’t see—at our usual level of consciousness— is that this is simply the hall of mirrors of the mind.

The great mystics and masters have pointed consistently to another way of doing business, another way of orienting our consciousness and receiving our identity: not from

Observations and Reflections on The Future of Church

eternal principles or the fixed recitation of a story or a set of beliefs (even cherished and “good” ones), but from the dynamic and flowing stream of compassionate Presence itself. A few quotes here: from Jesus (Luke 12:32): “Do not be afraid, little flock; it is my Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom”; from William Blake: “He who binds unto himself a joy doth the winged life destroy”; from the contemporary spiritual psychologist Gerald May: “As attachment [identification] ceases to be your motivation, your actions become reflections of compassion absolute.” God does not go away when we loosen our grip on identification as the means of establishing our identity and motivation; rather, these things fall “like dew from above” into the willing heart.

But to receive identity without identification is a higher spiritual/energetic capacity than can be sustained by the mind alone. It requires mind and heart, working together, to undergird a whole new level of spiritual perceptivity. Again, this is at the core of the Jesus teaching. To get there is possible—in fact, it’s the point of his whole teaching. But it requires spiritual practice, not dogma.

In short, my fear is that we will keep right on straw-manning and plea bargaining, looking at “things” it’s okay to “loosen our grip on,” or confusing inclusive and laid back style with a real change in game plan, until we spot the real problem of identification itself and begin to stabilize within ourselves and our church “the mind of Christ” which is capable of letting go of even our most cherished sacred cows—not because the cows are bad, but because the clinging to them is bad; it “doth the winged life destroy.”

Observation # 9: Letting go means being willing to accept that certain things may need to die. There are some institutional expressions of faith that are simply no longer sustainable. Certain things must be left undone in order to create space for new things to arise. For a time this may look messy. It may seem like failure. But the only failure is demanding that what has been in the past must continue to be in the future. Such a demand makes us unable to respond to the call of God’s Spirit blowing through the church today.

Cynthia's response: I’ve often remarked that as I work in the church in this extraordinary era, I never know whether I’m a hospice worker or a midwife. It’s important to keep in mind that these are both sacramental roles having to do with liminal space, and allowing things to die with dignity is as holy and faithful as receiving them into new life. I’m curious, Christopher, from your long experience as a parish priest, what you would see as some of those “institutional expressions of faith that are no longer sustainable”?

It’s been my experience that midwifing of the new often works better, initially, in smaller, contemplative groups—again, because the capacity for deep listening and collected attention is built right into the fabric of a contemplative gathering. I have seen great energy and new life in centering prayer groups, contemplative eucharist and Taize services, which seem to speak to people’s deep hunger for embodied, less wordy forms of corporate prayer. Once a critical mass of this new sort of collected energy has gathered

Observations and Reflections on The Future of Church

at the edges of the church's traditional expressions of theological and devotional piety, it can move into the center as a reconciling force, allowing old forms to die with less of the sort of contentious heartbreak that often ensues when old and cherished patterns are threatened.

Observation # 10: A church that has the potential to appeal beyond the narrow confines of churchland, will be driven by a vision that reduces division and emphasizes the oneness of all creation and of the human community. We are too familiar with the devastation of division in our midst. We know too well the impact of dissension and discord. The world is looking for places where the realities of deep connection are honoured and practiced. When churches quarrel and separate, they erect impenetrable obstacles to being able to speak in any meaningful way to the world beyond the church. We must model profound respect for all people. We must learn to pay careful attention to the world and to listen carefully for God's Spirit at work in all peoples' lives. Good speaking always starts from good listening.

Cynthia's response: How profoundly you cut to the heart of the matter here, Christopher! Those lines embedded in the midst of your summary here do in fact say it all: "The world is looking for places where the realities of deep connection are honoured and practiced. When churches quarrel and separate, they erect impenetrable obstacles to being able to speak in any meaningful way to the world beyond the church." Amen, amen! Dissension and strife create a powerful negative energy field, and in a world already so beset by dissension, danger, anxiety, and brokenness, any further fracturing only adds to the intolerable levels of dissonance. Who wants to seek refuge on a battlefield?

When my grandson Jack was three years old, one of his older aunts asked him if he knew what a sermon was. "Yes," he said. It's when someone stands up in a high box and goes "nuh-Naaa, nuh-Naa, nuh-NAAA, nuh-NAAAAAAA!!!" He raised his voice and jabbed his small finger skyward with mounting intensity, perfectly mimicking the sound of the rhetoric of certitude. The words were all just drone; it was the tone he was picking up on. And I suppose that countless others are doing likewise.

You call us back, Christopher, to that simple and yet overwhelming realization that if we are truly to bear Christ to the world, we don't do so through our words and theological formulas (even if they're correct), but through the qualities of energy that he himself brought: gentleness, peace, inclusivity, empowerment, hope. In a world reeling from violence and cacophony, the church has instead become among the worst polluters.

