

and holiness. But comparatively, church is a greater mystery as a way to maturity in a life of love and holiness — Christ the head and Christians the body, “wing to wing and oar to oar.”

### Between

Most of what the church is, we don't see: all the operations of the Trinity in the ways of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Neither do we see the “heavenly places” or “the seal of the promised Holy Spirit.” And no one has yet succeeded in taking a photograph of “all things under his feet,” or the broken down “dividing wall.”

At the very same time, though, simultaneous with all this “not seeing,” without even trying, without the aid of microscope or telescope, we see a great deal when we look at church. We see men, women, and children being baptized; neighbors whose names we know eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper; friends who three days ago shared a picnic supper at an open-air concert now listening to the reading and preaching of the Scriptures. We see a man praying — we assume he is praying, his head is bowed — who only last week repaired the crumpled fender of my car, and just over there the woman who diagnosed my cancer and arranged for radiation a little over a year ago, playing the organ.

In matters of church, nothing of what we see apart from what we don't see is church. And nothing of what we don't see apart from what we see is church. There is no invisible church. There is no visible church. Invisibility and visibility coinhere in church. There is no church without God, whom “no man has seen . . . at any time” (John 1:18 NAS). There is no church without the “great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (Rev. 7:9) that we can see.

Church is a staging ground for what takes place *between* heaven (invisible) and earth (visible).

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“Between” is a word that I have found to be essential for understanding church. I didn't find it on my own; Martin Buber gave it to me. Buber was a German Jew who spent his life writing and teaching on how to live life whole and holy in the specific conditions posed by the times we live in. He was very much involved in all the visibilities reported in the newspapers of his day: the stuff of politics, economics, and war; Nazi concentration camps and the furnaces that murdered six million of his fellow Jews; the Zionist movement that doggedly worked to find a homeland for displaced and marginalized Jews. Forced to leave Germany, he migrated to Palestine in 1938. He participated in the formation of the new nation of Israel and became a professor at its newly formed university.

I mention all of this — his deep and complex involvement in massive public and social events that radically changed the face of the world we live in — because he wrote a book in which he never said a word about the violently catastrophic events of his time, but, as it turned out, what he wrote had and continues to have everything to do with them. *I and Thou*<sup>9</sup> is a book about the invisible, something that cannot be seen, a relationship, a “between.” The book made no headlines at the time he wrote it. For several years it was nearly as invisible as the invisibles about which he wrote.

The seed from which the book grew is God, as God named himself to Moses at the burning bush in Midian over three thousand years ago (Exod. 3:13-14). It became for many, and most certainly for me, a definitive book for recovering a biblical grounding in understanding the nature and significance of God's unseen presence in the middle of everything that goes on around us, an “everything” that at that time in Europe included at its very center the attempted extermination of the Jewish people and their God, followed by an unprecedented acceleration of a depersonalizing technology and communications industry. Enormous energy continues to issue from this book, energy that in the ninety years since its publication has not diminished.

9. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970 [first published in 1923 as *Ich und Du*]).

The book grew from a three-word sentence (in Hebrew), *ehyeh asher ehyeh*. When God spoke to Moses at the burning bush in Midian and Moses asked him for his name, the answer he got was not a name. A name is a noun. It identifies and locates, objectifies. What Moses heard from the bush was a verb: "I am. . . I am just who I am. . . I am here. . . I am present." The verb in Hebrew is the basic verb for "to be" (*hayah*) spoken in the first person, "I am," and then repeated, "I am." I AM WHO I AM. "I am" — doubled. "I am" — most emphatically. I am present. I am Presence. The non-name "name" of God is vocalized in English as *Yahweh*. Buber translates, "I am there as whoever I am there." He then elaborates, "[I am] that which reveals. . . [I am] that which has being here, nothing more. The eternal source of strength flows, the eternal touch is waiting, the eternal voice sounds, nothing more."<sup>10</sup>

We cannot make an object of God; God is not a thing to be named. We cannot turn God into an idea; God is not a concept to be discussed. We cannot use God for making or doing; God is not a power to be harnessed.

This sounds simple enough — and it is. But none of us finds it much to our liking. We have a long history in wanting to make God into our image and use him for our purposes. Moses, followed by a long succession of Hebrew prophets, did his best to free us from ideas or attitudes or practices that would prevent us from letting God be God for us on God's terms, not ours. Jesus is the final word on God.

But given our stubborn preference for having God on our terms, not God's terms, we need repeated refresher courses on Moses at the bush, on Elijah in the cave, on Isaiah in the temple. Martin Buber is a compelling witness in this extensive Hebrew prophetic tradition. *I and Thou* is a sustained, detailed, energetic recovery of God as God reveals himself: God not as thing or idea or power, but Presence to whom we can only be present.

