

EMBRACING AN  
ALTERNATIVE  
ORTHODOXY

*Richard Rohr*  
*on the Legacy of St. Francis*

A 5-SESSION STUDY BY RICHARD ROHR WITH TIM SCORER

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# QUICK GUIDE TO THE HANDBOOK

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## TEN things to know as you begin to work with this resource:

### 1. HANDBOOK + WORKBOOK

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This handbook is a guide to the group process as well as a workbook for everyone in the group.

### 2. A FIVE-SESSION RESOURCE

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Each of the five sessions presents a distinct topic for focused group study and conversation.

### 3. DVD-BASED RESOURCE

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The teaching content in each session comes in the form of input by Fr. Richard Rohr and response by members of a small group on a DVD recording of just over 30 minutes in length.

### 4. EVERYONE GETS EVERYTHING

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This handbook addresses everyone in the group, not one group leader. There is no separate “Leader’s Guide.”

### 5. GROUP FACILITATION

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The creators of this resource assume that someone will be designated as group facilitator for each session. You may choose the same person or a different person for each of the five sessions.

### 6. TIME FLEXIBILITY

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Each of the five sessions is flexible and can be between one hour and two or more hours in length: however, if you intend to cover all the material presented, you will need the full two hours.

### 7. BUILD YOUR OWN SESSION

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Prior to the session it is advisable for one or more members of the group to determine what to include in the group meeting time. In some cases the session outline presents options from which you can choose. In other cases the material is organized as a progression through the three or four main topics presented by Richard Rohr.

### 8. WITHIN EACH TOPIC IN A SESSION

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Each segment in a session features a mix of input from Richard Rohr and the other members of the small group in the video, plus questions for discussion or other creative activities to guide individual and group reflection.

### 9. BEFORE THE SESSION

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Each session opens with five activities for participants to use as personal preparation prior to the session.

### 10. CLOSING AND BEYOND

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Each session ends with an option that is a suggestion for ongoing personal engagement with the topic of the session. A closing prayer is provided. Groups are encouraged to follow a prayer practice that reflects their own traditions and experience.

# BEYOND THE “QUICK GUIDE”

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Helpful information and guidance for anyone using this resource:

## 1. HANDBOOK + WORKBOOK

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This handbook is a guide to the group process as well as a workbook for everyone in the group.

- We hope the handbook gives you all the information you need to feel confident in shaping the program to work for you and your fellow group members.
- The work space provided in the handbook encourages you...
  - to respond to leading questions.
  - to write or draw your own reflections.
  - to note the helpful responses of other group members.

## 2. FIVE-SESSION RESOURCE

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This resource presents Richard Rohr’s insights on Alternative Orthodoxy, framed as five distinct topics of study:

1. Atonement Theology
2. Eco-Spirituality
3. The Cosmic Christ
4. Orthodoxy vs. Orthopraxy
5. Mysticism over Moralism

## 3. DVD-BASED RESOURCE

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The teaching content in each session comes in the form of input by Richard Rohr and response by members of a small group. The video for each runs just over 30 minutes in length.

Richard Rohr’s focused and engaging presentations stimulate thoughtful and heartfelt conversation among his listeners.

The edited conversations present group sharing that builds on Richard’s initial teaching. They are intended to present to you a model of small group interaction that is personal, respectful and engaged.

- You will notice that the participants in the DVD group also become our teachers. In many cases, quotes from the group members enrich the teaching component of this resource. This will also happen in your group—you will become teachers for one another.
- We hope that the DVD presentations spark conversations about those things that matter most to those who are striving to understand matters of faith in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **4. EVERYONE GETS EVERYTHING**

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The handbook addresses everyone in the group, not one group leader. There is no separate “Leader’s Guide.”

Unlike many small group resources, this one makes no distinction between material for the group facilitator and for the participants. Everyone has it all! We believe this empowers you and your fellow group members to share creatively in the leadership.