Observation # 11: We need to listen to the world outside the church and find ways to make church more accessible to that world. The world will never listen to an arrogant voice that pronounces from a position of power and privilege. The world will listen only to the authentic voice that speaks from a place of deep sensitivity and openness to the real

Observations and Reflections on The Future of Church

wisdom that is already present in the hearts of people who do not find a place in the church.

Cynthia's response: From the Christian Inner Tradition (via the Gurdjieff work) comes the powerful idea of the Law of Three. Basically, it states that every change or new arising in the physical world is the result of not two but THREE independent forces: not just “yes” and “no” (or “thesis” and “antithesis” in Hegelian terms), but “yes,” “no,” PLUS an additional energy that brings the two opposing forces into meaningful connection at a new level. These three are called “affirming,” “denying,” and “reconciling.”

An example comes in steering a sailboat. People will tell you that a sailboat moves across the water through the opposition of the wind in it sails and water against its keel. But any sailor knows that a boat doesn't sail in this state, it rounds up into the wind and comes to a dead stop. Only through the addition into the equation of the HELMSMAN, who brings the wind and water into connection for a chosen trajectory, does forward movement happen.

The church, it seems to me, has gotten stuck on the horns of a dilemma, mechanically taking the role of “denying,” or SECOND FORCE, in the mistaken idea that this is the only way to remain faithful to eternal truths. Wrong. It merely makes the boat head up into the wind and come to a dead halt. Instead, we must realize that in a religion whose core mandala is the Trinity and whose incarnational theology proclaims both the inevitability and the goodness of a dynamic world, we must learn how to be THIRD FORCE, “holy the reconciling.” We must prioritize CONNECTION, learning how to bring things into relationship at a new level, to support a whole new level of God's compassionate Self-revelation. This is not pandering to modernity, but midwifing the future.

For example, rather than simply digging in our heels and sticking ferociously to old formulas—no reception of the eucharist before baptism, no marriages solemnized outside of a church building, no new liturgical words not already belabored by a church commission, no marriages except between heterosexual partners (hear all the “no's"?), we might instead position ourselves to see that in all these situations there exists a possibility for making a new and deeper connection between old and new, inner and outer, in a way that neither trashes tradition nor trashes human beings standing on the outside, yearning to be invited deeper within.

Face it: there are now a staggeringly larger number of folks on the outside than on the inside. We're now well into the third generation of people who were not brought to church as children—or were driven away by arrogant answers or rigid parochialism—and have no comfort level or even familiarity with the churchified way of doing business. Connection (“holy the reconciling”) is the name of the game. It's what we need to be about, person by person, situation by situation.

Incidentally, the Gurdjieff work specifies that holy the reconciling exists in EVERY situation. But to see it requires an alert, flexible presence and a listening heart. The

Observations and Reflections on The Future of Church

mechanical sliding into “yes” and “no,” dualism, argumentation, and oppositionality, simply makes us third-force blind. Like the older son in the parable of the Prodigal Son, we stand frozen and self-righteous outside the banquet hall: correct, perhaps, but alone. The party goes on without us.

Observation # 12: There is hope. God has not given up on the church. God has not given up on the world. There will always be a need for spirituality to be embodied in some form of institutional expression. As we navigate the death throes of institutional forms that no longer have life and vitality, we need to keep our hearts open to the presence of the God who has not abandoned us. We need to trust God’s work in our midst and remain open to one another and to the world around us trusting in the faithful guidance of God’s Spirit.

Cynthia's response: Toward the end of his own life, that great contemporary mystic Raimon Panikkar affirmed, “The individual drop of water that I am will come to an end. But the water itself—the drop’s water—will continue—provided that it has come to recognize itself as water, not drop.” To the extent that we equate the word “church” with institutional expressions of church, we are casting our lot with the drop. But the drop’s water—the mystical body of Christ, the true meaning of church—is ever-living and ever-flowing, for if truth be told, we are inside IT rather than the other way around. The living water we so desperately seek...well...we’re swimming in it already, and the only thing lacking is that simple but sweeping act of recognition which transforms our perspective from drop to water.

I so appreciate, Christopher, that you end your reflections on such a strong note of hope. As Julian of Norwich observed, “All shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”

Now we invite you to join in as this rich and insightful discussion continues:

In the hope of inviting further conversation Christopher will post the original 12 points along with Cynthia's response and his response to her on his blog www.inaspaciousplace.wordpress.com on Tuesdays and Thursdays beginning July 5 and running until August 11. Cynthia will check in from time to time and may respond if motivated by the conversation. We encourage you to follow this series and to join in the discussion in the comments section below each blog posting.