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10. Buber, *I and Thou*, p. 160.

At the core of his book Buber developed a hyphenated vocabulary of three pairs of words: I-It, Them-Us, and I-You. None of these paired pronouns can be split in half and then understood in isolation, separated from its companion word. It can exist only in combination, in hyphenation. The paired words are basic to human relationships, but by extension they inevitably become God relationships.

I-It: This is the relationship that denies and then destroys relationship. I-It turns the other into an object, a thing. An It is a person de-personalized. The other is some *thing* to be experienced or used. The other is there for me to do with as I like. I do not listen to an It. I tell It what I want, what I think of It. I amuse myself with It as a novelty, an experience. I don't converse with an It. There is no mutuality between an I and an It — none. The I-It person does not know reciprocity. "When he says You he means: You, my ability to use!"<sup>11</sup>

Us-Them: the world is divided into two, the children of light and the children of darkness. This is a very convenient way to think about the world because whatever is wrong, it's obviously because of "them." Complexities vanish. Everything is suddenly tidy. There are goats and sheep, and the sheep by the very nature of things will triumph — didn't Jesus say so? Us-Them has always attracted demagogues, and the demagogues have attracted great crowds. This in effect demonizes everyone who doesn't think or feel along the lines of Us. Them can be a nation, religion, race, family, political party, or team.<sup>12</sup>

I-You: this is the basic word in an accurately lived life, a life lived in personal relationship. "I-You can be spoken only with one's whole being. The concentration and fusion into a whole being can never be accomplished by me, can never be accomplished without me. I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You. All actual life is encounter."<sup>13</sup>

There is no humanity without relationship. "In the beginning is

11. Buber, *I and Thou*, p. 109.

12. "Us-Them" is a gloss of the translator, Walter Kaufmann, on Buber's basic hyphenations. In his words, "There are many ways of living in a world without a You" (p. 14).

13. Buber, *I and Thou*, p. 62.

the relation."<sup>14</sup> Reciprocity is built into the very nature of all that is. A person "becomes an I through a You."<sup>15</sup>

The hyphens in I-It and Us-Them are marks of separation, isolation, and finally desolation. The hyphen in I-You marks a "between," a dynamic relation of spirit between persons.

I-It turns persons into things so that I can control or use or dismiss or ignore them. It is the basic word that is particularly attractive in buying and selling, but it infiltrates every sector of life. When it infiltrates our congregation, the men and women with whom we worship and work become objectified. Instead of being primarily persons whom we love, whether through natural affection (spouse, children, friends) or by Christ's command ("love your neighbor as yourself"), they gradually become functionalized. Under the pressure of "working for Jesus" or "carrying out the church's mission," we begin to treat our family members and fellow workers more like parts of a machine than parts of a body. We develop a vocabulary that treats men and women and children more like problems to be fixed or as resources to be used than as participants in a holy mystery. We develop an extensive I-It vocabulary to facilitate the depersonalization: "assets and liabilities," "point-man" or "-woman," "dysfunctional," "leadership material," "dead weight." Love, the commanded relation, gives way to considerations of efficiency interpreted by abstractions — plans and programs, goals and visions, evangelism statistics and mission strategies.

Us-Them turns others into the enemy. It is the basic word that demonizes others. It is prominent in military and religious wars, in political conflicts and ideological battles. It abolishes language as a way to tell the truth.

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We cannot live in isolation, disconnected, independent. Life is far too complex. The web of living is far too intricate. There is more to us than us.

14. Buber, *I and Thou*, p. 69.

15. Buber, *I and Thou*, p. 80.

Not that we don't try. We try to live with an "It-God," a God whom we can talk about all we want to but whom we never listen to as a You or address as You. We try to live by keeping our distance from others, including God. We try to live indifferently to the entire cosmos that provides the conditions for breathing and eating and drinking. We try to live without a church that keeps us in a place of obedient listening to the God who speaks, nourished by the life of Jesus as he gives himself to us in holy communion, receiving the gifts of his Spirit as he woos us into participation in his love and the community of his love.

Life exists only relationally. Everything is connected. God is God only relationally — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God creates only relationally. God exists only relationally. God gives only relationally. Church is a gathering of Christians under the conditions of God's relationality. Ephesians is an immersion in relationality.

