

Paul Smith

“Expanding the Trinity: God in 3D”

Episode 37 of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity

EvolutionaryChristianity.com



Paul Smith and the congregation he pastors (in Missouri) have been on the evolving edge of Christianity for nearly 50 years. Bringing himself and his church into congruence with shifting cultural attitudes in women’s equality and gay rights, Paul and his congregation were expelled from the Southern Baptist Convention in 2003. His current focus of spiritual development infuses Progressive Christianity with Integral theory. He is the author of *Integral Christianity*.

HIGHLIGHTS

This episode centers on Paul Smith’s **biblically congruent** celebration of, what he calls, “the Infinite God,” “the Intimate God,” and “the Inner God.” These “**three faces of God**” (or “God in 3D”) is one of the foundations of **Integral theory**, generally associated with philosopher Ken Wilber. As well, **the “stages of development” aspect of Integral theory** is explored in a Progressive Christian context, helping participants to grasp that life conditions tend to unfold an evolving consciousness at both the individual and societal levels. Because Paul Smith is “**Jesus-centered**, not religion-centered,” the primary example he uses of “God in 3D” is his interpretation of **the three ways that Jesus related to God** — and which he then offers as a model for religious seekers of all faiths. Similarly, he explains **the six stages of faith development** by way of how the same personal **experience of the presence of Jesus** would be interpreted differently at each level.

Overcoming inherited **prejudices** (e.g, of **homosexuality** and **women’s equality**) is explored by way of Paul’s telling of his own life journey. Study guide questions are designed to promote **critical reflection on one’s own worldview and a willingness and ability to temporarily step into the perspective of someone else**. This episode is also an opportunity for participants to reflect on their own faith journeys and “stages of development.” Finally, here is a superb platform for exploring different (and sometimes incommensurable) **standards of evidence** — notably, the standards of **science** v. those of “**nonordinary**” **states of consciousness**.

SUGGESTED AUDIENCES

This episode is highly recommended for learners keenly interested in Christian applications of Integral theory, about nonordinary (and mystical) states of consciousness, possibilities for cultivating a personal relationship to Jesus / the divine, and the implications of all these developments for progressive forms of Christianity.

BLOG COMMENTS

Ellen S says:

This was one of the best conversations. Paul Smith reiterates many of the points made by other panelists but in a way that I found particularly meaningful. He really spoke about how this faith journey of his was shared in a corporate, church setting. How it did affect church life — many left, many others came — and I think that speaks to the value of a minister leading a congregation on a journey that is challenging, risky, truth-seeking. I was very moved. I really liked his ability to identify with his Hindu friend who sees the human divinity in Krishna as Paul sees it in Jesus and that both are valid. I don't think this in any way waters down his Christian faith; it adds a universal dimension to it.

Mary says:

I have been surprised and delighted by each of the people who have talked about their faith. After listening to Paul who is so direct about sharing his transcendent experience and inspirational and helpful views about a 3-D God, I wanted to say, "At Last, at last, at long last!" I immediately thought of my father who was a strong believer in Darwin's theories and in the blessings of science. I think he would say (with a smile and a gleam in his eye) "told you so." I surely would be happy if my grandchildren could or would be willing to listen to this reasonable, sensible and mind-expanding vision of evolution and Christianity.

Richard R. Powell says:

Amazing introduction to, or summary of, Integral thought. Paul, you have really taken this stuff to heart and lived and breathed it. It was encouraging to hear someone so versed in this view who is making sense of their experience with new epiphanies along the way. It was inspiring for me because while I have read Wilber and listened to the 1,2,3, of God, I have mostly done so in a vacuum. I will be listening to this audio again for sure, if nothing else to hear your passion for the subject, and be encouraged.