For more writings and interview with Rev. Dr. Cynthia Bourgeault and for information on The Contemplative Society, please visit us at www.contemplative.org



Sacrament of Conversion

An Interview with Cynthia Bourgeault
March 24, 2011



The following interview, conducted by Christopher Page, took place as part of an on-going discussion in the church about the role sacraments may play in the spiritual journey. (First posted on Christopher's blog at: <http://inaspaciousplace.wordpress.com/>)

CP: Cynthia Bourgeault is a recognized spiritual teacher in the Christian contemplative tradition. She is a writer and an Episcopal priest. Tonight she has agreed to talk to me about her spiritual journey.

Cynthia, lots of people in their spiritual lives today, don't follow the traditional pattern of what we might assume in the Christian church is the normative pattern. You are kind of a pioneer in that department. Your spiritual journey has not exactly followed the traditional model of what might have been laid out for you. And yet you have ended up for many years in the Anglican Church following a traditional pattern of the Christian life.

Can you talk to me a little about the beginnings of your conscious spiritual journey and how that unfolded and led you into the Episcopal Church in the United States and to such an intense engagement in the life of the church.

CB: I was raised in the Christian tradition, but in corners that were the opposite end of the extremity that is Anglicanism. My parents were Christian Scientists and that was largely by the driving force of my mother.

Christian Science is one of those early religions of faith based practice. The idea was that, if one could really understand what Jesus was seeing, then one could perform the healings he did. Basically people know Christian Science practitioners as faith healers and that was the tradition I grew up in.

You can't say it's a non-Eucharistic tradition because they do celebrate Communion once a month. But Communion was not open to children in the Sunday school and you were In Christian Science Sunday school until you were eighteen. So there was absolutely no clue for me that Communion existed.

I was sent for my first 6 years of education to a Quaker school in Pennsylvania which was founded by a very beautiful classic Quaker Non-Program Meeting. Kids were exposed to a half hour of silence once a week. How they brought it off I don't know. We

Sacrament of Conversion - An Interview with Cynthia Bourgeault

all trooped in and sat on the long benches two kids from different classes on facing benches. It was a direct immersion in silence.

So from the Quaker tradition I experienced the immediate basis of the grounding in mystical religion. It was a huge relief because no one was kind of talking at me with words.

I had my first mystical experience, I don't know I wouldn't have named it that way but it was in one of the little assemblies that we did in our Quaker school and it was during the singing of the verses, I don't know whoever set the text for Finlandia, and it says "but other lands have sunlight too and clover...and skies are everywhere"

That text just opened out to me when I was ten, a sense of the oneness of the planet. So those were my two traditional streams. You could say they were both presence traditions, the Quaker more powerfully. The Quakers don't observe the sacraments whatsoever, because they say they that the present moment is sacramental. As one of the Quaker mystics Thomas Kelly would say "the immediate intimacy with Christ, not the receding vision of the divine glories has to be the basis of our prayer life". So in the classic Quaker orientation there's no baptism, there's no confirmation or Eucharist; there's no Christmas. There's nothing that creates contrast in the church because we are to learn to live in the immediacy of the present.

CP: What about Christian Science tradition, was there baptism?

CB: Christian Science is not liturgical. There was communion once a month. But the real guts of Christian Science is carried by the applied application of Jesus' healing.

CP: Would you be baptized as a Christian Scientist?

CB: Oh no, they don't do that – no baptism in Quaker tradition, no baptism in Christian Science.

CP: So did you ever take Eucharist or Communion as a Christian Scientist?

CB: Oh no, I would have if I had lasted as a member until I was eighteen. Then I would have been there on Communion Sunday.

CP: What was the deciding factor that would have allowed you to take Communion in the Christian Science church?

CB: Being eighteen. You get to join the mother church when you turn thirteen, which I did with great pomp and circumstance and promptly forgot about it. But you graduate from Sunday school at the age of eighteen.

Sacrament of Conversion - An Interview with Cynthia Bourgeault

CP: So it is purely chronological? You get to be the right age and then...

CB: Yeah, yeah.

If you've been through Sunday school you join the membership of the church and that membership establishes the rituals you get to go to. And the Eucharist was called Holy Communion and was that slightly embarrassing thing you do one Sunday a month.

CP: So at all these points along the way would you have self-identified as a Christian?

CB: Well it's not really a valid choice, because in West Chester, Pennsylvania in the fifties, there really was no other option. It was more to know what flavor of Christian you were going to be. And of course there was the understanding that the safest and truest Christians were basically Presbyterians. The Methodists got a little enthusiastic but that was ok. But the Baptists were definitely not only weird but lower down the economic echelon. The Catholics were definitely suspect because they were papists and the Anglican or the Episcopal Church were a little suspect because they had a foot in the door of the papacy. But the Episcopal Church was ok because the people who were heads of the country club went there. And the first six presidents of the United States were Episcopalians.

