Elements of Christian Faith

An Introduction to Theology

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Introduction

Christian faith turns our attention to the life of the world. Its claims, practices, beliefs, and hopes focus on the ordinary: food that sustains life, bodies that embrace life, sharing that enhances life, bathing that renews life. Christian rituals mark birth and death, breaking promises and making amends, cycles of the seasons, the rising and setting of the sun. Christianity, of course, is not alone in its concern with the ordinary. Most of the world's religious traditions see meaning, purpose, and sacredness in the everyday. These traditions, like Christianity, sense the extraordinary within the ordinary. Glimpsed through the eyes of Christian faith, a simple meal of bread and wine becomes a celebration of Christ's presence in community, a bath becomes a promise of forgiveness and new life, an itinerant first-century carpenter-cum-preacher becomes God's Son, the Savior of the world. Ordinary reveals the extraordinary in God's blessing and presence. Christian faith tethers us to the earth as our home and connects us to kin and stranger near and far by making distinctive claims about basic things that sustain life. In Christian imagination, spirit and matter belong together.

At times, however, Christian faith has forgotten this connection to basic things. It has sometimes fostered indifference to the present (its suffering, its injustice) and made elusive promises about the future. It occasionally has promoted the view that our true home is in heaven and that the earth is a way station. Or it has seen more value in ecstatic and otherworldly experiences than in the ordinary routines that occupy most of our days. I believe these emphases distort Christian faith. They forget how the ministry of Jesus focused on quotidian practices: sharing food, caring for stricken bodies, practicing welcome and hospitality. Christian faith flourishes when it focuses on the ordinary, an inexhaustible source of theological reflection.

This book offers an introduction to Christian theology. What is theology? Though countless definitions describe theology's purposes, I find the analogy of *conversation* helpful. Christian theology is a sustained conversation about the basic claims of Christian faith that began long before we arrived on the scene and will continue long after we've left it. It asks questions about how claims have been made in the past and how they might be restated and reclaimed today. It treats the dead as living conversation partners, because we are shaped by our ancestors. And it recognizes that the conversation needs our voices as well. Typically, theology focuses on an array of doctrines, the core beliefs (Christ, the Holy Spirit, Trinity, eternal life) that have molded faith over centuries, influencing how we interpret and act in the world. That is a time-honored way of "doing" theology, one that I often employ in my classrooms and writing projects. But that is not the only way of doing theology, especially in a culture where the doctrines of Christian faith are unfamiliar, even to those who claim Christian faith for themselves.

This book describes Christian theology in a different way. Instead of focusing on doctrine, it focuses on six "elements" of Christian faith, basic things that sustain human life and the life of the world. These are shared by all human beings on the planet; indeed, they encompass nearly all forms of life on earth. Four of them are often dubbed classical elements: earth, wind, fire, and water. The history of reflection on these elements stretches far back in time and encompasses many different peoples. Cultures as diverse as ancient Greece, India, and Angola developed intricate cosmologies surrounding these elements, as they promoted and sustained life or threatened and destroyed life. These cultures sensed the holy within these basic yet mysterious things. I believe Christian faith does as well by sensing the holy in unique ways. In addition to these four classical elements, I also explore two others that are particularly influential within Christian history: flesh and blood. These elements are especially tied (though not limited to) human life. Because Christians claim that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ—the embodiment of God's presence with humanity—it is critical that the book explores flesh and blood as well. In many ways, these two additional elements help frame a Christian understanding of the others.

The result of this approach to Christian theology, I hope, is that it invites a broader audience into theological conversation. Many people, I am convinced, see some of the ways that doctrines are interpreted as obstacles to Christian faith. ("Do I need to believe in the virgin birth/hell/the last judgment to be Christian?") Instead of zeroing in on doctrine, this approach begins by focusing on elements of life that we all share and how Christianity senses meaning, sacredness, mystery, and blessing within them.

A second intended consequence of this approach is that it anchors Christian faith in the earth and promotes solidarity with all creatures. We live in an ecologically imperiled age. The planet is warming; sea levels are rising; carbon emissions that fuel climate change are increasing. I believe Christian faith has something to contribute in light of this crisis, something that might promote the healing of creation. The task of theology is not simply to interpret God and the world but also to seek greater justice, wholeness, and reconciliation in God's world. For centuries, Judaism has celebrated practices of *tikkun olam* (mending/repairing the world) that lie at the heart of Jewish faith. I believe Christians are called to embark on nothing less.

Very little of my previous work as a teacher and writer has focused on theological method, or the question of how one "does" Christian theology. Instead, I have simply "done it" and invited others to "do it" without asking questions about the plausibility of Christian faith, the grounds for making theological claims, or the way in which one constructs an architecture that helps people make sense of Christian faith and how its claims are held together. My previous work, perhaps unwittingly, may have treated method as an ancillary or belabored task that kept theologians from saying something of substance. But I have become convinced that *some* focus on method is essential, especially today when the enterprise of Christian theology is often questioned from "insiders" within the Christian fold who see it as a diversion from more pressing demands of the gospel and from "outsiders" who see it as a relic of a time when theology viewed itself as "queen of the sciences." If so many today make sense of their lives and the life of the world without resorting to Christian theology (or any other religious tradition for that matter), why bother introducing Christian theology to a broad audience today?