KEYWORD TOPICS

Integral Christianity, feminine face of God, mystical experience, transcendent experience, universal love (experience of), **beliefs** (openness to change), **Jesus as role model, evolving church, inclusive church, theologically progressive church, Jesus-centered** (not religion-centered), “**three faces of God,**” (1) “**infinite face of God,**” (2) “**intimate face of God,**” (3) “**inner face of God,**” **God of Abraham, panentheism, evolutionary impulse, Father God, Abba, I-Thou, Martin Buber, worship, surrender, Mother God, Buddhism, Buddha** (as the intimate face of God), **Krishna** (as the intimate face of God for Hindus), **Spirit, Jesus as God, humans** (as made in the image of God), **Genesis, Christ-consciousness, God as creative love, spiritual body** (of the risen Christ), **Moses, Elijah, spirit guides, goal of the Christian life, God’s presence, speaking to God, humans** (as spiritual beings on a human journey), **deepest truest self** (v. ego), **the Trinity** (as traditional components of the intimate face of God), **God of the Old Testament, Marcus Borg, mystics, Meister Eckhart, Teresa of Avila, 3D view of God** (personal and interfaith benefits of), **Ken Wilber, Integral theory, Hafiz, overcoming prejudice** (of homosexuals and women), **always-evolving church** (importance and challenges of), **evidentialist, Great Self, stages of consciousness, stages of development, states of consciousness, zone prayer, trance, nondual state, intersubjective perspective, natural hierarchies** (v. dominator hierarchies), **postmodernism** (limitations of), **discernment** (v. arrogance of belief), **Spiral Dynamics, experiencing Jesus** (in different stages of faith development), **scriptural literalism** (allurement out of), **Jesus as in Integral teacher, the Bible** (understood in Integral terms)

BIOGRAPHY

Paul Smith is co-pastor of Broadway Church in Kansas City, Missouri. While serving two Southern Baptist churches in St. Louis, he earned a BA in psychology at Washington University in 1959. During that time, he also founded and led a series of annual youth camps and college retreats that were attended by thousands of young people over the course of a decade. After receiving a Masters degree in theology and biblical studies from Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, he came to Broadway Baptist Church in midtown Kansas City in 1963, where he continues to pastor and teach today.

During his nearly half century of leadership at Broadway Church the congregation has evolved from a traditional Southern Baptist church to the integral evolutionary model described in his most recent book, *Integral Christianity: The Spirit’s Call to Evolve* (Paragon House). It is recognized as a pioneer in small groups, contemporary worship, team leadership, justice issues, affirmation of the feminine face of God, church renewal, and spiritual formation. In 1980, Rev. Smith created a workshop on spiritual gifts, which is still used around the world.

Smith has taught extensively on contemporary church life in many churches and

seminaries, including St. Paul Methodist School of Theology, Unity Ministerial School, and Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He contributed two chapters to the book *Enabling the Dialogue about Homosexuality*. In addition to *Integral Christianity*, he also authored, *Is It Okay To Call God Mother? Considering the Feminine Face of God*.

Paul's passion is to see today's churches become radically inclusive and theologically progressive healing communities focused on the transformation that comes from following Jesus, whatever the cost. He and his church were expelled from the Southern Baptist Convention in 2003 for blessing gay and lesbian unions.

SUPPLEMENTARY WEBPAGE

Listener comments to this audio can be found and new ones contributed at:

<http://evolutionarychristianity.com/blog/paul-smith-expanding-the-trinity-god-in-3d/>

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. **God in 3-D.** The title subject of this episode in the Evolutionary Christianity series, "God in 3D," is not a new invention by Paul Smith. **"The Three Faces of God" (also called the "1-2-3 of God") was fleshed out by Ken Wilber, as a component of his Integral Theory.** Late in the interview, Paul Smith does provide a summary of Integral Theory, and he references Ken Wilber. We'll examine Paul's portrayal of Integral theory in a later question. For now, let's move directly into what our speaker intends by "God in 3D" — and particularly the value of his own, perhaps unique, way of introducing it: using the example of **how Jesus himself related to God in three ways.** In excerpts drawn from the interview, we will examine God in 3D by way of the three labels that Paul Smith uses: **(1) The Infinite God, (2) The Intimate God, (3) The Inner God.**

Jesus spoke about God in three distinct ways. **Jesus spoke about God, Jesus spoke to God, and Jesus spoke as God.** And he invites us to speak of God in those three ways ourselves. . . . I think that the goal of the Christian life is to have the same kind of relationship that Jesus had with God, and we can have that too. . . . So these three faces of God: **they're each partial but each is true.** Various realms of thought and understanding in Christianity emphasize one and leave out the other two. . . . I embrace all three faces. They're all real and all true and all partial. Embracing them has just revolutionized my understanding and experience of God in the last ten years.

Before we probe the details of each of the three faces of God that Paul Smith personally finds inspiring, let's examine the effectiveness of his choosing **the relationship to God modeled by Jesus** as his primary example of the importance of relating to ultimacy in all three ways.