CP: So you're a non-baptized non-Communion-receiving Christian Scientist who becomes a Quaker and begins to have some sort of spiritual awakening through Quakerism. And that gets us up to your high school years?

CB: Well I didn't become a Quaker, except for a couple of years in my adult life. It was just there in my childhood, as an anchor. There was no question of becoming a Quaker; no one was going to admit a ten year old child to the Quakers over the vast opposition of her parents. To my parents, I would remain a Christian Scientist.

It is interesting how my first experience with the Episcopal Church came about. My mother belonged to a recorder group and was asked to play in a Benjamin Britton musical opera, taking place in the Episcopal Church. I remember going one Saturday for a dress rehearsal. I remember going into this church and immediately having an intense sense of relief and mystery. There were stone walls on the inside and the outside and the presence of something I recognized as a whole different order of holiness.

CP: So it was the building, it wasn't a service; it was the architecture?

CB: Yeah, it was the ambiance of the architecture.

It's one of the reasons I am desperately opposed to churches being locked except when there's a service. I think that ninety-eight percent of the work of conversion takes place outside of services. It's in that private relationship between the person and the divine. That space is mediated directly between the person and God.

Sacrament of Conversion - An Interview with Cynthia Bourgeault

CP: So now you've had Christian Science, Quaker and some exposure to the Episcopal Church. But you are still a non-baptized, non-Communicating teenager.

CB: And I know nothing really about Communion or baptism. Whatever impressions I might have had were coloured by the pejorative comments of my mother who used to say, "So that's why they have to have stained glass windows because what they do in there can't stand up to the clear light of day!"

There were these vague rumblings about sacrifice and drinking blood. I remember being terrified when my eighth grade history teacher got married. He was a Catholic. My best friend and I were invited to the wedding at St. Agnes Catholic church in West Chester. I remember to this day being torn between wanting to be there and see my teacher getting married and yet being absolutely terrified to cross the threshold of the church because in the Christianity of the fifties papacy was like a foretaste of hell.

CP: So where are we now?

CB: West Chester, Pennsylvania about an hour west of Philadelphia. I had no concept of sacramental life. I had some exposure to the Bible. Basic Christian ethics were a part of Christian Science. And had that intense immersion in silence, waiting on the presence of God and some felt sense of God and of that living presence, that had all been part of my Quaker experience.

CP: So are you still a practicing Christian Scientist at this point?

CB: No, I never embraced the religion. I knew when I was three that there was something hopelessly wrong with it. All along I knew it was just a waiting game with Christian Science. But I had to attend. My parents were very clear that I was in their charge and remember this was in 1968.

CP: So then you went off for higher education?

CB: I was exposed a little to Episcopal liturgy, when I was sent to a private high school in a neighbouring town which was deeply intertwined with the Episcopal Church. We had chapel twice a week; we had major events, baccalaureate events at the local very upscale Episcopal Church. So once again I renewed my love affair with the stone buildings, architecture, and pointy shapes. And I learned a lot of the Episcopal hymns and prayers and responses that were part of the obligatory chapel.

CP: But nobody at that point indicated that you ought to be baptized, or take communion?

CB: No, no. We were required to take religion for two years in high school. It was actually taught by a wonderful fellow who was in fact a Quaker. He basically just opened up the whole field of religious inquiry and reading the Bible as literature. I remember to this day his taking us through the story of Saul in the Old Testament, the first tragedy of

Sacrament of Conversion - An Interview with Cynthia Bourgeault

western literature. It was such a delicious relief from the cramming theology down your throat kind of approach that I'd had on the cataphatic side of my religious experience.

CP: So then you get out of high school and there's no real religious leadings to go anywhere?

CB: Yes my mother wanted me to go to Christian Science meetings when I was at college but by then she was 350 miles away, so she had lost her influence.

So by the time I got out of high school I'd become desperately in love with music and I was a choral musician and I joined an early music group at college. I fell in love with just the intoxicating beauty of these early medieval and renaissance pieces that are 95% religious. And I gravitated to the motets and masses more than the madrigals, so something was working through that.

But the actual first day when I had an encounter with Eucharist, was by accident. I was on a weekend trip with my college roommate and another college girlfriend. I was in Ohio State at this time. We were going to deliver a girlfriend up to London Ontario for the weekend to visit her boyfriend. When we got there I saw in the paper on Saturday night that the boy choir of St Paul's Church of London England was going to perform at St Paul's Anglican Church in London, Ontario. They were performing selections from the Bird Mass for voices. I roused my roommate out of bed and she came along.

I was so enraptured with the performance of the boy choir that I didn't even notice the long talk breaks between the choral sections. It wasn't until a very stern, forbidding guy stood at the end of my pew and ushered us forward that I said, "My God we are in a Communion line." And all of a sudden it twigged what people were saying. This was Holy Communion, the weird thing they do in the Episcopal Church. All the girls in my class would get nervous because they had to go through some confirmation class and it was a big deal, party dresses, and then they didn't have to go to church anymore.