In the pages that follow, I do not offer a work of apologetics, a defense of why Christian faith might be established as "true." Nor do I offer a defense of why the world needs Christian faith for its improvement. One can obviously live a good life, do good, and be involved with efforts that mend our broken world without any understanding of Christianity. Each of the world's great religious traditions (and many nonreligious traditions) offer compelling visions of the "good"—the second classical virtue—and how individuals and communities might seek the flourishing of all creatures and the life of the world. This book, therefore, instead of focusing primarily on the *true* (Christian apologetics) or the *good* (ethics), focuses on the third classical virtue, the *beautiful,* which is most often overlooked in the church and academic theology, especially in the branch of the Christian family of which I am a part, Protestantism. One of the through lines in this book is that Christian faith invites its adherents to see the world a bit differently, to glimpse the beautiful, the presence of the divine,

in and through the ordinary: human relationships and customs, the earth that grounds us, the water that gushes and quenches thirst, the fire that warms our spirits, and the wind that rustles leaves. Christian faith invites humanity to sense the beauty in one another, to welcome the stranger as a gift from the living God, to cherish the basic things of life as infinitely valuable and beautiful. That faith, moreover, senses inherent beauty in people and things that modern consumer mindsets often deem ugly. Christian faith isn't the only framework, of course, that invites humanity to see the world differently, but I believe it is a powerful framework worth examining today, when so many voices—political, economic, and corporate—encourage us to see the world, other living creatures, and other people *instrumentally*, as objects or instruments for the building up of self.

How we see thus affects how we act. If we see other creatures chiefly as objects for consumption, we are less prone to regard their well-being. If we regard rivers chiefly for their potential to provide hydroelectric power, we are less likely to preserve their beauty and ensure that the habitats they offer are protected. If we view immigrants as undesirable intruders, we are less likely to offer them the hospitality and welcome that Christian faith stresses. Though this book emphasizes the aesthetic dimension of Christian faith, it also addresses questions of ethics, or the "good." Indeed, it understands the good to be bound inextricably to the beautiful. Christian faith helps its adherents discern what is good amid a host of forces that work against the good and what is beautiful amid what often seems to be society's relentless production of ugliness. Aesthetics opens our eyes to ethics.

I have written this book with a broad audience in mind, but it is chiefly designed for people without a formal background in the study of Christian theology. It might be used in college, seminary, or adult education classrooms. Readers with a more extensive exposure to Christian theology may also find it interesting, as it offers a different approach to the discipline than is often the case in textbooks and classrooms. Though I am a Christian, I am not assuming that the readers of this book will be. Throughout, I have tried to use language that does not assume that readers share the same faith commitments that I do. Occasionally, however, I employ "we" language, mostly for stylistic reasons. When I have done so, it has mostly been to describe a condition that affects humanity in general rather than specifically a Christian view of that condition. Throughout the book, I draw on a wide range of conversation partners, both within and beyond the Christian family. I do this out of the conviction that theology, at its best, is always a dialogical discipline. Christian theology listens to the wisdom of ecology, other religious traditions, psychology, art, literature, history, and on and on. Theology does not pronounce truths from

on high but discerns truth in the ongoing conversation that gives life to the world. I am convinced that a dialogical understanding of theology is essential for every student, teacher, and writer of Christian theology because each of us comes to the task with the wisdom and limitations of our own background and experience. In my case, I am a White American male, nurtured in Reformed traditions, who has been teaching at a Presbyterian seminary for twenty-five years. I am a man who has been blessed by a marriage to a remarkable woman for nearly thirty years; together we are proud parents to two adult children who have carved their unique, meaningful paths in these fraught times. Though I have lived in Texas longer than any other place I have called home, I am also conscious of where I'm from: the Pacific Northwest and, more distantly, Denmark, where I still have contact with family. All this and more makes me who I am and reinforces the need for me to be in continuous dialogue with others to do the work of Christian theology.

The method of this book is straightforward. I begin each chapter with a brief reflection on a human experience of an element: the feel of wind on skin, the quenching of thirst by water, the shock that many of us experience at the sight of blood. Each chapter begins with experiences that are common across cultures and places. I begin in this way because theology addresses realities of daily life, experiences that unite rather than divide humanity. This makes my work in theology different from other approaches, such as those that stress that theology must begin with revelation or an inherited truth-claim from the past. Once I explore this experience of an element, I turn to the Scriptures that have nurtured the Christian church over the centuries, and I examine a few key biblical passages that shape a Christian approach to understanding the element in question. A third section then explores ways in which contemporary life (particularly in North America) and Christian traditions have sometimes twisted our understanding and experience of the element in unhelpful ways. This section reflects my Reformed-Presbyterian heritage that emphasizes the continual need for theology to be a self-critical enterprise, since the church's traditions are always being reformed by God's Word. The chapter then turns to a more constructive statement of how people of faith might interpret that element today, followed by a concluding section that focuses on an issue facing life on our planet and how Christian faith helps inform a response to that issue. The trajectory of each chapter thus moves to the question of how Christian faith might be embodied in life in these conflicted and troubled times. With this outline in mind, my hope is that you might find something in these pages that ignites your own voice in theological conversation and helps you sense beauty in the world and in the ongoing work to make the world a more hospitable place for all creatures.

Chapter One

Wind: Spirit

Wind refreshes. In many seasons, in most parts of the world, the feeling of wind on skin pleases. When we step outside at the break of day, wind often greets us. It may be slight, barely perceptible, or brisk, making us jolt. But this first movement of wind on our faces welcomes the new day. Wind makes us feel alive and connected—if only momentarily—to forces larger than ourselves. Wind enlivens. Gardening becomes less tiresome when wind brushes against our brows. If we climb a hill, breeze rewards and soothes our limbs. While we bask in the view and relax on the summit, wind renews our energies for the descent. Wind touches, tantalizes, and sustains. Wind offers a unique form of touch: any exposed flesh senses wind directly; skin covered by clothing also feels its traces. Touch is central to human experience and necessary for life. Persons deprived of touch can become stunted in their capacities for empathy and relationships. We seem hardwired to reach out and touch one another: in handshakes, pats of reassurance, embraces, caresses, kisses, and lovemaking. We feel the touch of flesh on flesh in all these acts. But unlike these profound human forms of touch, the touch of the wind is different. In our human touches, we sense each other in a distinct place (lips, hands, torso, arms); in the touch of wind, we feel touch all over, all at once. Wind envelops, covers, and surrounds our bodies. The all-encompassing touch of wind can make us feel profoundly alive.