Question 1A: *Whether your worldview is Christian, spiritual-but-not-religious, secular, or anything else, were you **helped to understand Paul Smith's perspective on "God in 3D"** by*

his depiction of Jesus' three-fold relationship to God? If so, what in your own worldview helped you to do that? If not, what in your worldview made it difficult for you to see the world through his eyes?

Question 1B: *Again, whatever your personal worldview, choose one aspect or illustration used by Paul Smith in this interview that was particularly **useful in helping you to grasp the content of his position and to comprehend his passion and excitement** for this way of broadening and refining his own personal faith experience.*

2. Dimension 1: The Infinite Face of God. Let's now begin a close examination of each of the three dimensions of God that Paul Smith speaks about. Paul begins by introducing "the infinite face of God." He explains,

Jesus spoke *about* God as the infinite face of God that is **the awesome God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob**—the God that was **beyond everything and in everything**. The Bible talks about this God and describes this God as being **both right here and out there**. Theologians call it **panentheism**, which is that God is *in* everything and *beyond* everything. The **Bible** says, "Do I not fill heaven and earth?" **Jesus** said, "Split a piece of wood, I'm there. Lift up a stone, you'll find me there." **Paul** talks about "God in whom we live and move and have our being," a God who's all in all. That's the *infinite* God that is beyond our understanding. That is a God who encompasses, and lives in, and goes beyond the infinite cosmos. So in that sense, I believe Jesus talked about this infinite face of God.

Academia is very comfortable with the infinite face of God more and more, and they may call it "the evolutionary impulse" or "creative love" or "veiled reality" or something. But it's that infinite sense of God that gets us beyond the big guy in the sky. Traditional Christianity has ended up with God being **the big man upstairs**. And **that God isn't big enough for us**. That God doesn't make it in a world of atoms and quarks and billions and billions of galaxies and stars; that God isn't big enough. . . .

The infinite face of God is not a personal image of God, because that is a God who's an *it*. So **science studies this infinite face of God**, this panentheistic face, the God "in whom we live and move and have our being."

Question 2A: *In your own understanding of what Paul Smith means by "the infinite face of God," **which examples** that he used were most helpful to you — and why?*

Question 2B: *Paul asserts that "academia is very comfortable with the infinite face of God." What do you think he means by this?*

Question 2C: *Paul Smith says, "Traditional Christianity has ended up **with God being the big man upstairs**. And that God **isn't big enough** for us." What is your response to this claim?*

Question 2D: *Paul Smith states that "**science studies this infinite face of God**." Do you agree? Why or why not?*

3. **Dimension 2: The Intimate Face of God.** Paul Smith introduces the second face of God, which he calls, “the intimate face of God,” in this way:

And then, **Jesus** talked to God. I believe that this God of the cosmos comes down to us in some **personal** way. He-or-she-or-it comes to us to hug us and kiss us. **Ultimate reality** stands before us while we look into each other’s eyes. . . That’s a divine intelligence who can appear on a sofa next to us—the creator of heaven and earth who listens to who we are. I call this “the intimate face of God.” And so **Jesus’ expression of it was to talk to God as a Father—as Abba**, the same name he used for Joseph. So it’s very personal—very intimate.

Jesus sensed this intimate God being with him in a personal, intimate way. This is the **I-Thou of Martin Buber**. This is the face of God that we worship and adore and to whom we surrender. For Christians, this is also the face of Jesus. **God comes to us in the person of Jesus**, whom I believe still is with us in a spiritual sense.

This God may come to us if you’re Buddhist. I know Buddha didn’t talk about God, because he didn’t think it was helpful. But many, many Buddhists understand **Buddha as the intimate face of God**. That’s the God that comes and speaks close to them. **If you’re Hindu, that may be Krishna**, who is that intimate face of God whom you commune with and talk to and is very close to you. For others, it may be **Spirit** or Presence. But that’s the intimate face of God, which takes many, many forms—actually, it’s whatever way is most meaningful to us. **But it’s real**. It’s real. Just like the *infinite* God is a face of God that is real but partial, this *intimate* face of God also is real, but it is partial too.