## **5. GROUP FACILITATION**

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We designed this for you to designate a group facilitator for each session. It does not have to be the same person for all five sessions, because everyone has all the material. It is, however, essential that you and the other group members are clear about who is facilitating each session. One or two people still have to be responsible for these kinds of things:

- making arrangements for the meeting space (see notes on Meeting Space, p. 12 )
- setting up the space to be conducive to conversations in a diverse small group community
- creating and leading an opening to the session (see notes on Opening, p. 12 )
- helping the group decide on which elements of the guide to focus on in that session
- facilitating the group conversation for that session
- keeping track of the time
- calling the group members to attend to the standards established for the group life (see notes on Group Standards, p. 12)
- creating space in the conversation for all to participate

- keeping the conversation moving along so that the group covers all that it set out to do
- ensuring that time is taken for a satisfying closing to the session
- making sure that everyone is clear about date, location and focus for the next session
- following up with people who missed the session

## **6. TIME FLEXIBILITY**

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Each of the five sessions is flexible and can be between one hour and two or more hours in length: however, if you intend to cover all the material presented, you will need the full two hours.

We designed this resource for your group to tailor it to fit the space available in the life of the congregation or community using it. That might be Sunday morning for an hour before or after worship, two hours on a weekday evening, or 90 minutes on a weekday morning.

Some groups might decide to spend two sessions on one of the five major topics. There’s enough material in each of the five outlines to do that. Rushing to get through more than the time comfortably allows results in people not having the opportunity to speak about the things that matter to them.

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## 7. BUILD YOUR OWN SESSION

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Prior to the session it is advisable for one or more members of the group to determine what to include in the group meeting time. The session outline presents options from which you can choose.

- One or two people might take on the responsibility of shaping the session based on what they think will appeal to the group members. This responsibility could be shared from week to week.
- The group might take time at the end of one session to look ahead and decide on what they will cover in the next session. In the interest of time, it might be best to assign this planning to a couple members of the group.
- You might decide to do your personal preparation for the session (the five activities in “Before the Session”), and when everyone comes together for the session, proceed on the basis of what topics interested people the most.

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## 8. WITHIN EACH TOPIC IN A SESSION

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Each segment in a session features a mix of input from Richard Rohr and the other members of the small group in the video, plus questions for discussion or other creative activities to guide individual and group reflection.

You will recognize that the activities and topics in the study guide emerge both from the structured teaching of Fr. Rohr as well as the informal and spontaneous conversation of the group members. This parallels the process of your group, which will be initially led by the content of the DVD and the study guide, but then branch off in directions that emerge spontaneously from the particular life of your group.

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## 9. BEFORE THE SESSION

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Each session opens with five activities for participants to use as personal preparation prior to the session.

- We intend these activities to open in you some aspect of the topic being considered in the upcoming session. This may lead you to feel more confident when addressing the issue in the group.
- Sometimes these questions are the same as ones raised in the context of the session. They offer the opportunity for you to do some personal reflection both before and/or after engaging in the group conversation on that topic.

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## 10. CLOSING AND BEYOND

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Each session has a final reflective option for participants to take from the session and use as an extension of their learning. These offer a disciplined way for each participant to continue to harvest the riches of the group conversation.

A closing prayer is provided at the end of each session. Groups are encouraged to follow a prayer practice that reflects their own traditions and experience.

Another aspect of closing is *evaluation*. This is not included in an intentional way in the design of the sessions; however, evaluation is such a natural and satisfying thing to do that it could be included as part of the discipline of closing each session. It's as simple as taking time to respond to these questions:

- What insights am I taking from this session?
- What contributed to my learning?
- What will I do differently as a result of my being here today?