Wind seems to emerge from nowhere. Though we can see and feel its presence (in touch, in leaves buffeted about), we cannot see wind directly. Wind is mysterious. Where does it come from? Where does it go? How does it begin? Why does it stop? Wind fascinated the ancients, many of whom saw the source of wind in the four cardinal directions, personified by anthropomorphic forces at the edges of the earth. Today we know that wind has a rather simple

explanation: it is caused by differences in air temperatures in adjacent pockets of air. As warm air rises, cooler air rushes into the gap. Because the air temperature over land tends to differ from air temperature over water, winds often accelerate where land and water merge. This simple explanation indicates a profound truth worth a lifetime of pondering: wind is due to *difference*. Its rejuvenating power is predicated on land, sea, and air masses that are *not* the same. Utter sameness, in other words, leads to stagnant air. This truth is built into the fabric of the world: life depends on diversity. Only in difference is there a breeze that refreshes.

Wind ceases. A calm after a storm is always welcome. Ceaseless wind, especially strong wind, can make life nearly intolerable. But the absence of wind, for an extended period, is almost always stultifying. A lack of wind saps life, rendering air stagnant, thick, heavy. It makes everything feel the same, look the same. When air stops moving, it can suck the life out of us.

Perhaps the best example of wind's connection to life is the one we feel inside our bodies: the wind that is breath. We carry within ourselves gusts of wind as we breathe in and out. Most of the time, we are unconscious of wind's movement through our cells and organs. Our breath comes automatically. This breath is synonymous with life itself. We can't see it, but we can certainly feel it. As we move closer to one another, we can sometimes feel each other's breath on skin. Wind moves our bodies; breath keeps us alive. In May 2020, George Floyd's last words as he was brutally murdered were "I can't breathe." As a stone-faced police officer kneeled on his neck for nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds, the officer smothered Floyd's breath. Air stopped moving, and George Floyd died. Floyd's murder was hardly unique. Countless others, often persons of color, have lost their lives at the hands of those who swear to preserve and protect. Sometimes humanity seems bent on snuffing out life.

Our breath does more, of course, than simply keep us alive. Breath makes us feel alive. Breathing makes speech possible—Shakespeare's sonnets, Ntozake Shange's plays, Winston Churchill's oratory. Speech can summon us to soaring heights, heroic acts of compassion, and works of healing. Speech makes us human. Breath makes music possible—Willie Nelson's troubadour ballads, Wynton Marsalis's jazz notes, Marian Anderson's operatic heights. Breath makes life beautiful. Breath makes us know there is something more to living than simply existing.

This recognition of something more, perhaps, is why language for spirit is so closely connected to wind and breath. Hebrew, as is well-known, has an evocative word, *ruach*, that can be translated as wind, breath, or spirit.[1] One of the greatest insights of the Hebrew Bible is that the spirit is connected to bodies. Unlike some strands of Greco-Roman cultures that perceived a chasm

between the spiritual and the material, the ancient Israelites knew the two were profoundly interlinked. This link occurs on the very first pages of Genesis, but in the centuries that have since passed, Western societies have often missed it. This chapter explores some biblical texts that portray the movement of wind, ways in which that movement has sometimes been distorted in Christian traditions, and finally, how attending to wind and breath affects our understanding of God, ourselves, and the Christian life.

Beginnings and New Beginnings: Wind in Genesis and Ezekiel

Wind blows through the pages of Scripture, from Genesis's primordial chaos to trumpet blasts in Revelation. Wind stirs, enlivens, rages, and calms. Wind generates life and sometimes overwhelms. The Bible opens with the movement of wind in its depiction of creation, as God brings order out of chaos. The Jewish Publication Society's *Tanakh* translation is particularly suggestive, emphasizing the ongoing nature of God's activity: "When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water . . ." (Gen. 1:1–2). Wind is the first thing that God initiates; wind, perhaps, is the first thing that God *is*. Wind, of course, is notoriously hard to explain, impossible to capture, very much like God. Every ancient society has its stories of creation, but the story of creation in Genesis is in many respects unique. Nahum Sarna notes Genesis's "lack of interest in the realm of heaven and its economy of words in depicting primeval chaos. . . . The descriptions in Genesis deal solely with what lies beneath the celestial realm."[2] We find in Genesis no account of God's "beginning," no description of divine motivation in creating, no imagining of the architecture of heaven. The focus, in Genesis, is distinctly earthy. God is beyond comprehension, transcendent, wholly other. But this God gives life by stirring the wind—a wind *from God*. This wind appears in the first moments of creation and then, just as quickly, disappears, only to emerge again in the second creation narrative of Genesis 2. But wind sets it all into motion.

Subsequent Christian commentators have often made these winds more familiar. The hovering of winds over the face of the deep, for many Reformation theologians, was analogous to the brooding of a mother hen. These commentators tended to identify the winds of primordial creation with the work of the Holy Spirit. German Reformer Konrad Pelikan, for example, writes, "The good pleasure of the creator of all things distributed the power of germination over the earth and the abyss just as an egg is warmed by a bird: while the chick is developing, the heat of the mother's

body is supplemented by natural feelings of love."[3] Martin Luther notes that as a hen broods over her eggs, "so Scripture says that the Holy Spirit brooded, as it were, on the waters to bring to life those substances which were to be quickened and adorned. For it is the office of the Holy Spirit to make alive."[4] Wind here becomes personal and intimate, depicted as a mother who nurtures all her children into life.

