

Extract from *The Wisdom Jesus* by Cynthia Bourgeault

From Chapter 2: Jesus in Context p21

...It's all hopeless unless we believe in Jesus and put our full trust in his mercy - that's the slant in the Christianity of the West.

The Christianity of the East saw things radically differently. Theirs was not a soteriology, but a sophiology. The "sophiology" has as its root word "wisdom." (*Sophia* is the Greek word for wisdom.) Christianity was supremely a wisdom path. For the earliest Christians, Jesus was not the Savior but the Life-Giver. In the original Aramaic of Jesus and his followers there was no word for salvation. Salvation was understood as a bestowal of life, and to be saved was "to be made alive." Entering the waters at the hand of John the Baptist, Jesus emerged as *Mahyana*, "the Life-Giver." He came forth also as the *Ihidaya*, "the Single One" or "the Unified One." Nowadays we'd call him "the Enlightened One," a person whose life is full, integrated, and flowing. Jesus's disciples saw in him a master of consciousness, offering a path through which they, too, could become *ihidaya*, enlightened ones. A sophiological Christianity focuses on the path. It emphasizes how Jesus is like us, how what he did in himself is something we are also called to do in ourselves. By contrast, soteriology tends to emphasize how Jesus is different from us - "begotten, not made," belonging to a higher order of being - and hence uniquely positioned as our mediator.

At first the sophiological take may seem strange to you: definitely a variant and perhaps even a heretical position. But as the evidence begins to pour in from the other 270 degrees of the Christian circle, we begin to see that it is the West that holds the variant position. From the Gospel of Thomas and the Nag Hammadi collection in general, from the Syriac liturgies, from the African desert fathers and mothers, from Celtic poets and Chinese "Jesus sutras" the same sophiological message emerges. "Yes," says Jesus, "as I am, you, too, can and must become. I will be here to help you. But you must do the work yourself." Whatever theological premises you may or may not choose to believe about Jesus, the primary task of a Christian is not to believe theological premises but to put on the mind of Christ."