## POINTERS ON FACILITATION

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### 1. Meeting Space

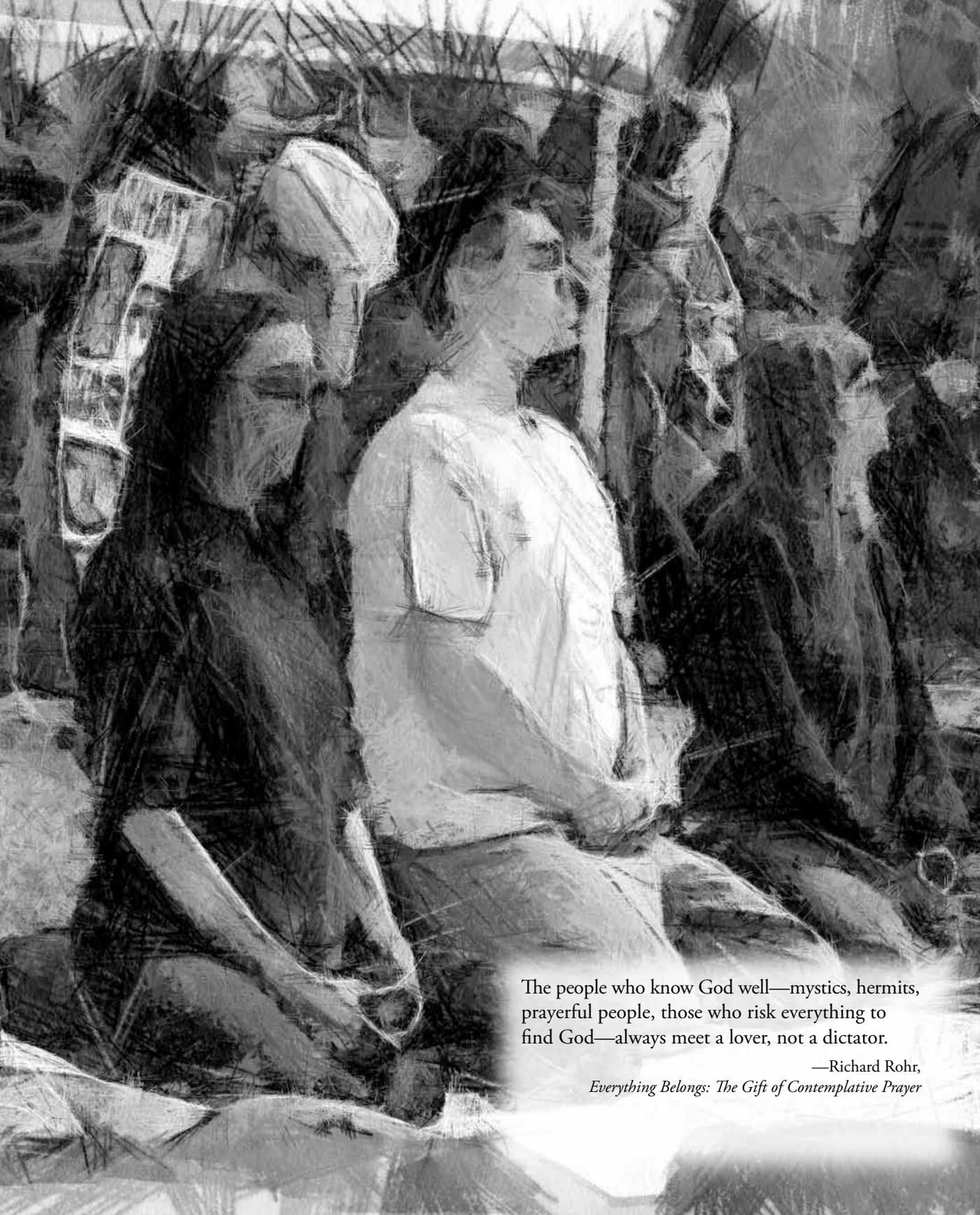
- Take time to prepare the space for the group. When people come into a space that has been prepared for them, they trust the hospitality, resulting in a willingness to bring the fullness of themselves into the conversation. Something as simple as playing recorded music as people arrive will contribute to this sense of “a space prepared for you.”
- Think about how the space will encourage a spirit of reverence, intimacy and care. Will there be a table in the center of the circle where a candle can be lit each time the group meets? Is there room for other symbols that emerge from the group’s life?

### 2. Opening

- In the opening session, take time to go around the circle and introduce yourselves in some way.
- Every time a group comes together again, it takes each member time to feel fully included. Some take longer than others. An important function of facilitation is to help this happen with ease, so people find themselves participating fully in the conversation as soon as possible. We designed these sessions with this in mind. Encouraging people to share in the activity proposed under *Group Life* is one way of supporting that feeling of inclusion.
- The ritual of opening might include the lighting of a candle, an opening prayer, the singing of a hymn where appropriate, and the naming of each person present.

### 3. Group Standards

- There are basic standards in group life that are helpful to name when a new group begins. Once they are named, you can always come back to them as a point of reference if necessary. Here are two basics:
  - Everything that is said in this group remains in the group. (*confidentiality*)
  - We will begin and end at the time agreed. (*punctuality*)
- Are there any others that you need to name as you begin? Sometimes standards emerge from the life of the group and need to be named when they become evident, otherwise they are just assumed.