Wind moves. The God of Genesis is a God on the move. Life itself is characterized by movement: pulsing, vibrating, humming, breathing. As wind sweeps across the depths, the Genesis story warns against stagnation. Life is on the move. Cease movement, and life ends. Catherine Keller, in her stirring interpretation of Genesis (and a full-blown account of creation from the depths), writes, "Apart from the spirit Tehom [the depths] remains a sterile possibility and 'God' remains mere Word, fleshless abstraction and power code. . . . The universe becomes Sacred Body there where genesis takes *place*. No wonder the Spirit . . . vibrates at the edge of chaos. There it breathes, contracts, expands, making space, taking flesh, tuning relation to possibility."[5]

Wind brings matter to life by giving it breath. If, speaking analogically, God is akin to wind, then God is not primarily a "being beyond being," a static entity, or unmoved mover. Sabbath occurs at the conclusion of Genesis 1, as God delights in all that God has made. For God to rest, God is first—in Mary Daly's suggestive phrase—a verb.[6] The stirring, vibrating movement of God indicates that if we are to know God, we first come to know what God *does*. Activity and rest belong together.

Wind appears in these first verses of Scripture and then disappears. The remainder of Genesis 1 stresses God's activity through speech. But speech, too, is a result of winds from God, the breath of God. Words are the vibrations of air moving from the body into the world. Genesis knows that these are personifications and anthropomorphisms. As I have already noted, there is no imaginative description in Genesis—or in the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures—of God's appearance. God is beyond. As Sarna notes, "The mystery of divine creativity is, of course, ultimately unknowable. The Genesis narrative does not seek to make intelligible what is beyond human ken."[7] And thus, even these quasi-personifications of the divine have an elusive nature. God speaks and brings creation into being. But in Genesis 1 we have no more depiction of God than that. We know God from God's actions—and those actions bring forth the life of all that is.

The second creation narrative in Genesis leans more anthropomorphic. Here we encounter the winds of God again, but in the form of God's breath. God is likened to a potter, fashioning humanity out of the earth: "The

LORD God formed man [Hebrew: *adam*] from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being" (2:7 *Tanakh*). Prior to God's breath, humanity is not alive—perhaps the *adam* has the outline of life, but *adam* is in no way a living being. The narrative thus intermingles our breath and God's. We are who we are because of the breath of another. By breathing out, God gives us space to breathe in. This fashioning of humanity out of earth and breath bespeaks our intimacy with the Creator and our humility in the face of God. Sarna writes that "Man… enjoys a unique relationship with God by virtue of his being the work of God's own hands and being directly animated by God's own breath. At the same time, he is but dust taken from the earth, mere clay in the hands of the divine Potter."[8] The winds that hover over the face of the deep are also winds that animate *adam*, the earth creature: winds within and beyond, impossible to see and constrain, but integral to life. Without wind, we die.

In Ezekiel, the connections between wind, life, and death are even starker. Composed for Israelites in exile in Babylon, Ezekiel's vision of the "dry bones" is one of the most memorable vignettes in all Scripture (Ezek. 37:1–14). The narrative repeats the term "*ruach*" throughout, resulting in a word-play on the shifting meanings of wind/breath/spirit. The vignette begins with a scene of utter desolation, as the Spirit of God brings the prophet into a valley of bones. This charnel house represents the loss of hope, desolation, and suffering of a people in exile. Their lot is akin to living death. But God promises Ezekiel that God will make the bones live again: "I will lay sinews on you and will cause flesh to come upon you and cover you with skin and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD" (37:6). The vision is one of graphic restoration: noise, rattling, bone bound to bone with sinews, flesh emerging on bone. Wind and breath surround this restoration: from the "four winds" and the very breath of God (37:9). In an early Christian commentary on this text, Ambrose makes an intriguing observation that spirit is the last thing to return to the dry bones: "There was hearing and movement in the bones before the Spirit of life was poured on them."[9] Such is the reality of Israel's exile: movement without the fullness of life. Only the breath of God, the movement of God, ensures full restoration and the promise of living again. As bleak as exile is, Babylon does not have the final word. God's breath can animate and restore what has been lost. God's breath makes a new beginning: "I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act" (37:14). Here, wind, breath, spirit, flesh, and earth are all intertwined. The spirit is not merely spiritual. The promise of restoration is not heavenly. It is simply a return home; a

home that was lost is now found: "From the ancient dust stand forth men made new."[10] No wonder that later Jewish and early Christian commentaries understood this text to prefigure resurrection. The wind on these pages brings life out of death. Wind swirls and surrounds, animating dry bones. Breath blows into the bones, suffusing life. Spirit raises bones from the grave, offering intimacy with God. *Ruach* lies within.

Winds of the Spirit: Acts and John

Winds cavort in the New Testament, appearing at pivotal moments in the Jesus story. Typically, the swirling winds announce the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Two of them are particularly suggestive: Acts 2 and John 20. In each of these narratives, wind gives new life to bodies, empowering and impelling, even in mysterious ways.

In Acts, the wind sounds violent at first. On the day of Pentecost, or Shavuot, early followers of Jesus gather in one place to celebrate God's gift of the Law and to remember the ministry of the One they called Rabbi. This "birth of the church," as many Christians call it, begins with a violent sound from heaven that fills "the entire house where they were sitting" (Acts 2:2). Willie Jennings notes, "The similitude of the wind to the Spirit's coming suggests not only its absolute power but its absolute uncontrollability. No structure is stronger than the wind, and there is nothing beyond its touch. . . . This is God touching, taking hold of tongue and voice, mind, heart, and body."[11] This is God's action, not ours. Wind concentrates that activity in sounds that stir, inspire, and stun. The Holy Spirit comes as an unexpected power.

