

**ONE STEP
CLOSER**



ONE STEP CLOSER

WHY U2 MATTERS TO THOSE SEEKING GOD

CHRISTIAN SCHAREN



© 2006 by Christian Scharen

Published by Brazos Press
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.brazospress.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Scharen, Christian Batalden.

One step closer : why U2 matters to those seeking God / Christian Scharen.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 1-58743-169-6 (pbk.)

1. U2 (Musical group) 2. Rock music—Religious aspects—Christianity.

3. Rock musicians—Ireland—Biography. I. Title.

ML421.U2S33 2006

782.421660922—dc22

2005028470

Unless otherwise marked, all scripture is taken from *THE MESSAGE* by Eugene H. Peterson, copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group. All rights reserved.

Scripture marked NIV is taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Scripture marked NRSV is taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by permission.

To Isaiah and Grace, beloved children,
And to Rose Delesani,
their sponsor-sister in Milambe, Malawi
(For more on sponsorship,
see www.savethechildren.org)



CONTENTS

Introduction: One Step Closer . . . 9

STEP ONE . . .

1. Singing Scripture 23
2. Psalms as Thanksgiving and Lament 29
3. Wisdom as Desire and Illusion 43
4. Prophecy as Judgment and Hope 57
5. Parables as Offense and Mercy 75
6. Apocalypse as Ecstasy and Healing 89

STEP TWO . . .

7. Singing the Cross 107
8. Faith (Not Sight) 117
9. Hope (Not Possession) 129

CONTENTS

10. Love (Not Power) 143

11. Now (Not Yet) 157

STEP THREE . . .

12. Singing the Truth 173

Epilogue: . . .To Knowing 191

Notes 195

Acknowledgments 205

INTRODUCTION

One Step Closer . . .

There's cathedrals and the alleyways in our music. I think the alleyway is usually on the way to the cathedral, where you can hear your own footsteps and you're slightly nervous and looking over your shoulder and wondering if there's somebody following you. And then you get there and you realize there was somebody following you: it's God.

Bono

A Wide Tradition

I hope that you've found this book because you, too, find yourself drawn into the ways Bono and U2 talk of spiritual matters. I've been a fan since I first heard them in 1985. I've always felt a spiritual kinship with them, as though they seem to know my soul and put words to thoughts I've had. They've been spiritual companions for me. This is true during times when I've felt at home in a traditional church, but even more

so during times when I've felt frustrated with the church. When my life is in spiritual upheaval, U2 has been and is a trustworthy companion. For a long while I appreciated this, as one appreciates a cool uncle or a favorite aunt. Only recently when a group of college students asked me to lead a retreat for them did I begin to think about revisiting U2 in an effort to think through their spiritual voice in a more organized way.

I don't mean to be scolding in this effort to think through U2's spiritual voice as so many Christians have done when they've questioned if U2's members and music are sufficiently "Christian." That question is humorous if you reflect on the ways U2 has turned the question back on the church, asking whether the church is sufficiently Christian! Rather, what I mean to do here is to think about how U2 fits within a longer tradition of Christian voices that point us to the cross, to Jesus, and to the power of God's ways in the world. By seeing them in a fuller light, I'm trying to make some sense of how they fit into a certain tradition of speaking and living faith. It is worth doing because many preachers "preach to the choir," so to speak, while U2 "preaches" to millions who don't even know the basic songs of faith and have grown up without any connection to the church.

When I think of preachers who reach millions, I usually think of Billy Graham, Rick Warren, or others like them who speak to thousands with Christ's message. U2's "preaching" is strikingly different from the stereotypical television preacher (the kind Bono criticized in songs and finally lampooned in his Mirror Ball Man persona during the 1990s). I want to say to all the fans of U2 who don't go to church, who don't know that the Christian tradition is a wide and generous place with room for many voices: listen! The voice of U2 is not unique; it is deeply rooted in authentic Christianity. I want to invite you into that generous and wide tradition and introduce you to

some of those saints and friends of God who have also spoken as U2 does about faith in the midst of doubt, hope in the face of despair, love in the face of violence, and peace and justice in the face of suffering.

This book is not about the meaning of U2 songs nor is it a chronicling of their spiritual journey from *Boy* to *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb*. It is not an investigation of the private life of Bono or any one member of the band. Neither is it intended first of all for those within the church as an effort either to defend U2's faith or to explain the usefulness of their lyrics for preaching to spiritually hungry but religiously disaffected young people.