Question 3: *Did Paul Smith effectively convey what he means by “the intimate face of God.” If so, which explanations or illustrations were most helpful to you. If not, which elements of his response caused you the most confusion? Again, the question is not whether you agree or disagree with him (you’ll get a chance to expound on that later), but whether he explained his viewpoint well enough for you to grasp what he means.*

4. **Dimension 3: The Inner Face of God.** Paul Smith calls the third face of his 3D God, “the inner face of God.” He explains,

Jesus not only modeled talking about the *infinite* face of God and the *intimate* face of God in his own prayer times, in his own life, and in his own relationship with Abba; **he spoke as God**. At some point in his life, he evidently came to take very seriously the words of *Genesis*, that **we are made in the image of God**, and that he (along with all of us) carries that divine image. He was able to access it and express it in a dazzling way that I think is incredible. This *inner face* of God—I call this, the *inner* face of God—was Jesus’ **true divine self**. That was **his Christ-consciousness**; that was his own image of God that *he* was and that was being expressed in human flesh.

The inner face of God is that **I too am made in God’s image**. I believe Jesus is the light of the world, and the Light of the World said to us, we are the light of the world, too. So I believe **we are each divine**. Every person, every conscious being contains divinity and the image of God. I believe the Bible teaches that. Jesus said before Abraham, “I am,” and I think we can say that, too. **We are eternal spiritual beings who are now on a human journey. And so I experience God as my deepest, truest self**—and not my ego, which would love to *be* God. Our ego *thinks* it is God. Our true self *knows* it is God. Our deepest, truest, highest, purest self, I think is divine—it’s a piece of

God. And Jesus knew that and modeled it. I want to follow his model; I want to express God in that way.

The inner face of God is the one that has most changed me. . . . I began to see the New Testament and Jesus in a different way. Jesus was no longer an exception—someone who came to be the good cop to rescue us from the bad cop (God) and to save us from God’s wrath so that we wouldn’t go to hell. That’s just a very low understanding of God. Rather, **Jesus came to show us who we are really like.** How wonderful we are—that we’re the light of the world.

Question 4: *Again, did Paul Smith **effectively convey** what he means by “the inner face of God”? If so, which explanations or illustrations were most helpful? If not, which elements of his response caused you the most confusion?*

5. The Trinity is not the “3 faces of God.” Paul makes clear that the “3 faces of God” is not the same thing as Christians traditionally mean by “the Trinity.” He explains,

The traditional **Trinity** has been a solid, accessible way to think about God for centuries, and it was the way the early Christians experienced God. They experienced this God of the Old Testament—the awesome God that Jesus called Father. And then they came to be overwhelmed with Jesus and the presence of God *in* Jesus. As **Marcus Borg** said, **Jesus was a person so full of God that the early Christians began to see him as God, too**—that is, as an expression of God in human flesh. And then they experienced God as a *spirit* that touched them in a very intimate way, that filled them and was with them as a presence. . . . So those three forms have kind of defined God for traditional Christianity.

When people think of God—a Christian God—they think of **Trinity: Father, Son, and Spirit. That was a good first step.** The early Christians tried to move that into some sort of understanding because they were monotheists and they believed in only one God—so they had to wrestle with this. And then the Council of Nicea (in 325 C.E.) came up with the idea of Trinity; they invented a word that is not in the Bible. That was their best understanding. And so that’s embedded in us nowadays. If you’re Catholic, you do the sign of the cross—Father, Son, Spirit. In Baptist churches, most churches, the Trinity is embedded in our thinking, and that defines God.

I find that I appreciate it, I value it, but it is now very limiting. **Father, Son and Spirit are part of the intimate face of God. I put them in that second category.** But they’re very limiting. . . . The Trinity, then, I think is a first step towards the *intimate* face of God, but it fails miserably as the *infinite* face of God. What we have in traditional Christianity today is sort of **the ‘man upstairs’, the ‘sky God’ that gets laughed away.** That’s an obstacle to recognizing that when scientists are exploring the universe and exploring the molecules and atomic structures, they’re exploring a part of the divine—that that’s a part of the *infinite* face of God, that God is *in* all those things and *beyond* all those things.

So that is why **I say that the Trinity is not enough.** The Trinity is not wide enough. The Trinity is not high enough—that is, it doesn’t encompass the infinite God. And the Trinity is not deep enough. The early Christians were so excited about Jesus being this divine spiritual being in the flesh that they forgot that he was modeling that we are *all* that. **And so the Trinity leaves divinity with Father, Son, and Spirit—and leaves us out of it.**

Question 5: Were you **surprised** that Paul Smith did not choose to map the doctrine of the Trinity directly onto the “the three faces of God”? And did he **effectively convey** why he concluded that “the Trinity is not enough”? If he did, which explanations or illustrations were most helpful to you? If not, which elements of his response caused you the most confusion?