The people who know God well—mystics, hermits,  
prayerful people, those who risk everything to  
find God—always meet a lover, not a dictator.

—Richard Rohr,  
*Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer*



# SESSION | 1

## ATONEMENT THEOLOGY

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### BEFORE THE SESSION

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Many participants like to come to the group conversation after considering individually some of the issues that will be raised. The following five reflective activities are intended to open your mind, memories and emotions regarding some aspects of this session's topic. Use the space provided here to note your reflections.

1. Traditional atonement theology can be summed up by the roadside sign that announces “Jesus died for our sins.” This theology requires that there be a transaction—a deal—so that God can love what God created. God’s acceptance is purchased through the death of Jesus. Where have you encountered this theology? What place does it have in your belief system and in your faith community?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. An alternative view of atonement (*at-one-ment*) tells us that God’s love has always come without conditions and still does. No deal is necessary. As you go through these days, engaged in the ordinary tasks of living, watch for signs of the overwhelming, unconditional love that God has for the creation, for you and for all that you choose to love.

3. Jesus models for us a life path that is all about letting go of illusion and pretense (the small false self) and embracing the fullness of life—including death—in a way that the true self has space to emerge and to be known ever more fully. How is your “self” doing as you follow this Christ path from the false to the true?
4. *Quid Pro Quo* names a way of dealing with things “tit for tat”—an eye for an eye. Retributive justice is like that, ensuring that the wrongdoer be adequately punished according to the laws of the state. Restorative justice, on the other hand, focuses on the just restoration of relationship in which the concerns of all those affected by the wrong done are addressed. Restorative justice makes space for the exercise of grace. Where have you seen grace being given space to make a difference recently?
5. Richard Rohr is a Franciscan friar, hence the subtitle of this series: “On the Legacy of St. Francis.” What can you find out through the Internet about the following: *Rohr, Franciscans, St. Francis*.

## GROUP LIFE

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The theme of this study is “Embracing An Alternative Orthodoxy.” You have come together as a group, ready to uncover some responses to this question: What are the dynamics of alternative orthodoxy in the second decade of the 21st century?

If this is a new group meeting for the first time, take a few minutes to introduce yourselves in two ways:

- by telling your name
- by telling one thing that attracted you to participate in this program

In September of 2013, another group met in Albuquerque, New Mexico, to learn with Richard Rohr and to grapple with the same issues that are on your agenda for these five sessions.

Moving from left to right as you will see them on the screen, they are Tim Scorer (moderator and author of this study guide), Doug Travis, Jennifer Murphy-Dye, Joe Alarid, Suzanne Gutierrez, Raymond Raney and Fr. Richard Rohr. You won't hear from each person in every session, but over the course of five sessions you will hear contributions from all six participants in the group.



Before selecting from the following options, *watch the entire portion of the DVD for Session 1.*

## OPTION 1: COMING TO TERMS WITH ATONEMENT

### Historical Background to Two Approaches to Atonement

Franciscans had an alternative understanding of the atonement from their inception 800 years ago. The Roman Church did not deem this heretical. In the broad-mindedness of the 13th Century, it was possible to have a minority position as well as a majority one without anyone being kicked out of the Church.

Mainline Protestantism by and large fully accepted the majority position on atonement. Because Franciscans were something of a sideshow within Catholicism, they were never as invested in it as most evangelical Christians are today.

#### 1. Richard Rohr on the Majority Position on Atonement

Some insights that Richard offers in his introduction:

- The mainline position on atonement that anyone in any denomination has probably been influenced by is summed up in the phrase you see on highway signs: “Jesus died for our sins.”
- Traditional atonement theology claims that there needed to be a transaction for God to love what God created. God’s love had to be purchased in some way.
- This theology is based on many quotes from the New Testament where this kind of language is being used: *ransom*, *satisfaction*, *paying the price* and *died for us*.

- In the first 1,000 years of Christianity, the normal Christian consensus was that the debt was being paid *to the devil*.
- It was Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) who, in his paper *Cur Deus Homo (Why Did God Become Human)*, made a case for the debt being paid *to God*, not the devil.
- Atonement made sense to Jewish people from their experience of Temple sacrifice, where there was some transaction necessary because the language and metaphors were already part of their tradition.