I was 20 and I was terrified. My roommate had fortunately been raised a Catholic. She said just follow me and do what I do. So we knelt at the altar rail and she put up her hands and whispered to me "don't chew it". So it was placed in my hands then along came the cup and she said "don't touch it... with your hands I mean."

So I'm kneeling there wobbling, thinking as I still do today, how can you steady the cup without putting your hands on it? I took my little plastic wafer and my little sip of Communion wine. Then I started back to my pew and said "Well, that's that!" – with a sense that I had survived.

But somewhere on the way back to the pew there was a quiet sense that I had met my match, that something intensely familiar, intensely intimate had happened. I sensed something I had been missing all my life, like a missing dimension without even realizing that's what it was. So that was in 1967.

Sacrament of Conversion - An Interview with Cynthia Bourgeault

CP: And there was no indication from anyone that you shouldn't have gone forward?

CB: Well, I was a stranger. I was in town going to a concert, and the priest didn't know who I was. If the priest had said this is for baptized Christians only, I wouldn't have really known what he meant anyway. And anyway I was too scared of that sidesperson to not go up for Communion. If I thought I had a choice I never would have done it. But it was like you shall go up or you will be in trouble.

CP: So going back – there was an experience, this sense of something.

CB: Well the word they use is good, "Communion." You know the most amazing thing for me from that experience is not that I knew, but that I knew I knew. What in me recognized that this was a qualitatively different dimension and that it somehow inhabited real space/ time? There was a familiarity and an intimacy that I simply could not deny. So the axe was to the root as it were.

CP: So where to go from there, why not just drop it?

CB: Well it was a seed. There were no more immediate ramifications. It was in a strange church, in a strange town. There was no follow-up; there didn't need to be any follow-up. I didn't hear God calling me to be an Episcopalian but a seed was planted. My second Communion happened 3 years later.

In the interim I got married and was working at Quakerism with my husband and singing a lot of sacred music.

CP: At that point you joined the Quaker Meeting?

CB: Well we joined the Meeting together and were married in the Quaker Meeting.

CP: But that wouldn't have introduced you to sacraments.

CB: No, then a friend of mine said she had heard something about an Easter midnight service and she invited me to come along. So we went to vigil at this little church. It was 1970. The service went the whole 9 yards, in the dark, the choir, the new fire, it was so exotic . By then I was a 23 year old starved for mystical experience. It was just so exotic and we had Communion; that was part of it. I don't have a clear memory of it. Then my third Communion was a year after that.

CP: So now you are an active Quaker. Do you consider yourself a Christian, an active Quaker at this point?

CB: Yeah, still working with the non-sacramental tradition but already hitting a wall. Already I could see at the age of 23 that the fire they were paying lip service to was not actually being tended and that eldership had become a matter of the length of time you had been in the meeting and the amount of money you paid and there was no living

Sacrament of Conversion - An Interview with Cynthia Bourgeault

formation, which by this time I was thirsting for and there was no place you could go to be more deeply formed as a Quaker. There were residential schools like Pendle Hill and other communities, but my husband was not in a position to leave and go there – what was so distressing to me was that no one in the Meeting seemed to recognize the problem.

CP: So you clearly have a heart that is burning for God, but...

CB: Yes, for a more intimate encounter with the Divine.

CP: But it never occurred to you to be baptized, it never occurred to you that Eucharist should be a regular part of your spiritual discipline?

CB: These were not part of my life; there was just this hunger. Then my life began to entwine with this extraordinary Episcopal minister at the University of Penn. His name was John Scott. He really became my first mentor in Christianity. It is through his unique genius that I am where I am today. But my intermediary ground really and my immersion in sacramental life came through the arts.

I was a graduate student in medieval studies at that point working very intensely with the English cycle dramas. St Mary's Episcopal church was the informal campus performance centre for these cycles. So we were working to perform the 14th century play of the creation from one of the cycles and I had worked out a translation of it and my husband was the director of the choir and we had musicians and we were working around a performance date and we were talking about this time in February.

We had a date nailed down and then I said, "Isn't that near Ash Wednesday?" And he said "Yeah. Why don't we do it on Ash Wednesday as the service." So we put on the play of the creation and it was profound, exactly right for Ash Wednesday, this 14th century cycle play of the fall of man and woman. Then when we received the ashes afterwards and were told to "Remember that thou art dust," it had already been spoken in the play. Then it came time for communion, and the priest made it clear that everyone was welcome.

At St Mary's you received communion by standing in a vast circle. So to bow out of communion you had to wriggle your way out of the circle.

CP: So you would have to choose to exclude yourself.