6. **Michael Dowd’s distinct translation of a “3D” God.** On his own volition, the host, Michael Dowd, attempts to map a 3D perspective of God/Ultimacy onto his own worldview. Here is what he comes up with:

Now let me try to reflect what I think I heard you say, and I’m going to use language that’s native to how I would normally speak—which is as universal as I can. Let me start by saying that, bottom-line, **I’m an evidentialist**. I believe that *how* God is communicating (and even what we mean by the word ‘God’) is best understood through our best evidence and what that evidence is revealing. And of course over time, there’s greater evidence and it’s coming from a lot of different sources. So, when I look at the religious traditions all over the world and I ask the question, **Why are there all these different religions and all these different competing stories** about what God is like and what God or the Goddess said or did or wants? All those differences make sense from an evidential perspective, if I understand the brain and how **human brains inherently develop relationship**. We *relationalize* reality. We *personify* reality, and then we enter into that personal relationship. And then in that, we experience, as you say, **three faces of reality**. One is the “face” that is beyond anything we can know, think, or imagine and yet that is also *revealed in* everything we can know, think, or imagine. That **infinite face of God**, as you call it, the infinite face of reality, the awesome dimension could be called *ultimate reality*.

However, to be *related* to that, we need to enter relationship by **using personal metaphors**: the *beloved*, relating to reality in a devotional way, in a lover-like way, in an intimate way: father, mother, lover, friend, the ‘I-Thou’ relationship that’s more **intimate**. And in doing that—by having that stance towards reality—we actually have a different experience of reality. Reality shows up for us differently because **we’re interpreting through the lenses, through the eyes of intimacy of relationship**.

And then there’s also the sense that **we are each an expression of reality**. We’re part of reality. We’re not separate from reality. Our larger self—our larger body—is the body of life, the planet, the galaxy, and fundamentally the universe. Ultimate reality is that which contains it all, whatever our names for that.

So, there’s the dimension of reality, or the face of reality, that is ultimate reality. There’s also the great beloved—that is, the various intimate metaphors that we use to relate to reality and communicate and speak and feel our way into that. And there’s also **the “Great Self”**—that our larger body, our larger self is this. So that’s the language that *I* would use.

Question 6: Did Michael Dowd **effectively convey** what a 3D view of reality would mean to him? If so, which explanations or illustrations were most helpful to you. If not, which elements of his response caused you the most confusion?

7. **What qualifies as evidence?** Michael Dowd prefaces his own translation of a 3D view of God/Reality by stating, “Bottom-line, **I’m an evidentialist**. I believe that *how* God is communicating (and even what we mean by the word ‘God’) is best understood through our best evidence and what that evidence is revealing.” In previous episodes he depicts his view of trustworthy **evidence as three-fold: “scientific, historic, and cross-cultural.”** Dowd also, of course, values the importance of having a **subjective**, emotional (indeed, relational) response to reality, as best as it can be known. But he doesn’t follow the path of Paul Smith in valuing personal transcendental/mystical experience as trustworthy evidence. Here is how **Paul Smith explains his high regard for the transcendental experience** of nonordinary states of consciousness:

I believe the second-person face of God is also based upon evidence. **But it’s not evidence that uses the same tools as science.** The second-person evidence is based upon the history of relationships that people have had with whatever they call ultimate reality. This is also true of the first-person experience of God that the **mystics** have. And what the experience of mystics has been is, if you will take time apart and move into **nonordinary states of consciousness** and move deeply into yourself, you will experience yourself as something *more* than just this material world, this human being. I think there’s **evidence** for this. What I tell people is, “If you will take an hour a day to move into altered states of what the Bible called trances, the evidence that you come up with by looking through that lens is **transcendent**. It is **transpersonal**. And so I see that as evidentiary, too. So if you take the mystics of all the traditions, they have something in common. For those people who have gone inside to search for their own inner, true, original face, I believe there is evidence that says, there is this experience of *something*—whether it goes by the name of God or, as Ken Wilber calls it, “our original face”—I call it “**our divine self**.” I think that’s evidentiary, too. **All three faces of ‘God’ are based upon evidence. There are different vehicles for finding the evidence, but all three are based upon evidence.**

Question 7A: *On the **spectrum of worldview** that has Michael Dowd omitting personal transcendent experience from the ways one learns about the outer world (that is, about the world outside of one’s own subjective mind) and Paul Smith’s high regard for “transcendent” experience as a source of knowledge about reality, **where do you tend to reside**? And have any of the episodes in this series that you have thus far experienced shifted your position, and in what ways?*