#### 2. The Franciscan Minority Position on Atonement Theology

Having offered an introduction to traditional atonement theology, Richard then proceeds to offer a critique of it by presenting the Franciscan view of atonement beginning with a quote from Franciscan John Duns Scotus, one of the most important philosopher-theologians of the High Middle Ages:

Jesus did not come to change the mind of God about humanity, but to change the mind of humanity about God.

Here are seven quotes from Richard's presentation of the minority Franciscan position on atonement:

- 1: God organically loved what God created from the first moment of the Big Bang. There was an inherent love relationship between God and creation. God wanted to show God's Self in material creation.
- 2: The Christ existed from all eternity. The Christ was the first idea in the mind of God.
- 3: Jesus is the image of the invisible God from all eternity. There is simply a union to be named: *at-one-ment*.
- 4: The first idea in the mind of God is to reveal who God is. Jesus is the revelation of God's Plan A. Jesus is not a mop-up exercise after Adam and Eve ate that darn apple!
- 5: When we say in traditional atonement theology that there needs to be a transaction for God to love what God created, we create a barrier to mystical thinking and to the understanding of the unconditional love of God.
- 6: The traditional atonement theory doesn't say much good about God. It suggests that God doesn't have an inherent love for what God created; God is "pissed off," so to speak.
- 7: No transaction was necessary. No blood sacrifice was necessary. No atonement is necessary. There is no bill to be paid.

1. Richard states:

When you make these challenges to traditional atonement theology people feel like you're taking away their faith because many people have based their understanding of Jesus on this.

This may be true for you too. Perhaps this challenge to traditional atonement theology comes as a shock. It may take a while to fully absorb Richard's challenge and to consider the implications for your own theology. What impact does Richard's critique of atonement theology have on you?

2. Now that we have these two conflicting approaches to atonement laid out so clearly, what do you affirm for yourself about these matters:

- God and creation
- Christ in creation
- Jesus as revelation
- the death of Jesus
- atonement vs. at-one-ment

3. Richard says:

*When we say in atonement theology that there needs to be a transaction for God to love what God created, we create a barrier to mystical thinking and to the understanding of the unconditional love of God.*

In other words, there can be no conditions on God's love. That love existed from the beginning for all creation, and it is still here for you billions of years later. It did not need to be bought, and it will never need to be bought. What convinces you of the love of God, fully present with no conditions?

## OPTION 2: THE SELF-EMPTYING WAY

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Doug asks:

*Jesus asks that the cup be passed and then goes on to say, “nevertheless, not my will but your will.” So he willingly dies. There is implicit in that a notion that, in some measure, God required of Jesus that he die. How does that fit in to plan A?*

Richard responds:

*I wouldn't say that God required it. I would say that reality requires the letting go of what I call the “false self.” Reality requires the letting go of illusion and pretense. In my Christology I would say that Jesus died willingly, surrendering the Jesus “small self” so the Christ “universal self” could be born. In doing that he models for all of us the same path. I know this isn't attractive to Western Christians, but death is part of the deal. That's not a negative statement, a morbid, punishing or threatening statement. It's just that animals know it, trees know it—the cycles of death and life. What we see in Jesus is a willing surrendering to that, an embracing of that.*

Raymond adds:

*Paul talks about Jesus emptying himself—in Greek, kenosis. The actual atonement that Jesus did was the emptying of himself to do what God wanted.*

Richard responds:

*You name it that way, and suddenly Buddhists take notice. We're saying the same thing and, of course, if truth is one (as it has to be or it's not truth), wouldn't that make sense that the great religions are coming to very similar conclusions. So using that word “emptying” from Philippians is right on if we see it as an entire process of self-emptying instead of a dramatic three hours on the cross. For some Christian denominations the first 30 years of Jesus' life mean nothing: his teaching can be ignored. It's just those last three hours. I don't mean to be disrespectful, but it amounts to “get that blood” instead of a whole life of self-emptying.*

1. Richard encourages us to see this path that Jesus followed in letting go of the false self and giving birth to the true self (or universal self) as something to be emulated. He acknowledges that this path isn't attractive to Western Christians. What would it actually mean "to let go of the false self" and to fully embrace the natural cycles of life and death?
2. What is it about this path that makes it unattractive to Western Christians?
3. If it's attractive to you and is, perhaps, the way you live, what makes it so?