Theology in a Minor Key

This book is an attempt to reveal to those unfamiliar with Christianity that the Christian tradition has, metaphorically speaking, many "keys." Some of Christianity's most prominent voices play major keys, claiming for instance that God has laid a special blessing on the United States or that God will lay a special blessing on you if you write out your check to this or to that church or ministry. Others claim that if you come to church, you will find everything to your liking, from the cookies and coffee to the pop music and practical, uplifting messages. Rather than speak in these major keys, this book introduces you to a minor key—what I call the theology of the cross—that fits U2's voice. I will expand on this later in the book, but let me give a quick introduction to that perspective here.

The theology of the cross fits U2 because it avoids the all too common proclamation of faith, hope, and love that ignores the present realities of doubt, despair, suffering, and injustice. It is a tradition that looks at the world and speaks the truth

about what it sees: the good, the bad, and the ugly. In the words of the church reformer Martin Luther, the theology of the cross “calls a thing what it really is.” The honesty of this theological voice is freeing because it faces up to our experiences of the truth of life. One need not ignore or be surprised by the many difficulties and sorrows in life. Rather, such faith allows us to take life’s challenges straight on knowing that in our struggles we are not alone. Jesus, the crucified and risen one, has already faced the worst of life.

This book, therefore, will help you make sense of U2’s style of talking about God, Jesus, the Spirit, and the Christian life in a holistic way, rooted deeply in the history of faith we who follow Jesus share. As I will talk about more in the last chapter, it is a way of speaking (or singing!) the truth, but even more than that, it is a way of living the truth. Now I’ll briefly tell a little about my spiritual journey and how I found U2 along the way.

Closer to . . . What?

I thought I’d already found Jesus. I’m thinking of a time during my first years at university. My childhood friend, Nick, had gone to a Christian college in Seattle, Washington, while I attended a Christian college in Tacoma, just a few miles south along the Puget Sound. During high school in Montana, Nick had been the good boy. He was on the varsity basketball team, and he was an academic merit scholar and a nice guy whose family went to a church where they praised the Lord. I was an average football player, a below-average student, I was on the edge of trouble, and to top it off, I’d dropped out of church after ninth grade when our family’s church had an ugly split over a pastor. A group in the congregation didn’t like this pastor and so withheld their pledges of financial sup-

port to force him out. He left, we left, and I left. If that was Christian community, I could do without it.

I arrived at college with an individual spirituality I'd found through imagining my own success. Jesus was my friend and wanted me to succeed. My version of the gospel was rooted in a few verses taken out of context, such as "ask and it will be given to you" (Matthew 7:7, NIV) and "all things are possible with God" (Mark 10:27, NIV). I went to a Christian college because of their football team, still hoping I was better than I really was. Such an attitude fit my faith at the time, too. I went to different churches with friends, hoping my faith was better than it really was. I had no sense of purpose, and although I seemed successful from the outside, I was caving in. It turns out that my years away from church had helped me find a spirituality that was too thin, too small, too shallow. My personal faith that Jesus would help me succeed wasn't deep enough to create any real change in me, especially when I felt I was failing.

During these first years at college, I'd sometimes go up to visit my friend Nick in Seattle. I looked to him for support since he was the one who had the solid faith and credentials for college success. He'd done the right things in high school, and he was positioned to do really well in college and in life. Usually, I'd just go for the day and we'd hang out or go to the mall or go to lunch at Pike's Place Market, a downtown outdoor gathering place. One of the last times I saw him, however, was in the winter of our sophomore year when I spent the weekend with him. Two things happened that weekend that had an impact on my life.

The first event was about music. I'd grown up on rock music—from classics like the Rolling Stones, the Beatles, and the Who to 1980s groups like the Clash, REM, and the Talking Heads. On that weekend, Nick's roommate played the first

“Christian” rock music I’d ever heard. It was by a band called U2, and I made copies of all his cassettes. I was captivated by the pulsing and God-haunted sounds of “October,” “Sunday Bloody Sunday,” “Gloria,” and “I Will Follow.” As I listened, something clicked together that had never before met: my faith and what you might describe as my culture—the music, friends, and life I lived from day to day.