Question 7B: *While there may be a well-defined distinction between what qualifies as compelling “scientific” evidence, quite a few speakers in this series **do not limit their sense of evidence to what appears in science journals and textbooks**. So when Dowd claims that he is an “**evidentialist**”, do you think that Paul Smith (and others) regard their own worldviews and understandings of reality as any less grounded in evidence than Dowd’s? Indeed, might they judge that Dowd is working from an artificially constricted range of evidence, and thus that their own ways of knowing are **more inclusive and trustworthy**?*

Question 7C: Now reflect on the occasions in which **you have entered into debates or arguments with others** — ranging from domestic disputes (which may devolve into conflicts over who is “right” about what actually happened) and then outward to differences in politics. Surely, both you and your “opponents” not only marshaled the best “evidence” but probably (and honestly) believed that one’s own evidence was superior. *So the question is this: Within and between faith communities, to what extent is it helpful to focus on so-called “evidence” when a dispute arises? Overall, if the **incommensurability of worldviews** (including what is regarded as trustworthy evidence) impedes individuals and groups from standing in one another’s shoes and finding ways to work through their differences, what could be a solution to such stalemates?*

8. Translating the “3 faces of God” into your own worldview. At least twice in his discussion of “the three faces of God,” Paul Smith invokes the term “**ultimate reality**” as a synonym for God. Using whatever term you are comfortable with — God, ultimate reality, or something else — reflect on the following question:

Question 8A: *How could you **map a three-dimensional perspective onto your own worldview** — that is, what would be your equivalent of the “infinite” dimension, the “intimate” dimension, and the “inner” dimension?*

Question 8B: *To what extent do you find your own translation of **God or ultimacy into three dimensions to be a useful exercise**? And to what extent did this exercise help you to comprehend the passion and excitement that Paul Smith feels for having done this for his own sense of God?*

Question 8C: *Evaluate your own translation of 3D into the worldview that works for you, and consider: **In what ways is your 3D experience more like Paul Smith’s, and in what way more like Dowd’s** — or do you find nothing in common with either of them?*

9. Women’s equality, gay rights, and an ever-evolving church. Paul Smith reports that his latest theological innovation in his nearly **half-century of pastoring the same congregation** is this 3D approach to God. He calls his style of ministry and that of his congregation, “ever-evolving church.” It is not an easy path to follow, however, and there have been consequences. Paul characterizes the challenges this way: “Being a part of an always-evolving church is like remodeling your house. It takes longer than you think, it costs more than you thought, and it makes a bigger mess than you ever thought possible.”

In this series, Paul Smith joins **John Shelby Spong** in humbly reporting that, early in their long ministries, they each held **prejudices common to their era and geographic region**. Paul briefly recounts the challenges of surmounting the prejudices against women’s equality and gay rights. He says,

When I began to see **women as equal to and partners with men**, and when I said that we need to

have women deacons and eventually women pastors, that was a big deal. We had a lot of conversations about it, and finally we had our first woman deacon. Next I said, you know if women were made in God's image, then what about God's image? What would happen if I called God 'She' on some Sunday morning, instead of 'He'? And so I wrote a book about **the feminine language for God**: I wrote it for my church members, so that they would understand my arguments. Then we debated it, and **lost some church members**, but finally, I can remember the first time one of our men got up and referred to God as 'She' and nobody fainted, nobody fell out of their seat. And now we regularly do.

As we began recognizing the feminine face of God, we began recognizing that men and women are made with various varieties of masculine and feminine and sexuality. And **the gay members in our church, who had to be in the closet**, said to me, "Paul, you change your mind about so many things. You change your mind about women; you change your mind about God language. Could you read the **Bible** again and change your mind about gays?" You see, I held the traditional theology—benign: I didn't persecute them, but I did see them as sick or damaged. So I did take another look, and I realized I was totally wrong. **I had misinterpreted every single passage about that**. So I told the congregation I had changed my mind about that, and we held some classes. We took two years to make the change. We had speakers come in to represent the traditional viewpoint and others for a progressive viewpoint. And we had lots of discussion. Ultimately, we lost a lot of members in making that change. Actually, **we lost over half of our members**. But, you know, if we're going to be faithful to Jesus, we will always want the *more*. We will always be evolving. We will always be seeking. We will ask, what is it that you're still teaching us? And so God had to teach us that gays and all sexual orientations are gifts from God.