Violent sound gives birth to speech. Some who have gathered begin speaking in tongues they do not know; others hear their native language. The miracle of Pentecost is this wondrous combination of speaking and hearing. Wind gives birth to language familiar and foreign. Vibrations in the room lead to vibrations in the voice box. External winds give rise to breath that generates speech. Natural wind results in language, a creation of humanity. Creation sings in the eruption of speech: praise and glory. The movement of the wind is excessive, superfluous. Johann Spangenberg remarks, "Whenever [the Holy Spirit] arrives, he arrives with such fullness that he drenches every humble heart so richly with his grace and gifts that they overflow immediately, unable to contain themselves, they must break out and proclaim to all the world the wonders God has worked in them."[12] What has begun in the sound of wind cannot be obstructed. Those gathered submit to the wind, submit to speech. The movement of wind, moreover, suggests our submission to each other as well. Jennings notes this intriguing

characteristic of language: "To learn a language requires submission to a people."[13] The Spirit makes us all learners, students of each other, receptive to God's teaching. The movement of the wind here is diametrically opposed to the ways in which colonial powers impose their language upon others. If the history of humanity is an ugly chronicle of suppressing languages (Native American tongues, African tribal speech, etc.) so that the conquered may learn the master's speech, the movement of God's Spirit results in the proliferation of tongues. Languages expand rather than contract. Wind cannot be contained. Today we live in a moment when languages are disappearing at alarming rates. As tongues vanish, human experience gets flattened. But the winds of God's Spirit begin with the unleashing of tongues, tongues that cannot be tamed or suppressed, languages we are invited to learn.

Peter's sermon after this rushing of wind, perhaps the first Christian sermon, begins in an auspicious place: interpreting Israel's Scriptures. Peter cites the prophet Joel (2:28–29): "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy" (Acts 2:17–18). Spirit touches bodies, rests on bodies, drawing together, lavishing gifts on all. Spirit and flesh belong together, not apart from each other. The vision is stunningly egalitarian. In a world ravaged by distinctions of class, culture, and gender, we differ little from the ancients. But the Spirit turns all these distinctions on their heads. Luther makes the point directly, as if God were saying "'I am unwilling to make distinctions between city dweller and farmer.' So, this text establishes a new priesthood that has no distinction of persons. . . . This is an irritating word."[14] Irritating to our tendencies to divide, discriminate, exclude, and shun. Inviting in its promise to welcome, to see each other as God sees us, and reconcile. Wind moves and shifts so that we might stand together. Its motion gathers us in.

Though the Acts account of the Spirit's arrival is most familiar, John's Gospel offers another rendition. Here the Spirit enters more intimately, in the gift of breath. In John, the Spirit comes in one of Jesus's postresurrection appearances. Sandwiched between his appearance to Mary Magdalene at the tomb and the story of doubting Thomas, Jesus appears as the disciples are gathered in a house. His first words to them are words of peace (John 20:21) and then "he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained'" (20:22–23). Jesus breathes on bodies. Typically, we do not feel each other's breath. We stand at a distance. But lovers feel each other's breath in touch that enlivens, quickens, and makes new. Here, Jesus's

breath is like a lover to the beloved: breath on skin. The disciples receive. They feel Jesus's touch. Mary Coloe notes how this vignette recalls God's creation of humanity, when God breathes into the earth-creature and gives life: "When Jesus comes to his disciples and greets them the first time with 'Peace,' this could be understood as saying: God's first creation has been brought to completion. When he says to them again, 'Peace,' and breathes on them the Holy Spirit, this is an act of new creation, reaffirming Jesus's words and actions at the cross."[15] Gathered in the house, the disciples are mourning loss; Jesus comes to them with intimate breath, offering new life in the Spirit.

This breath comes with a catch about forgiving and retaining. We can block the Spirit's movement by holding grudges and being unwilling to forgive. Forgiving others releases us from bondage to our sin; holding on to the sins of others, clutching our own righteous judgments, leads to us retaining our sin. We can hold our breath so long that we start suffocating, unable to inhale the divine breath. But Jesus's breath, the coming of the Spirit, enables us to breathe again. Theodore of Mopsuestia describes this gift of absolution and forgiveness as "the strength of the Spirit."[16] In the Spirit's breath, we give and receive peace.

Stifling the Spirit, Blocking the Wind

Wind refreshes; Spirit gives life; breath testifies, "I am alive." *Ruach* swirls throughout biblical testimony and the history of creation, blowing profusely: "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). But human beings resist the movement of the Spirit, attempt to block the wind, and silence speech. If wind makes us alive, we have often tried to bolster our defenses against it, choosing death rather than life.

Both the churches and the wider society fall prey to silencing temptations. In direct opposition to the winds of Pentecost, we often suppress speech. "You don't belong here." "The church is not for people like you." "His voice is more important than hers." "Your identity is not what God intends." "Those other religions have nothing to say to me." "Your politics are disgusting." But this drive to silence is the result of false consciousness, where one places oneself at the center and sees others as threats. The testimony of biblical faith, however, is that we become ourselves only through each other. From the first chapter of Genesis to the conclusion of Revelation, Scripture attests to the relations that constitute our identity. We become an "I" only through a "You."[17] God speaks and breathes us into being; we become who we are by hearing each other's

speech, making room for each other to breathe, being bound to others in relationships. Desperate attempts to smother speech are doomed to fail. They may achieve temporary successes, but the movement of God's Spirit that gives rise to speech cannot be suppressed.