CB: Yeah, you had to choose to exclude yourself and not take communion instead of including yourself. So I received communion for the third time. I remember our little daughter Gwen who was three spoke to me and said, "I never knew that the body of Jesus had nuts in it." We were back in the 60's or 70's when it was home-baked date loaf bread. She received too at the age of three.

Sacrament of Conversion - An Interview with Cynthia Bourgeault

That was the tipping point. Then that spring we were performing in the little colonial church in Delaware. We performed the Bird Ave Verum Corpus which was this extraordinary Communion hymn. Then we all tramped down and received Communion and I received Communion on Maundy Thursday in the Episcopal Church and then on for the next forty-eight hours it was kind of this continuous mystical experience of being in the body of Christ.

I drove into St Mary's in Philadelphia where John Scott was. There was this big Easter celebration, and I was part of that circle, squished into it, and I became part of the mystical body receiving Communion. That was 1971, four years out from my first accidental Communion and I fell into the habit. St. Mary's offered a daily noon-time Eucharist that lasted only half an hour and it was bare bones, simple, no sermon, you came in and you got out.

John Scott was also a third order Franciscan. He brought friars down to preach at St Mary's and I realized even then that there was a difference with them. Anyway, John knew perfectly well that I was unbaptized and didn't push, just kept giving me the Eucharist.

CP: So you were going weekly?

CB: I was going daily.

CP: What was it you thought you were doing then?

CB: I was wishing. I felt like putting a paper bag over my head when I left church because it was not cool at graduate school to be religious and yet something was so drawing me. So I didn't really know what I was doing. Everything else was opening up too, I was listening to the Bernstein Mass. I was reading Jung's work on the Eucharist.

CP: And you are still sitting in Meeting?

CB: Yeah, but it's getting harder and harder because the Eucharistic reality has seized hold of me.

The next stage in the process was the discernment – again with John Scott. I was working part time at the Episcopal seminary because when I graduated from graduate school there were no jobs out there for a medievalist in a university. But I worked out a deal, once again with my feet walking me to the seminary which was a couple of blocks from the university. In exchange for teaching a couple of blocks of liturgical arts, I could audit one course a semester at the seminary. So I was in seminary and then folks began to say, how about ordination?

CP: You're not baptized yet?

CB: Right. I had an initial meeting with the bishop, Bob Dewitt who was one of the great

Sacrament of Conversion - An Interview with Cynthia Bourgeault

visionaries in the Episcopal Church. He said, "Yeah, you are exactly the kind of person we are looking for to ordain. By the way, the starting point of it will be to begin with you being baptized."

But at that point I was ready to do the difficult separation work with the Meeting. And I was actually baptized in the Philadelphia Divinity School chapel, the last official function of it before the seminary merged with the Episcopal theological school in Boston.

My own experience is that the five or six years of feeding from the Eucharistic body was what gradually created the strength in me to be able to be ready to say yes, I am willing to self identify as a Christian on this path. At any point I along the way I could have tipped in the opposite direction. If John Scott had said well you really can't keep coming here unless you're baptized. I would have fled. At that point the deck was so stacked. Here I was a member of a Quaker Meeting and doing something that was so unpopular and I didn't know what I was doing. My feet just kept walking me there. So if anyone had questioned me, if I'd have met with any rejection, I would have fled.

In my own empirical experience Eucharist precedes baptism. The change comes from the centre of your being where Christ transforms you from the inside out to enable you to embrace baptism as the acknowledgement of your choice that is a witness to the world given you by the grace of God.

CP: So you recognize that's not the traditional pattern, certainly not an Anglican one.

CB: Oh yeah.

CP: So do you have any sense of what it is about your experience of Eucharist that facilitated your transition towards accepting the idea of baptism?

CB: Absolutely! It's the living presence of Christ.

I've never been terribly impressed by theologies that try to pinpoint the moment bread turns into body and wine turns into blood. But there was never any question for me, from the very first moment, that these vessels were a living viaduct of the real presence of Christ. It was this incredibly intimate act of ingesting, so that it's food on one level for the physical body, it's also food for the spiritual body that is growing and ready to live its commitment to the invisible reality of the presence of Christ.

CP: So do you have any sense why it might be that the church has chosen for the most part to suggest that you can't have that experience of Eucharist until you have had the expression of incorporation into the body through baptism?

CB: Well it's because people are much more comfortable with their maps of reality than they are with reality.

Sacrament of Conversion - An Interview with Cynthia Bourgeault

I remember one of the old fishermen on Swan's island who brought out one day a young guy who he thought could fix his plumbing system. The young guy spent the day in consternation and the old lobsterman said to him "It ain't like it looks when you read it in the books".

CP: So what's the appeal of the books?