So we voted to **welcome and affirm all sexual orientations** as gifts from God and for them to be a part of our fellowship in every way possible. That eventually meant, of course, we started doing **gay unions**—and that made the headlines. The local Baptist Association had been trying to get rid of me for years, but they never could quite get the votes. So when we started gay unions, that was the end of it. They **officially voted us out of the Southern Baptist Convention**, which we had expected. Actually, we would periodically ask ourselves if we should just leave, and I said, "No, we need to have them ask us to leave, because it will make the headlines." And it did.

Question 9A: *What do you **most appreciate** about Paul Smith in the story he tells of his own evolution, and that of his church, away from prejudicial stereotypes?*

Question 9B: *What comes up for you when you heard Paul Smith declare that **he turned to the Bible to re-determine whether prejudice against gays was right or wrong?** That is, how important is the **Bible as the foundation for moral values** if Paul could read it one way when the cultural ethos was anti-gay, and then read it another way when his gay church members asked him to reconsider? **If scripture doesn't change, but morality sometimes does, what does that say about how one should view scripture?***

10. **Personal spiritual benefits of a 3D view of God.** Let's examine some of the points that Paul Smith makes in conveying *why* a 3D view of God is beneficial for him personally. Let's look at benefits he speaks of for each of the 3 faces.

INFINITE face of God: One of the first things this perspective helps is I no longer have to look with suspicion upon **science** as it explores space and astronomy and quantum physics. Science is a part of the exploration of the *infinite* God. . . . Now when I read a science book, I'm reading a book that's exploring God's Creation.

INTIMATE face of God: The *intimate* face of God has meant a lot to me because . . . that has released me to **feel very much at home with my own relationship with Jesus personally**, whose presence I experience, and with spiritual guides that I experience personally.

INNER face of God: The *inner* face of God is the one that has **most changed me**. . . I began to see the New Testament and **Jesus** in a different way. Jesus was no longer an exception—someone who came to be the good cop to rescue us from the bad cop (God) and to save us from God's wrath so that we wouldn't go to hell. That's just a very low understanding of God. Rather, **Jesus came to show us who we are really like**. So when I look in the mirror now, I try to look for that astonishing light of my own being. I'm aware of all my faults and all of my pathology. But now I believe that somewhere down in there, there's this astonishing light of the world—that is *me*. And what's more, it's you, too! And now, I'm standing in a line at the grocery store and there's this **homeless street person** who smells and I don't want to get close to, and I say to myself, "That person is the light of the world. Somewhere underneath all that outward appearance, somewhere in there is the image of God, is the divine spiritual being on a human journey, like Jesus." And how I treat this homeless person is the way I treat Jesus. Why? It's because they're both God! They're both God!

Question 10A: *Paul Smith is very open about the personal spiritual benefits and ways of seeing the world that he derives from a 3D view of God. Now **consider your own belief system and worldview**, and how those systems have evolved for you during your life. To what extent is it important for you to find **a beneficial, even uplifting, way to interpret a belief** — or even to accept a new scientific finding — before you give it your assent? Overall, **how much do the practical consequences of a belief shape your willingness to embrace it?***

Question 10B: *Have you ever let go of a prior belief because it failed to produce good fruit? If so, please describe.*

11. **Stages of development, with Christian examples.** Several listeners commented gratefully on this interview for **the short course Paul Smith provided in Integral theory** — and its implications for **embracing diversity** within Christianity. Besides the "three perspectives" concept that infuses Paul's 3D view of God, an Integral concept that he dealt with at length is that of "stages of development." Paul Smith explains:

Integral philosophy recognizes that we have been **evolving through levels of consciousness** for at least fifty thousand years, tracing back to the beginning of our tribal consciousness. Integral looks at these different levels of consciousness that you could see in cultures, in history—and that you

can see in cultures today; you can see in churches today; you can see in all groups today. And it tries to understand these levels as **appropriate expressions of the Spirit's work at that particular time**. . . . So what Integral does is it understands these evolving stages of consciousness, and treasures and values the strengths in them, and invites people to transcend the weaknesses—but sees them all as the work of the Spirit. . . . **To understand the Bible** in Integral or evolutionary terms is to turn it from a book of silly stories into a fascinating story of **the evolution of human consciousness**—from a tribal level, at the beginning of Genesis, onward to the traditional level and beyond.