Sometimes we try to smother breath. At other times, however, we are prone to over-spiritualizing the earthy movements of the wind. This is the "religious" attempt at thwarting the Spirit; it severs breath from the earth, encouraging us to see only the "spiritual" as the real and the "material" as somehow inferior. This tendency has haunted Christianity almost since its inception. Early Christians influenced by Gnosticism considered the heavens rather than the earth as our true home: our bodies and natural surroundings were mere husks to be discarded on the way to salvation. The earth was akin to a prison or a temporary way station. Jesus, in this view, came to liberate the Spirit from the body, to gather us with him in the celestial realm. Though such sentiments were eventually deemed heretical because they denigrated the incarnation by disparaging Christ's human flesh and denied creation's goodness and God's blessing of the earth, ghosts of Gnosticism continue to appear. One hears similar strains on talk radio, in popular Christian fiction, and elsewhere. Many have ignored the connections between wind and earth: wherever wind and Spirit appear in Scripture, they rest on bodies, move bodies, and caress the earth. Contrary to the gnostic ghosts, the earth is our home because God blesses it, from the initial movements of wind over the face of the deep. And yet our traditions often stress disembodiment. Catherine Keller notes: "Spirit has been the agent of sublimation, transparency, and escape; God as 'pure spirit' gets free of any body; mind as pure spirit does likewise. It was kept suspended *above* the waters."[18] We have often rendered the Spirit too spiritual. But a religious outlook that succumbs to this trend eventually becomes out-of-body escapism rather than incarnational faith. Spirit seeks bodies; wind moves over bodies; Spirit gives us a home—right here, right now.

Eugene Rogers notes that modern Western theology is particularly prone to severing Spirit from body. His riveting book *After the Spirit* offers a sustained exposition of how the Spirit, in biblical and patristic traditions, consistently "befriends the body." The Bible's portrayal of the Spirit resting on the body of Jesus—in resurrection, annunciation, baptism, and transfiguration—models how we consider the embodiment of the Spirit today: "In that the Spirit rests on the Son, it becomes manifest and worthy of belief that the Spirit befriends the body, turns matter into sacrament, distributes gifts, and incorporates diversity."[19] Spirit seeks relation, drawing bodies together in blessing, resting on matter so that we are incorporated into God's very life.

Pope John XXIII, at the dawn of the Second Vatican Council, warned against another temptation to shelter from the wind. He offered a provocative image of a church throwing its windows open to the world. The image served to critique overly defensive postures within the church. Some strands of the modern church had shut the windows to protect its cherished teachings and traditions. The church, in this vision, needed to defend itself against worldly onslaughts and threats. If one opened the windows, one risked being tainted by forces outside the church. This impulse, however, had drastic consequences for the air inside the church. Over time, the air became stagnant. Wind could not refresh the sanctuary. In contrast, the spirit of Vatican II, the pope argued, was one of aggiornamento, opening the windows to the world. The church did not exist on a self-contained island but was called to exist *in* the world. God is at work outside the church as well as within it because the world belongs to God. Pope John XXIII thus welcomed rushing winds as the church witnessed to the world *and* listened to it. Voices, breath, and wind: all existed for the renewal of church, the human spirit, and the life of the world. His diagnosis is as accurate today as it was in the mid-twentieth century. Whenever we stop our ears to others' voices, wherever we insulate ourselves in the confines of the familiar, a similar dynamic is at work. Windows close; protective impulses reign; air becomes stale; eventually we start gasping for air. When we inhale only our own exhalations, we struggle for life. Only fresh wind can sustain. Winds from God animate all life.

Carried by the Wind: Implications for Christian Theology

Wind moves us. Paying attention to its motion can help illuminate Christian faith. Wind is essential for the transmission of life. Countless plants depend on wind for reproduction: dandelions, tumbleweeds, maple trees, cedars. Wind carries seeds across paths, fields, and sometimes over mountain ranges. Wind spreads life profusely, superfluously. Belden Lane writes, "In a forest, wind makes trees stronger and more limber, disperses seeds over long distances, and facilitates the migration of birds and insects."[20] Wind crosses borders, carrying native plants beyond fixed territory. Wind spreads life abroad, subverting the ways in which we fence each other into limited spaces. Wind carries us into encounter with others. Justin Martyr, perhaps the church's first full-fledged theologian, emphasized the *logos spermatikos*, the "seminal word" present in all people and cultures. He claimed that the divine Word is not restricted to the church; it is also encountered—sometimes dimly, sometimes radiantly—in pagan peoples: "For each man spoke well in proportion to the share he had of the spermatic word, seeing

what was related to it. . . . Whatever things were rightly said among all men, are the property of us Christians."[21] Seed is spread profusely throughout the world; God is at work in all places: illuminating, moving, bringing life. When we attend to the refreshing, life-giving movement of the wind, we are opened to the ways that others teach us about the ways of God. This means that in Christian imagination other religions and traditions are not threats to the faith. Christianity does not see the panoply of spiritual traditions as a zero-sum game, where "my truth" exists in inverse proportion to "your truth." Taking Martyr's concept of *logos spermatikos* seriously means that other traditions sometimes can express dimensions of Christian faith more richly than church traditions. Islam's ninety-nine names of God, Judaism's emphasis on the joy of following *mitzvot*, Buddhism's emphasis on nonattachment, Hinduism's recognition of the divine permeating all things: each of these emphases, though different from some classical Christian affirmations, also address insights within Christianity, perhaps better than Christians have. Wind blows through all traditions, giving life, spreading life generously, abundantly. Wind carries seeds far beyond the seed's original home. And in this new place, the seed begins to take root, with the promise that in the next generation, its seed will also spread.