We are conceived in an act of relationship, a conception followed by a nine-month apprenticeship of total intimacy in the womb. We are not ourselves by ourselves. We have our origin by means of a relationship between our parents. After coming out of the womb we find it easy going for a couple of years. We have all our needs cared for, food and warmth and affection. We are one with our mother at her breast. We are one with our father, riding on his shoulders. Our siblings entertain us, playing and laughing with us. But it isn't long before we begin to explore the illusions of making it on our own, of getting our own way, of imposing our will on another. The weeds of I-It grow over us. Sin-cracks begin to appear in the intimacies of I-You. Unchecked, the disintegration leaves us without a You. Paul calls it "dead through trespasses and sin" (Eph. 2:1).

It is a strange thing and truly sad: the first casualties among those who have set out on the way to maturity, equipped to "build up the body of Christ" (4:12), are the people closest to us.

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The transition is silently insidious. We start out as participants in this rich heritage of church and feel called to something beyond and more

intense than simply “Christian” — we have *work* to do. We find ourselves in positions of leadership and responsibility for the church, going about making recruits, lining up allies, arguing the opposition into compliance, motivating the lethargic, and signing up participants to insure the success of a project or program designed for “the glory of God.” But there is no God in it. Spouses and children recede into the background. God may theoretically take precedence over working companions (the “masters and slaves”). But the God whom we name has been de-godded into an It. Under the despotism of the proliferating It, the I continues to dream that it is in command, administering the programs, casting the visions, bringing in the kingdom.

Martin Buber is relentless. He shows how easy and common it is to treat both people and God as It instead of You. He also shows how awful it is, turning what God created as a human community, intended to be “subject to one another out of reverence for Christ,” into a depersonalized wasteland of self-important roles and impersonally efficient functions. No matter how righteous the roles and functions, sacrilege has been committed.

### The Ark and the Tomb

Wayne Roosa, professor of art history at Bethel University in St. Paul, in a brilliant piece of art criticism, calls attention to Israel’s Ark of the Covenant as a way of attending to “the Between of relationship.”<sup>16</sup> His insights reinforce what is involved in the practice of resurrection.

The Ark, set at the heart of the wilderness Tabernacle, provided a visible focus for the worship of God. It was a rectangular, coffin-like box, 4 feet 2 inches long and 30 inches wide and high, covered with gold. The lid of the Ark was called the Mercy Seat. It was flanked on either end by cherubim with outstretched wings. But the Mercy Seat was

16. Wayne Roosa, “A Meditation on the Joint and Its Holy Ornaments,” in *Books and Culture, A Christian Review* (Carol Stream, IL, Christianity Today International), January/February 2008, pp. 16-23.

not a seat at all. It was empty space, a void, defined by the angel wings as the presence of the enthroned God, Yahweh. Yahweh: “enthroned upon the cherubim” (Ps. 80:1). Yahweh: God who revealed himself to Moses as Presence, God who delivered his people from Egyptian slavery; God who spoke to his people in thunder from Sinai, God who fed them on quail and manna on their way through the wilderness to Canaan. Inside the Ark were the tablets containing The Ten Words, their charter of salvation.

The focus and function of the Ark was the empty space marked off by the cherubim — nothing to see, nothing to hear, nothing to handle. But it was not an incomplete emptiness, but rather an emptiness that is fullness, “the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:23): “I am that I am; I am here, present to you; and you are present to me.” The “I am that I am” at the burning bush is filled out by Jesus in his seven-fold litany in St. John’s Gospel of “I am’s” that includes “I am the resurrection and the life”<sup>17</sup> — all the ways that Jesus is God *present* to us as a *between*. We cannot see a between; we cannot see a relationship. A relationship is an absence of *It* so that *You* can be given and received. There is plenty in this life to be talked about. There is plenty in this life to do. But when it comes to *living*, relationship is basic. Nothing said or heard, seen or done, but an act of mutuality, reciprocity, a *between*: I and You, You and I. Only participants need apply.

The space between the cherubim is an inaudibility, an invisibility: nothing to be conjured, nothing to be controlled or manipulated. It is a nothingness that holds a fullness. The void is not a vacuum. It is comprised of the most basic rarefied element, air: the Hebrew *ruach*, the Greek *pneuma*, the Latin *spiritus*, the German *Geist*. In English we have different words for it: breath, wind, the invisibility that makes life possible, that quite literally animates, gives life. In English when we speak of the medium of relationship we commonly use the word “spirit.” But “spirit” in English has lost touch with its metaphorical root as the air

17. The complete list of seven: bread of life (John 6:35), light of the world (8:12), gate for the sheep (10:7), good shepherd (10:14), resurrection and the life (11:25), the way, the truth, and the life (14:6), the true vine (15:1).