The second event was about drugs. I’d grown up in small-town America, so drinking a beer was no surprise to me. During high school, we used to sneak into the fraternity parties at the college in the town where I grew up. But Seattle is not small-town America. Nick took me to a party at the University of Washington where people were smoking marijuana and other things I didn’t recognize—the first time I’d seen drugs like this. I remember being totally shocked while wanting to seem totally cool. But truthfully, having come from listening to U2 in Nick’s apartment to now seeing people making bongos out of cola cans and sniffing powder up their noses like I’d only seen in movies was too much. I had been drinking, but all of a sudden I experienced a sobering surge of fear and heard voices exploding in my head saying “get out.”

After that weekend, I went home feeling sad and confused. Who was I, and who was my friend I thought I knew? What were we supposed to be and do? What mattered? I teetered on the verge of personal collapse. After throwing myself into training for football and failing to get the preseason invitation that all varsity players receive, I faced the fact that I was pouring my energy into the wrong place. I quit football. I floated, not knowing what to do or where to turn. Jesus had not worked it out for me. I thought I’d found Jesus and that he was my man, the one to help me succeed. And when I failed, I felt I’d lost him.

In the midst of these struggles Jesus found me and turned my life upside down. I began attending the campus church on Sundays. A new team of campus pastors had begun in my second year, and they genuinely seemed to make space for questions. I wasn't ready to toss out my faith yet. One night that fall, a religion professor was presenting a lecture on homelessness in the Seattle-Tacoma area. I went not knowing what to expect. There I learned that four thousand people slept on the streets each night, and many more were hungry and had inadequate housing. As if for the first time, I stopped looking in the mirror, and I looked at the world. I saw tremendous, shocking, and inexcusable suffering. I vowed that night that I would work to change this. I call it my conversion experience—the night Jesus came to me and told me to help the homeless, just as he said to his friend Peter, “Feed my sheep” (John 21) so many years before.

So I started an educational campaign believing that if people knew about the outrage of homelessness, surely the problem could be solved in a short time. My first major event, complete with a film and speaker, drew four people—three were my good friends and one was the speaker! So I began volunteering every Friday night downtown at the Last Chance Shelter and serving meals at the nearby New Covenant Pentecostal Tabernacle Church of God in Christ soup kitchen. I began reading more about Jesus—the Jesus who sought out those who were suffering and who were left on the margins of society, and while I worked to help them, I was being made whole myself.

That same fall I began listening to the new U2 album called *The Joshua Tree*. I'd really liked U2 before, but now I felt that the anthem “I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For” explained exactly how my faith had turned from a self-centered certainty (my prayer: Jesus, help me and bless me)

to a world-centered questioning (my prayer: Jesus, why do so many people have to suffer this way?). After I traveled to Nicaragua, to Mexico, and to Jamaica to work with and learn about the struggles of third-world countries, songs like “Bullet the Blue Sky” made so much more sense. As I learned about the heroic struggles of the civil rights movement, I sang out joyfully on “Pride (In the Name of Love).” Jesus had found me, and over the years since then I met him again and again as I listened to the music of U2 and tried to follow Jesus in working with the suffering and outcast of society.

Icons of the Cross

In all the promotional photos for their recent album *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb*, the Edge has on a white t-shirt with black crosses all over it. If the image of the cross in association with U2 were unusual, I would pass over it. But whether it is the Edge’s shirt or the commonplace sight of Bono’s rosary (a beaded necklace with Jesus on the cross as the pendant, given to him by Pope John Paul II in exchange for Bono’s blue glasses), the cross is a regular feature in their lyrics and attire. The band very often reveals their faith without speaking of their faith. That is, they use songs and symbols. As Bono says, they “draw their fish in the sand.” One easy way to describe this is to speak of U2 as an icon.

“Icon” is an easy enough term. Of course, you might think of “icon” as referring to a sort of “classic,” a person who perfectly represents a certain lifestyle. Tommy Hilfiger might be seen as an icon of fashion or Madonna as an icon of pop music. Yet so far, this definition doesn’t point enough beyond our love of material success to fully say what I mean by “icon.”

Another similar way we use the term “icon” is with the little symbolic pictures on computer desktops. These are icons

because the picture refers to a program usually stored on the computer's hard drive. The icon is a shortcut to that program. But the icon in this sense also represents and points to the company that makes the hardware or software and thus works as a marketing tool as well. Here, the definition pushes beyond our association with human material success but still refers to a material point of reference.