Wind germinates and promotes life, but it also conveys beauty. Wind can be playful: dancing on our skin, swirling leaves, spraying droplets from the morning's rainfall. Christians have not always appreciated the playful and aesthetic dimensions of faith. The iconoclastic controversy in the early church destroyed nearly all artistic depictions of Jesus; my own Reformed tradition was wary of sanctuaries that contained too many "tempting" delights for the eye. Of the three classical virtues (truth, goodness, and beauty), the former two tended to win out over the latter. For many on the "right," it's the truth of Christianity that matters—truth that must be protected against alien truths. For many on the "left," it's the goodness or ethical impetus of Christianity that makes the difference. Be caught up in the liberating activity of Jesus and resist everything that stands in its way. But the faith also needs the beautiful because God is the source of all beauty. Christian faith cannot be reduced to its doctrines or its ethics. It also invites us to participate in the beauty of God's life for the world, a God who opens us to the beauty of all creation and all people that surround us. What makes Christian faith compelling, ultimately, is its stories: stories of beauty and wonder, of God's love for the world and humanity's response to that love, of a wandering preacher who proclaimed good news to the poor, of a church stumbling along the way yet sustained by the living God, of saints who show us the character of grace. These stories of beauty, worth telling over and over again, have captivated generations, as each generation adds its distinctive stories. Christianity is aesthetic, introducing us

to a beauty beyond measure, inviting us to revel in the play that is God's love for the world. Along the way, we sport in the wind.

The God of Christian faith creates a world of unsurpassed beauty if we only open our eyes to it. This God is not an unforgiving moralist or a dogmatist. Instead, the God of Christian faith is a God who delights, who creates out of the excessive gift of giving life to others. This is the God who pronounces after each day of creation in Genesis 1 that it is "good" and at the conclusion of six days announces that it is "very good." God beholds what God has made, relishes it, and rests. We, too, ought to delight in creation and in each other. Anything less is ingratitude. And so, as in all things, God moves, stirs, sustains, delights, and plays. Wind cavorts and moves ahead of us. Our task is to catch up with this delight.

Sometimes, however, the wind is fierce. On the high plains, in alpine regions, and in deserts at night, wind comes with bone-chilling force. Gretel Ehrlich, who has chronicled her life in Wyoming, where high plains meet mountains, notes this power of wind: "If anything is endemic to Wyoming, it is wind. This big room of space is swept out daily, leaving a bone yard of fossils, agates, and carcasses in every stage of decay. Though it was water that initially shaped the state, wind is the meticulous gardener, raising dust and pruning the sage."[22] Relentless winds expose, uncover, sweep away, and erode. Thunderstorms burgeon in sweltering summer. Tornadoes and hurricanes barrel with astonishing power and destruction. Sometimes the wind wreaks havoc. Wind, ultimately, is unpredictable. The God of Christian faith isn't predictable either. The biblical writers knew this well: God could not be domesticated, made to fit into one's preferred groove. Sometimes the biblical writers experienced God in fear. In Leviticus, Nadab and Abihu make an unauthorized sacrifice before God and are consumed by the fire of God's presence (Lev. 10:1–2). Job, in his suffering, speaks of the divine in this way: "I am terrified at his presence; when I consider, I am in dread of him. God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me" (Job 23:15–16). A faith that is more than rose-tinted glasses needs to recognize this dimension of the divine as well. The journey of faith is not a seamless spiritual growth plan. There is also the dark night of the soul: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). Jesus's last words, a quote of Psalm 22:1 according to Matthew and Mark, are a stark reminder of that. God can also make Godself known in searing pain and abandonment. The Psalms express this dimension as honestly as any religious text ever written, for example, "Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?" (Ps. 44:24). The Christian life, in the end, does not promise ease: "If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23).

Christian faith recognizes the life-giving and the life-threatening powers of wind. In some instances, wind endangers. One of the most memorable vignettes in the Gospels is Jesus's calming of the Sea of Galilee. In this story, the disciples and Jesus cross the sea in a boat when "a great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped" (Mark 4:37). The disciples wake Jesus (who is, oddly, asleep in the stern); upon awakening, Jesus says tersely, "Peace! Be still!" (4:39 NRSV), calming the storm, calling for their faith, uttering words of peace. The story is easy to twist into psychology, as if Jesus, in calming the force of the wind, is really calming his disciples' anxieties and fears. But something more is at stake: the winds that rage are also external ones—both in weather patterns and the forces of human history. Many are the storms that buffet us today. Jesus calms the storm with words of peace that summon actions of peace, inviting his followers to be a part of a peace that abides.

The wind of God's Spirit displays a mysterious power. Unlike conceptions of power common to modernity, the power of wind is not found in pure force. Sailors know this: harnessing the wind is not simply applying its force to an inert object. Peter Hodgson offers the metaphor of sailing as a way of understanding the Spirit's power, noting that a sailing ship was an early metaphor for the church: "On most points of sail, the wind is ahead of the ship, pulling it forward through the vacuum—a negative force—generated on the leeward side of the sails. . . . God's power is not predominantly that of a positive force. Rather, like a vacuum, it is the power of negation or emptiness, the power of powerlessness—which proves to be the greatest power of all."[23] The true power of wind is its reordering of the powers that be: from domination to sharing, from the zero-sum game that understands life as endless competition for survival to self-giving so that life might flourish in abundance. Wind disrupts the order that we've created, in the name of life.

This recognition leads to a final characteristic of Christian faith that attends to the wind: we cannot escape it. Sometimes shelter is necessary, and we may temporarily seek it. But wind will always surround us. Christianity has consistently stressed divine omnipresence. This is a belief shared by monotheists and polytheists alike; it is not unique to Christianity or even the Abrahamic traditions. It is profoundly present in Native American traditions that connect the presence of the divine to the land. In Navajo traditions, according to Joseph Brown, the landscape is sacred: "The landscape is not a surface of patchwork sites physically and spiritually isolated from one another. All created forms of the landscape have a spiritual essence. . . . Navajo elders believe that no one place is more 'sacred' than another."[24] Modern life, by contrast, is prone to compartmentalizing God, rendering God a help summoned in times of need

and occasionally in times of thanksgiving. Whether dubbed therapeutic deism or a God-of-the-gaps, this compartmentalized God is a far cry from the God of the Scriptures who claims, blesses, surrounds all things, and gives life. The psalmist writes, "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast" (Ps. 139:7–10). There is no escape from God's breath, the wind that gives life to the world. It is present in all things, summoning, beckoning, inviting. This recognition is both comforting and at times even frightening. Sometimes we want to hide. Sometimes the wind exposes us. But the result of the wind is to give and promote life, superfluously, graciously, gloriously. Eventually wind refreshes like a summer breeze.