## OPTION 3: LEVELS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

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As you listen to Richard teaching and interacting, you'll notice that on a number of occasions he speaks about the process of human development that moves us as individuals and as a culture through a number of levels of consciousness, from magical (transactional), through mythical, rational and pluralistic, and finally to mystical or non-dual. We are focusing on this understanding of human and cultural development here because this approach is so influential in Richard's thinking and teaching. It also leads to a reflection on what Richard refers to as *alternative orthodoxy*.

Richard's reflection on levels of consciousness began with a question from Joe:

*There is a certain attractiveness to the crucifixion and the death of Christ being the just result. Justice is now here to pay for the evil or transgressions that humanity engaged in before. I can see where the majority view was well received.*

Richard responds:

*I've been influenced in the last 10 years so much by things like Spiral Dynamics, Integral Theory and levels of consciousness. The early level of consciousness is the magical level; what I call the transactional level. It's also the ego level, what I call the quid pro quo. It really doesn't understand restorative justice. It's only retributive justice: quid pro quo or tit for tat. That's where all of our minds are. Look at your 11-year-old: they want quid pro quo. "Follow the rules." "You said!" We all go through that level of consciousness, and culture itself did too. It couldn't understand restorative justice*

*in the 11th century, namely, that God, in fact, justifies us by loving us more, not by punitiveness. That didn't even make sense.*

*You put it very well, Joe. There's a certain level of attractiveness to "paying a price"—quid pro quo. It does satisfy an early level of the mammalian brain. Things are justified. The playing field is leveled. The thing we Christians believe is that the gospel goes far beyond that: the Doctrine of Mercy and Grace has nothing to do with quid pro quo.*

Later in the conversation Richard returns with further reflection on levels of consciousness:

*As a culture we are at the pluralistic level. That's why so many things that were understood at the magical and mythical level don't make sense to us anymore. I don't want to throw them out. I want to ask how you raise them up and see that they are truer than ever. Once we get to the highest non-dual or mystical level, we really understand the transaction of love—the transformational power of love. I don't want to throw out any of these doctrines or dogmas; let's find out what they really mean.*

*That's why we use the term alternative orthodoxy. We're still concerned about being orthodox, but what so many people call orthodox is childhood conditioning passing for orthodoxy. It doesn't help because when they go off to college at the rational level of consciousness where it doesn't make sense anymore, they throw out the baby with the bath water. That's why agnosticism and atheism are largely a child of Christianity. If you go to formerly Christian nations you find a high degree of agnostics and atheists.*

1. Through Richard's teaching we can begin to see that concepts like traditional atonement are not only a product of historical process but also a reflection of the development of human consciousness. When have you been aware of your own journey of consciousness being influential in your beliefs and practices as a person of faith?
2. Richard talks about the move from *quid pro quo* (tit for tat) thinking to the gospel of grace as one example of a development of higher consciousness. A cultural expression of that is in the shift from retributive justice to restorative justice. When have you been aware of either a personal or cultural move from *quid pro quo* thinking to something that reflects the transformative power of love?

## OPTION 4: ALERT TO ATONEMENT THEOLOGY

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Atonement Theology can be as unnoticed as the air we breath. Its presence and language has become so familiar that we can be unaware of it until a circumstance or an individual actually draws our attention to it.

In Handel's *Messiah*, notice the presence of atonement theology:

Surely He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows!  
He was wounded for our transgressions;  
He was bruised for our iniquities;  
the chastisement of our peace was upon Him.  
And with His stripes we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray;  
we have turned every one to his own way.  
And the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

He was cut off out of the land of the living;  
for the transgression of Thy people was He stricken.

Here is one example of hymns in the Episcopal *Hymnal 1982* that reflect atonement theology:

Cross of Jesus, cross of sorrow, where the blood of Christ was shed,  
perfect Man on thee did suffer, perfect God on thee has bled!

Here the King of all the ages, throned in light ere worlds could be,  
robed in mortal flesh is dying, crucified by sin for me.

O mysterious condescending! O abandonment sublime!  
Very God himself is bearing all the sufferings of time!