CB: Well, it creates order and continuity and a basis for things. You can play against that but I don't want to. My own empirical experience would never allow me to validate the fact that you have to have baptism before you are admitted to Eucharist. I don't want to be too superficial and say that this is a bad theology and tear it down – there's power in the tradition reverently followed. John Scott was an ordained priest who had come through the tradition. The traditions are our midwife and they pass on a sacred lineage. So I want to be respectful here.

Where we get stuck is there is so little actual lived experience. It becomes hard to trust that the actual reality is true. So we idolatrously hold to our maps and terrain as the closest we come I think to the living power.

What the Quakers had done from the very start was they had accustomed my heart to recognize the living reality of the presence. They had taught me to trust that. From that first kind of mystical experience when I was ten I had learned from the quiet mentorship of the Quakers that any spiritual reality that is worth its salt has to be able to penetrate the present moment and live in one's heart as a present reality. So that's always been my orientation. And from the Christian Scientists I learned that maps can be bogus.

I really think that on the basis of the reconstruction of the tradition which seems to be very ancient, we turn a deaf ear to the possibility of real presence. I think the theology we so actively work out of, no matter what we think we proclaim, is that Christ is absent until the next coming and the church is the absentee landlord and that the best we can do is come to him by the meticulous observance of past directed rituals. I think this loss of faith in the presence of the resurrected Christ is the deep depression and sickness at the heart of our Christianity but we fight against everything that would allow that reality to have actual presence and life.

CP: So we put our roadmaps in the place of that presence, but does that mean abandoning all roadmaps?

CB: No. But it means learning to turn them into windows not doors, so that our roadmaps are gates or windows and they define normative practice. There's probably goodness in that but when you can't open the window and the Holy Spirit is knocking or you won't open the door and when the wall is favoured over the opening in it – that for me is basically blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

CP: So how do you know when a healthy, normative practice has become a straightjacket?

Sacrament of Conversion - An Interview with Cynthia Bourgeault

CB: When you can't make exceptions.

CP: Yeah, and how far do the exceptions go?

CB: That's what the heart of priestly vocation is all about, that we look inside the person. And I keep thinking in deep, deep gratitude of John Scott who was an early contemplative and who sat faithfully with the Franciscans. He knew how to look into the heart of things. He was also the only Episcopalian in the Diocese of Philadelphia who was arrested for anti-nuclear and anti-war behavior. I mean he was empowered from within to look at all things in the light of Christ.

CP: And so because of that he could see the work of Christ in you?

CB: He could see. He could see that... I don't know what he saw. But intuitively I think what he sensed was that the Holy Spirit was moving me along and his function was to be in service of this conversion, not to impede it or try and direct its course.

CP: Which is probably a beautiful definition of priesthood and of the priestly vocation. It sounds almost like a midwife function.

CB: I think it is. It is really the Holy Spirit that is unfolding the soul from God rather than motivating the soul to God. The key is to be able to sense when to push and when to relax, when to set a challenge, when to set a hoop that a person has to jump through because you realize that they are ready.

I think when the Bishop of Pennsylvania said "Yeah, we can ordain you but you've got to be baptized first", he too was a wise man. He knew when to push and how to set a hoop. But are these the rules because Christ appointed them? I don't think so.

You know, Christ never said at the last supper, all baptized Christians please come forward and receive. I mean it's not even the original understanding that the home of the Eucharist was in a church setting. That is a total romantic fantasy; it's a retrojection in time. In the Eucharist what we have is a very present moment right on the edge of the crisis with a present person and a spiritual master taking elements close at hand and imbuing them with a meaning for the specific group of people gathered there so that they would be carried forward.

CP: So it's interesting that even in earliest Christian tradition the Lord's supper would have been celebrated in homes around a meal. It seems unlikely that children or visitors or company was excluded from that and the model of baptism in Acts that's alluded to several times is that the person who has made a profession of faith was baptized and all of his household so they just kind of gathered everybody up and you were included. You were included in baptism and you were surely included in the celebration of the Lord's Supper as well, regardless of whether or not you had been baptized.

Sacrament of Conversion - An Interview with Cynthia Bourgeault

CB: What we have now is all a churchified interpretation. It serves the church; it doesn't serve the actual living thing. I've often said that if people understood the actual power that resided in the Eucharist, then, rather than locking up the Communion tables, they would place hosts in every hotel room, you know.

Because the procreative power of Christ to call his own is basically an intimate ritual, basically a calling of Christ the resurrected Christ and the person being so moved. I consider it sacred that whatever compels a person to come to a Communion rail is a stirring of something, particularly in the early stages of conversion. The move has to be new and tentative. I think the priestly function is to support that with every power available, holding out a hand to take the next step. But to have a hand that pushes you away because you have to do this thing first... well why would anyone possibly be attracted to baptism having been rejected?

CP: So your experience and your present theology of the sacraments isn't in any way a diminishment of the power and importance of either the Eucharist or baptism?