What both of these previous definitions miss is something that the original use of icons within the traditions of Eastern Orthodox Christianity called "soul." Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury and a scholar of the Eastern Church, has said, "'Soul' is—at least—a religious style of talking about selfhood." Traditionally speaking, an icon is a picture that shows a scene, a person, or a group of persons in a distinctive light, a light that both shows the picture in a strange light and at the same time a light that makes the fullest sense of the meaning of the picture. It is, in a sense, the view of the soul.

The title of this book, *One Step Closer*, raises the question "To What?" The song referred to in the title says, "One step closer to knowing." I view U2 as an icon; that is, I see the band as pointing fans one step closer to the light that is the view of the soul. I do this because I think such a perspective makes a wider, fuller sense of the meaning of the band's words and lives. Thus, I will argue, U2 is an icon that points those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, leading them "one step closer" to the cross, a place both of suffering because of the world's rejection and violent killing of Jesus, as well as joyful hope that comes from God's raising him to new life as a victory over violence, hatred, and death.

As Bono famously wrote: "You broke the bonds and you loosed the chains, carried the cross, all my shame, all my shame, you know I believe it." Yet we live in the space between.

While God raised Jesus to life as a sign of the promised “new heaven and a new earth,” or as Bono described it “the kingdom come when all the colors bleed into one,” this time has yet not arrived. So we sing with Bono, “but I still haven’t found what I’m looking for.” While we await the return of Jesus and a healing of the nations, we are not surprised by the suffering of the world, but we are not satisfied to allow suffering to continue either, for we have had a glimpse of God’s promised future.

The danger is always that the strange light that makes an icon more than what it first appears can be misinterpreted, or even missed altogether. As the nations of Western Europe and North America become more pluralistic, and with an increasing number of young people who have no associations with the Christian faith at all, we might even speak of a cultural loss of soul. If it is the case that fewer people have deep resonance with the Bible and the tradition of the Christian church, then it is also likely the case that many people have lost the ability to see the soul that animates U2. It is tempting to let U2 mean many different things to all manner of spiritual seekers. And of course this is true: the songs and lives of U2 do mean many things to many people. Yet their lives and music make little sense without one central focus, and that central focus is very particular: the cross of Jesus Christ, who was killed by being nailed to a cross in Roman-occupied Palestine in about the year AD 26. That story, told in the Bible, is the light that this book tries to shine around U2 in an effort to show that in various ways their lives and lyrics are indeed an attempt to point fans one step closer to knowing.

Looking Forward

Here I just want to wrap up the introduction by pointing forward through the remainder of the book. Think of it as

a map, mainly put here so that you can have a sense of the whole as you read each part. This is especially important, I think, because the book by design is not mainly about U2. Sure, I talk about U2 all the way through, but the point is to help those of you who, when asked if you've ever gone to church, immediately think of the last time you went to a U2 concert! Not that I'm opposed to that; to the contrary, I think the spiritual character of their live shows is one of the most powerful things about U2. But the book is to help you see them as icons, that is, to see them in a fuller light within a complex and often caricatured tradition: Christianity.

In Step One of the book I'll pick up the question of how we talk about God. This question gives a sense of the distinctive "voices" speaking out of Christianity that lead some to talk about various Christianities, as if there are distinct versions of this global faith. I don't particularly want to catalog all modes and models of Christian speech. First of all, that would be boring. Instead, I'm interested in thinking through the kinds of voices used by U2. I'll look in on the ancient patterns of speech found in scripture and show how U2 uses these same patterns in their music.

Step Two of the book circles around the question of how we talk about God. This time, however, I draw on the theology of the cross—a way of speaking of God with deep traditional roots. The theology of the cross might seem an unlikely style to assign to the world's greatest rock and roll band, but these four Dublin men have almost ruined their career in music because of their inability to let go of this way of speaking. It is a way of speaking—or in the case of U2, singing—truthfully and unflinchingly about God and the world God loves. It is a way of speaking that highlights faith over certainty, hope over despair, selfless love over the self-indulgent pursuits that tempt even the church and its leaders to grab power and

INTRODUCTION

money for themselves. Most of all, this is a tradition that lives the questions, and it is as quick to critique the church as to critique the world.

Step Three of the book introduces the idea of living the truth as a way to live the cross. To make the theology of the cross clearer as well as livelier, I'll give an account of how U2 "walks its talk," so to speak, in describing how, for U2, following God means *doing* the truth. That, I hope, compels others to seek the truth and to act on the truth in their lives.