Cross of Jesus, cross of sorrow, where the blood of Christ was shed,  
perfect Man on thee did suffer, perfect God on thee has bled!

*Words: William J. Sparrow-Simpson (1860–1952)*

We see atonement theology reflected in The Book of Common Prayer:

All glory be to thee  
Almighty God, our heavenly Father,  
who of thy tender mercy  
didst give thine only Son Jesus Christ  
to suffer death upon the cross  
for our redemption;  
who made there,  
by his one oblation  
of himself once offered,  
a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice,  
oblation and satisfaction  
for the sins of the whole world;  
and did institute,  
and in his holy gospel command us to continue,  
a perpetual memory of that his precious death,  
until his coming again.

*Eucharistic Prayer I (Rite I of Holy Eucharist, p. 334)*

1. When have you been aware of the presence of atonement theology either in roadside signs or in Sunday worship?
2. What hymns and prayers do you know that give expression to an alternative orthodoxy that speaks the truth in a way that resonates with your beliefs?

## OPTION 5: SHAPED BY WILLFULNESS; YEARNING FOR WILLINGNESS

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Doug asks:

*Isn't it inevitable that experience is going to have to teach us that quid pro quo doesn't work?*

Richard responds:

*We've been shaped much more by American culture. We like will-power religion: "I can do whatever I need to do." The language of the scriptures and the mystics and saints is not the language of willfulness but willingness—the language of surrender. Jesus surrenders to his passion. He's not steering the whole thing, he's surrendering to what has to happen, what's inevitable. That's a very different language than "pulling up by my own bootstraps"! We are so formed by that notion that we pretend it's the gospel. Christian preachers talk that way: "You can do it! You can do anything you want!"*

*In biblical theory that's pure heresy, yet you can get away talking that way in a pulpit. Willfulness appeals to the egocentric, low-level self. It looks like winners win. What the gospel is saying is losers win. We should all be happy about that because it includes all of us. That's why I wrote the book *Falling Upward*. I wanted to show that you've got to go through that falling experience. Your initial self-created game for superiority has to disappoint you, has to fall apart on some level or you never get to the second half of life, which is the gospel possibility.*

1. This is a huge condemnation by Richard of the meaning of religion within American culture. And it's an alarming description of the consequence to individuals of that cultural reality. This conversation about surrender and falling into the second half of life has to be one of the hardest conversations for privileged North Americans! Listen with care. Speak with courage. How is this characterization of religion in America borne out in your experience and observation?
2. What has America lost as a result of the appropriation of religion that Richard is describing?
3. How has this tension between willfulness and willingness been lived out in your life? Where do you find yourself now?

## OPTION 6: A DEEP CONCERN FOR THE GENERATIONS TO COME

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Suzanne and Jennifer give voice to their passion for ensuring that these insights that come under the title *alternative orthodoxy* will be available to and desired by their children and grandchildren.

Suzanne puts it this way:

*I hope that my son and his generation will not have to fight the fight that I'm fighting now. It took me a while to get to this because I was trying to remain loyal. Finally, through years of reading and being open to other ways of thinking, I realized this is no threat at all: I can hang on to these other things. I don't want the next generation to have to undergo that. Maybe if we do our part in introducing this to them early on, telling them, "This is important, but so is this: God is a loving God!"*

And Jennifer adds:

*Something I've seen in working with adults in education are grandparents who see that their adult children aren't baptizing the grandchildren, so the grandparents do it. And it's not out of love, but out of fear, fear that if this child does not have water poured on its head and a ritualistic formula said exactly this way, then if the child dies he or she will go to hell. That to me says so much about what your image of God is. It's so important to communicate to our children, to our grandchildren a different image of God than what I had. I had the cosmic attendance-taker keeping track of my sins and of my attendance at mass instead of a God who from the get-go planned to come and meet us where we are.*

Richard responds briefly:

*We've discovered—and I'm sure you as educators know this—it's not what parents say, it's what they're excited about. If you talk about this in an excited way, it's sold. It takes.*

1. We are in a time in mainline Christianity when participation in the life of the congregation at all age levels, but especially at younger ages, is in dramatic decline. Many congregations have neither children nor younger adults participating in the life of their faith community, so this issue raised by Suzanne and Jennifer really matters. *Theology* matters. Why would people stick around to hear about a God who is keeping track of your sins and your attendance at church? Richard reminds us that genuine excitement about something that really matters makes a difference to those who are learning and seeking. What do you think about all this?
2. Is it too late for Christianity to recover from its history of bad theology?
3. What do you intend to do in terms of the spiritual and faith-formation of the generations to come, especially the ones in whose lives you have an influence?