Wind Power

Wind surrounds and envelops us, giving life. If wind is central to Christian theology, one consequence for the Christian life is how wind reconfigures power. The most common way of understanding power in our day (and perhaps in most eras) is via two competing forces. Power never manifests itself in isolation but always in relation—and often in opposition—to another power. Persons vie for power; nations struggle to assert their power in relation to other nations. Whether one wields power over others or chooses to empower others, struggle tends to surface. This oppositional understanding of power has sunk into our bones, informing our language, vision, and imagination. We think of history as a struggle between the power of good and the power of evil. In democracies, we conceive political life as different parties jostling for power. Elections, especially in the United States, tend to be seen as complete "wins" or "losses" for one's preferred political party. At its worst, this conception of power becomes a zero-sum game. For one's favored group to gain power, others must lose: elites versus commoners; reformers versus traditionalists; management versus labor. In many of these struggles, power gets reduced to brute force.

The power of wind, however, is different. Occasionally wind rages with violent intensity, as in hurricanes and tornadoes. But wind typically displays a much gentler form of power. Many of its effects are discernible only after eons. Utah's arches did not appear overnight or even over thousands of years. Wind evinces its power over hundreds of millennia. Gentle breezes eventually yield stunning geologic transformations. Movements for transformation, whether geologic, political, or social, are not enacted overnight.

They take time, inordinate patience, and a commitment to stick with it, despite temporary failures. This vision of power is not for the faint of heart. Most of us will not experience many of the effects of our efforts in our lifetime. But our grandchildren will.

Wind power, moreover, does not simply manifest itself as a force that erodes or transforms. The most significant power of wind, as all sailors know, results from *yielding* to it. A sailboat scuds across the sea not merely because wind exerts a force against a sail; rather, the sail creates a vacuum, an empty space, that propels the boat at an even greater velocity than the speed of the wind. This is part of wind's mysterious power: it generates, when we yield to it, even greater motion than its initial movement. This kind of power lies at the heart of the Christian gospel: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). The power of the cross is not Jesus's assertive opposition to imperial power. Rather, Jesus yields to that power, submits to the evils that empire inflicts, and thereby reveals that power as desperate, flailing, and futile. Jesus triumphs over the powers of the sin-sick world not in sheer opposition but by exposing those powers as empty and self-destructive. His is the power of life, yielding so that others might partake in fullness of life.

It is difficult to put this kind of power into practice because we have become so accustomed to its opposite. The seesawing struggles of our time make it almost impossible to envision alternatives. But one way that we might begin to conceive of power differently, and more closely along the lines of the power of the cross, is to reclaim the virtues of compromise and building consensus. As long as we conceive power as "I win" and "you lose," we are trapped in endless zero-sum games. In 2024, the US Congress was trapped in a struggle that wrote off compromise as a sign of weakness. When a few US Senators forged a bipartisan bill on immigration (one that did not reflect all the demands of the Republican or Democratic parties), it was quickly rejected by many Republicans because it was deemed a sign of a Democratic "victory" during an election year. Power struggles, in this case, trumped policy. Better to engage in an endless political struggle than try to craft bipartisan agreements. Better to prepare to "win" in November than to work to make today better.

In South Africa, in the wake of apartheid, the dawning of a genuine democracy, and the beginning of a road to racial healing, another kind of experiment in power emerged: the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Much has been written about this experiment in justice and truth-telling, some of it theological.[25] Though the commission, in retrospect had a decidedly mixed record in accomplishing its aims, the aims themselves are worth revisiting because they can serve as guidelines for understanding political power today. As the racist

state crumbled and the multicultural, Black-majority democracy began to emerge, it may have been understandable for the new South African government to round up the perpetrators of the atrocities of apartheid, grant them a speedy trial, and throw the crooks in prison. After all, the old regime killed and imposed lengthy prison sentences on many for the "crime" of working for the dignity of all people. But the architects of the commission had other ends in mind and a different understanding of power. It was important in this process for the perpetrators to come face-to-face with those whom they oppressed, to hear their stories, to see and hear the effects of their acts across generations. The perpetrators were compelled to see the humanity of those they had silenced, brutalized, and imprisoned. This process recognized that there was no way forward to a more just future unless the stories of injustice—and the people who perpetuated injustice—were aired openly. Building a better tomorrow required grappling with the crimes of the past. Perpetrators were also given the chance to tell their stories, how apartheid and racism malformed them. The flaws and distortions that caused the perpetrators to commit crimes could be healed only in face-to-face encounters, in a process of mutual recognition of each other's humanity. The process did not work all the time. The storytelling was sometimes incomplete. Some perpetrators did not show signs of remorse. But at other times, the commission evoked reconciliation and shared forms of power and constructive steps toward the building of a more just tomorrow. Sometimes true power is shown in yielding or even relinquishing one's rightful claim on power so that others might speak, repent, and commit to transformation. Ultimately this yielding leads to shared understandings of power. True power is found neither in raw exertion or utter abandonment but in discovering reservoirs of power greater than we find on our own (or among our favored group). We find power together, in making space for all, so that we might catch the movement of the wind.

Questions for Reflection

1. How have you experienced wind in your life? What have you learned from those experiences?
2. Where do you see attempts to stifle wind and breath in society and the church?
3. Do you find wind a helpful image for the divine? Why or why not?
4. Is the description of power as yielding and sharing at the end of this chapter realistic? Why or why not?

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