

# The Bible and Metaphor

(The Bible—Part Two)

The Shepherd of the Hills bus, “Powered by Grace”, easily navigated Monarch Pass and is now heading further west on Highway 50. Ultimately, our destination is the Kingdom of God. Mrs. Hinklemeier was getting impatient. “When are we going to arrive?”, she asked, “This journey is getting long and I’m tired.”

Joseph Gilman agreed. His health has not been good for the past several years. With rheumatoid arthritis, just getting out of bed is a chore. His beloved wife has been gone for eight years and he, too, would rather be home with the Lord. The first of their two sons, Michael, died in a car accident several years ago. Joseph could have grown bitter and angry, but chose a different path. He said to Mrs. Hinklemeier, “Remember, the Kingdom of God is not only after we die. The journey is the destination.”

The bus grew silent as Joseph spoke. He has many reasons to complain, yet he chooses to look at the positive things in life and be grateful, rather than the negative and criticize. His favorite scripture passage is: *I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to their life? Seek first his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.*  
Luke 12

Joseph strives to make his goal to “seek first His kingdom”. His faith is not naive. He has deeply struggled with tragedy and even questioned if God exists, especially after his son was killed. His questioning allowed his “Sunday school faith” to become a mature “adult faith”. He doesn’t have black and white answers to all of life’s dilemmas. In fact, he has more questions now than when he was younger. His faith has become a mystery to be lived each day. During worship service on Sundays, when he grasps the hand of his neighbor and prays: “Your Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven”, he is comfortable knowing God’s Kingdom comes in mystery and patiently awaits its fulfillment as he enters the autumn of his life.

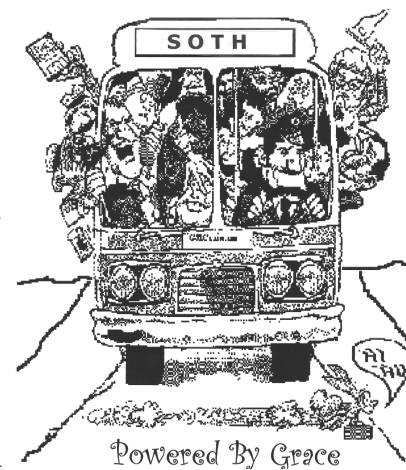
Suddenly, “Powered By Grace” came to a crossroads and found other roads she could take. One sign pointed to LCMS (Lutheran Church Missouri Synod) and the other to WELS (Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod). “Powered By Grace” pulled over at a scenic rest stop. Hubert Lautenschlager, the Chairperson of the Council, asked Pastor Bob, “What’s down these other roads? How is the ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) different from other Lutheran denominations?”

Pastor Bob said: “The main differences are in the interpretation of scripture. The LCMS and WELS believe that the Bible is without error in all that it says. The ELCA avoids making such statements, holding that Scripture is not necessarily accurate on such matters as history and science. It is a collection of various forms of literature, including poetry, songs, parables, etc. Therefore, the ELCA would say the Bible is inspired, but not infallible. Differences between these two Synods and the ELCA on the interpretation of Scripture also help to explain why the ELCA ordains women.”

Mrs. Hinklemeier interrupted Pastor Bob and said, “If something is written in the Bible, it must be infallible. It is the Word of God!”

“Suppose”, Pastor said, “1000 years from now people read these newsletter articles and think them to be literally true. They would read stories about a 400 passenger bus called “Powered by Grace” that has a 10,000 horsepower engine, yet requires no fuel, because it is powered by God’s Grace. Some might conclude that this bus and people like you, Mrs. Hinklemeier, are real.”

“You mean we don’t exist?”, yelled Mrs. Hinklemeier. She was beginning to have an existential melt down.



“You exist”, Pastor said, “And, so does this bus, but metaphorically, not physically. Metaphorically, this bus is Shepherd of the Hills church, which is powered by Grace. Hubert, Joshua, Mildred, Connie and Joseph all exist metaphorically. Each has a message to teach us, but they don’t *physically* exist.”

Mrs. Hinklemeier would hear none of this. A product of modern scientific thought, she equates “truth” with “verifiable fact”. For her, the Bible must be literally and scientifically true, or it creates a crisis of faith. Therefore, the richness of Biblical metaphor is often lost. Prior to the Age of Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, people had no problem believing in the truth of metaphor, recognizing that words don’t necessarily have to be understood literally in order to contain truth.

In his book, *The Heart of Christianity*, Marcus Borg puts it this way: *Metaphor has both a negative and positive meaning. Negatively, it means nonliteral. Positively, it means more-than-literal... Genesis stories of creation, the Garden of Eden, the expulsion of Adam and Eve, Cain’s murder of Abel, Noah and the flood, and the Tower of Babel are what might be called “purely metaphorical narratives.” They are not reporting the early history of the earth and humankind. It is not history remembered. Yet, as metaphorical narratives, they can be profoundly true, even if not literally factual. This claim—that metaphorical language can be true—needs to be emphasized in our time. We in modern Western culture tend to identify truth with factuality... Emphasizing the historical factuality of the stories can distract from their meaning. This emphasis often produces a sterile debate between those who think they are factual and those who think they aren’t, an endless back-and-forth: “It happened this way,” “No, it didn’t,” “Yes, it did.” When this happens, the rich, more-than-literal meanings are most often lost. When this debate breaks out in my classroom, I say to my students, “Believe whatever you want about whether it happened this way; now let’s talk about what the story means.*

John Picard, a retired professor from Pueblo Community College, rose from his seat and said, “I am a person of faith, but also a scientist and I cannot believe the Bible is scientifically true and inerrant. If I am required to believe this I feel I can no longer belong here. Other Christian denominations believe the creation narratives in Genesis to be historically and scientifically accurate accounts of creation. I can only accept a metaphorical reading of these texts. These texts contain God’s truth, but not scientific truth. The Bible was never intended to contain scientific truth in the manner we understand it today. Christians of other denominations are good people and I respect their beliefs, but they are not my beliefs. I joined Shepherd of the Hills several years ago because I desire more moderate views.”

Pastor Bob said, “Even though we have significant differences of belief with Christians of other denominations, we are all God’s children who seek to be faithful to our Lord. As a called ELCA Pastor, I will strive to preach ELCA theology. However, at Shepherd of the Hills, there is room for everybody.

The ELCA seeks to be faithful to Christ who looked beyond the confines of the written word into the faces of hurting people. He interpreted the scriptures of his day through the lens of love and often violated literal interpretations of law in order to touch the untouchables and transform them. For ELCA Lutherans, the Word of God is not equated only with the Bible. Jesus is the Living Word of God (John 1:14). He does more than communicate a message. He is alive and he is the message and presence of God reaching from eternity into the hearts of people at this very moment. This is what we experience and celebrate Sunday mornings during worship.”

To learn more about these subjects, please go to the web site: [www.elca.org/questions/](http://www.elca.org/questions/) or read Honoring Our Neighbor’s Faith, by Robert Buckley Farley.

Out of the blue, from the back of the bus, Ole yelled: “Hey Pastor, why do we say during da creed at Sunday services dat we believe in da catolek church, when we are Luderans?” Stay tuned next month for more adventures of “Powered By Grace” when we address “Why catholic?”

~ PB