## OPTION 7: A BIBLICAL HYMN OF AT-ONE-MENT

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Richard states:

*The Early Franciscan School of which St. Bonaventure and John Duns Scotus were both preeminent philosophers, both emphasize the hymns at the beginning of Colossians and Ephesians and the Prologue to John's Gospel as expressions of a nonviolent atonement theology.*

And so we turn to the hymn near the beginning of Paul's letter to the brothers and sisters in Colossae:

*Colossians 1:15-20*

- 15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation;
- 16 for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.
- 17 He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.
- 18 He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.
- 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,
- 20 and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

In his book, *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality*, Richard Rohr writes a short exegesis on the hymn at the beginning of Colossians:

Jesus, Scotus said, was not “necessary” to solve any problem whatsoever—he was no mopping-up exercise after the fact—but a pure and gracious declaration of the primordial truth from the very beginning which was called the doctrine of “the primacy of Christ.”

The Incarnation of God, in Jesus, gives us the living “icon of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15), who is the template for all else (1:16), who reconciles all things in himself (1:17), who is the headmaster in a cosmic body that follows after him (1:18). If I may use a contemporary image: Jesus is the “hologram” for all that is happening in a constant and repetitive universe (1:19). He is the pattern for all. He does what we also must do, which is why he says, “follow me.”

The human Jesus, in other words, is God's preemptive statement to humanity about history and the soul. This “Word of God”—all distilled and focused in one visible life—which is “secretly” Divine but overtly human. Sort of like us!

Let me summarize: *Whatever happens to Jesus is what must and will happen to the soul*: incarnation, an embodied life of ordinariness and hiddenness, initiation, trial, faith, death, surrender, resurrection and return to God. Such is the Christ pattern that we all share in, either joyfully and trustfully (heaven), or unwillingly and resentfully (hell).

*Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality*,  
Richard Rohr (Cincinnati, OH:  
St Anthony Messenger Press, 2008, p. 198)

Take the scripture passage and Richard's exegesis of it as you would another passage and reflection in a Bible study, finding:

- the parts of it that speak strongly to you
- the elements that unsettle you
- the questions that arise and provoke further thought and conversation

## OPTION 8: PERSONAL REFLECTION

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(for use following the session)

Following the session you will continue to think about issues raised both on the DVD and in your small group. This suggestion for journaling is offered to support you in continuing your reflection beyond the session time.

1. You may not have had time to complete all the options in the group study time. As you have time, take the opportunity for personal reflection on the ones that you missed or the ones that were really engaging and to which you now want to return on your own.
2. You will have seen that Richard Rohr is convicted by his calling as a Franciscan, by his profound immersion in the reality of God, and by his capacity to bring together theological issues with the deepest concerns of human life. Because of this, he is a remarkably compelling and inspiring teacher. What was it from all the things that you heard him say that most stayed with you? Reflect on why that matters to you. What questions would you like to ask Richard?

## CLOSING

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Because Richard Rohr introduces us to an alternative to traditional orthodoxy, we close each session with a prayer that gives expression to orthodoxy while also allowing room for a contemporary theology.

### **Prayer of Alcuin (8th Century Celtic)**

Give us, O Lord, we pray,  
firm faith,  
unwavering hope,  
a passion for justice.

Pour into our hearts  
the Spirit of Wisdom and Understanding,  
the Spirit of Counsel and Spiritual Strength,  
the Spirit of Knowledge and True Compassion,  
the Spirit of Wonder in all Your Works.

Light Eternal,  
shine in our hearts;  
Power Eternal,  
deliver us from evil;  
Wisdom Eternal,  
scatter the darkness of our ignorance;  
Might Eternal,  
have mercy on us.

Grant that we may ever seek your face  
with all our heart, soul and strength.  
And in your infinite mercy  
bring us at last to the fullness of your presence  
where we shall behold your glory  
and live your promised joys.

In the name of Jesus,  
our body and blood,  
our life and our nourishment.

*Amen.*