CB: Oh no, I would say it is rather an increase of it. The experience has its own sacred power within it. It's an arcanum in the classic tradition which means not just the symbol of the thing, but it actually has the power to begin to implement the change it points to. It's because of the power, the power to transform life. It's also because of the specific importance and the inclusiveness of the invitation that Jesus put on it that I think we have no right to lock it up in our interpretations in any way that would stand in the middle of the immediate relationship between the living Christ and its ability to engage and manifest in a person.

CP: It really goes right back to the image you were using when we were talking about the experience of your first Eucharist as a seed that has the power of its own that is beginning to work within you.

CB: And I think my story is somewhat trustworthy because I had absolutely no precondition. I had no expectations either positive or negative. I'd read enough liturgy and dramas at that point in my career as a medievalist that I knew when we got to the Communion rail I knew what we were doing. But I had no theological niches to put it in and no community cheering me on. I was a stranger in a strange town, so there were no pressures other than the naked encounter.

CP: The image of birthing is interesting and its connection to roadmaps.

I've never had a baby myself but I've been around a couple as they were being born and it seems to me that if you try to impose a roadmap on the arrival of a baby, you're going to be in big trouble because it's such an intimate relationship of the mother's body, the baby's body, the coaching, the support of the community, and the whole interplay of all of that.

CB: And sometimes it works backwards from what people think. People have fantasized

Sacrament of Conversion - An Interview with Cynthia Bourgeault

that they are going to have a natural childbirth and they run into trouble and something else is happening and so the capacity to deal with reality as it presents itself is a spiritual skill that maps tend to dull.

CP: So what makes it so hard for the church to do that?

CB: Lack of practice.

CP: What practice?

CB: Practices that open the heart to the present – basically, starting with meditation which is the foundation to all presence. And then a tuning and deliberate cultivation and formation of those qualities of spiritual attentiveness in the moment, vigilance as the eastern orthodox call it. Nepsis that allows one to tune into the present nature of the divine reality rather than using the maps as a substitute.

CP: What about fear?

CB: What about it?

CP: Does that play a role?

CB: Yeah.

CP: What are we afraid of?

CB: I think at heart there is a deep fear of disappointment and unmasking.

CP: What does that mean?

CB: Well, suppose we gave a Eucharistic banquet and no one came? And suppose that all of this is just a hoax? I think it's one of the reasons that people are so idolatrously attached to their words. You know I've worked with a number of people who at first get so upset when we sort of start rethinking doctrines and they say "You're taking away my faith." And I say, "No I'm not. I'm taking away your codified beliefs and your faith is what is left afterwards."

I think there's a deep fear that none of this that we're saying is true and so we have to keep saying it louder and the game has all shifted to correct formulation and people have a pecking order around how precisely and brilliantly and imaginatively we can juggle our rubik's cube and come out to the same and only possible solution.

CP: So the antidote to all of that is the living presence of Christ.

CB: Exactly, and I'm not even willing to pin it on fear. Before I hit a bottom line of fear,

I'd put it on bad training and ignorance, the possibility is so often not opened up for people.

CP: What possibility?

CB: The possibility that our heart is a living participant and a trustworthy one in presence. And since we're never taught to spend any time in presence whatsoever, the fear can then begin to grow inside a mind and soul that hasn't grounded itself in presence feels that all of this just may be a hoax.

CP: And nor are we taught to trust our heart.

CB: No.

CP: Why not, that seems fairly fundamental?

CB: It's a syndrome, I remember being shocked reading an editorial comment made by a professor on the dissertation proposal from one of my students at the seminary when she talked in a contemplative way about putting on the mind of Christ. The professor, who was the major academic advisor on the paper, wrote in the margin – all attempts or claims to put on the mind of Christ are psychological projection and represent severe dysfunction.

What kind of a tradition are we going to have based on that when we have nothing but a hermeneutics of suspicion and no training in how to find and connect with a lived reality of Christ? So I think we need to begin by building the space – the Quakers helped me find that space -that was their great gift to me.

I love what one of my friends who is a Quaker up in Calgary said to me when I said “Oh, the Quakers, you fired the priests!” And she said: “No we fired the laypeople!” It's a brilliant comment because I think it's our responsibility to midwife the spiritual heart which is the birthright of every person.

CP: And to trust that.

CB: And trust how it's unfolding. So I am obligated, in virtue of my own history, to adopt a point of maximum inclusivity.

CP: Which creates space for the Spirit to be at work.

CB: Exactly.

CP: Well, that's a beautiful vision and I should let you finish with that. It's heartwarming to suggest that we might be able to open a space for people to be and to grow and to experience the reality of Christ at work in their lives.

Sacrament of Conversion - An Interview with Cynthia Bourgeault

CB: Exactly and to trust that reality of Christ in whatever form of work it downloads.

CP: All right thank you and bless you.

CB: Thank you!