Paul Smith then speaks of how a personal spiritual experience of **the presence of Jesus** would be interpreted differently among the six “stages of development.” One set of names for these six stages is: tribal, warrior, traditional, modern, postmodern, and integral. Here are the examples he gives.

So let's say someone at the **tribal level** in a very sect-like, snake-charmer church has an experience of the presence of Jesus. They may really be experiencing the presence of God and the spirit in Jesus, but they will interpret that at the *tribal* level. They will see this as the **magical Jesus** who performs miracles and probably strikes a little bit of fear into their hearts.

If they're at the **warrior stage**, if they're in a fundamentalist church, and they have a spiritual experience of Jesus' presence—Jesus appears to them—it will be interpreted as a *warrior Jesus*—a warrior Christ. Now, I'm not saying their experience of God is not real and true, but their *understanding* of their experience would be the warrior Christ. So this will be **the fearsome Jesus**, who's come to separate the good from the bad and **send the evil to hell** and help people fight against sin and be warriors for Christ. That will be the kind of interpretation they give to that spiritual experience of Jesus' presence.

If they're at the **traditional level** (or *mythic* level) and they have experience of Jesus' presence, perhaps they will interpret this as “**this is the one and only savior of the world**.” This is the Jesus that everybody needs to know by name—or else they're going to go to hell. Everybody needs to say yes to this Jesus, and this Jesus has appeared to *me*, so I must be right. I must understand this in the right way.

If you're at the **modern level** and Jesus appears, you may think you're having indigestion [*laughter*]—because you don't put much store in spiritual experience because **your main focus is now rational thinking**. And rational thinking has produced such wonderful things—like medicine, and science, and so on. And so you may have temporarily abandoned the spiritual. But if not, you will see Jesus as someone who's come to **bring reason into the Judaism of his day**, and to bring a reasonable quality about that.

If you're at the **postmodern level** and you have an experience of Jesus' presence, you're all excited about it because you think spiritual experiences are really wonderful. And you will see this as **a Jesus who includes everyone** and who appears in different forms to different people. This Jesus is not exclusive at all, but you'll be excited about it.

Editor's note: Paul Smith already presented his sense of the Integral experience of Jesus throughout the interview, as that is the stage that he sees himself representing.

Question 11A: *To whatever degree you have become familiar with the Integral perspective via this interview or the series as a whole, or because you have encountered it elsewhere, **what is***

your response to this kind of stages-of-development approach for understanding differences in beliefs, interpretations, and values — especially among individuals who profess the same religion, e.g., Christianity?

Question 11B: Where would you place **your own stage of consciousness or faith** on the six-stage scale that Paul Smith describes, and why? If you are unwilling or unable to use this scale, reflect on and discuss why that may be so.

12. **Natural v. dominator hierarchies and the perils of postmodernism.** Near the end of the interview, Michael Dowd asks, “How do you personally go about looking at different forms of the Christian faith and practice in the world today, **without becoming arrogant** about your own perspective or condescending towards others?” Paul Smith replies,

Well, to be **arrogant** is to discount the spirit’s work in bringing people to wherever they are. Now, the postmodern stage (and **we’re all afflicted with postmodernism**), its weakness is it cannot stand hierarchies. **It cannot stand levels of development**, because that sounds like elitism. It sounds like, “Oh, this is somebody who is going to be arrogant about where they are.” I understand that, because **postmodernism has rejected all hierarchies**, when they should have just rejected dominator hierarchies.

Dominator hierarchies are arrogant and overpowering and controlling. But there are natural hierarchies. For example, a molecule is more complex and more evolved than an atom. It’s just part of the natural hierarchy. It doesn’t mean it’s better; it’s just different. Age twelve is more evolved and more complex than age five. There’s nothing wrong with age five. . .

So I think **discernment is different from feeling superior or arrogant.** And postmodernism doesn’t like discernment. They want to say all paths are equal; everything’s the same; this is as good as that. Integral says, “Ooh, lets transcend that and say *some* good is more good than other goods. Some things are truer than other things. And it’s okay to recognize that. And we don’t need to feel superior or arrogant about it, because God isn’t superior or arrogant about it. **Jesus** wasn’t superior or arrogant about his beliefs.

Question 12A: To what extent do you find this distinction **between “natural” and “dominator” hierarchies** to be useful?

Question 12B: To what extent do you sense you may **be “afflicted” by postmodernism** — and do you experience it as an “affliction”?