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On January 22, 1934 in London, a column appeared in The Times under the headline “A Manuscript of Dickens: ‘The Life of Our Lord’ to be Published” (Times January 22, 1934) which announced what should have been a momentous addition to both the Dickens canon and its related body of criticism. As it was, however, the literary value of The Life of Our Lord was largely overshadowed by a focus on its complex publication history and new and controversial biographical information revealed about its author at the time of its emergence. In his 2009 book Dickens, Christianity and The Life of Our Lord, Gary Colledge has emerged as one of the only scholars in a long tradition of Dickens scholarship to recognize the significant insight this work provides into his religious and literary voice. This paper will begin by examining the unique literary archeology of the text of TLOL and its surrounding literary criticism in order to gain an understanding of why it has been underappreciated. It will then align itself with Colledge’s argument that TLOL “acts as an index of sorts, a reference point, that provides a clarifying voice with regard to the nature and substance of the Christian character of Dickens’s own religious thought and emergent worldview” (Colledge 2009 15), and will return to his novels of the 1840s and 50s to apply this lens to his fiction. In doing so, it will suggest a reading of TLOL as a way of revealing not only the specific version of Christianity displayed in his fiction, but also his particular view of narrative itself as a means of constructing faith.
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INTRODUCTION

For well over one hundred and forty years, scholars, critics, and enthusiasts have been examining the work of Charles Dickens from theoretical, theological, and aesthetic perspectives in order to characterize his unique Christian beliefs and to properly situate these views as they are manifested in his literary works. In spite of the incredible volume of intellectual work surrounding the prolific author, only a small number of scholarly investigations into his fiction have yielded any comprehensive or definitive conclusions about its religious implications. A number of factors contribute to this apparent gap in Dickens scholarship and the subsequent lack of success scholars have had in appropriately categorizing or delimiting the boundaries of his faith as it is represented in his fiction. While the sheer volume of Dickensian literary research and analysis and the limited scope of this project precludes an examination of these factors in their entirety, it is necessary to begin this discussion with a short survey of Victorian religious issues and the particular place from which Dickens’s own Christian voice found its utterance.

Having properly situated Dickens’s literary voice, this paper will then briefly explore current scholarship pertaining to Dickensian Christianity invoking the work of Linda Lewis, Emma Mason, Carolyn Oulton, Janet Larson, Dennis Walder and several others in order to understand why an important piece of the Dickens canon has not been fully appreciated. Although each of these authors identifies important aspects of the author’s Christian belief system and attempts to grapple with the broader historical context of Victorian England, they tend to overlook the importance of Charles Dickens’s final published work, *The Life of Our Lord*, as a vital source in understanding Dickensian Christianity in the author’s fiction.
In his 2009 book *Dickens, Christianity and The Life of Our Lord*, and his more recent work from 2012 *God and Charles Dickens*, Gary Colledge has emerged as one of the only scholars in a long tradition of Dickens scholarship to recognize the significance of his last published work and the illumination it provides into his religious and literary voice. This paper will begin by examining the unique literary archeology of the text of *TLOL* and its surrounding literary criticism in order to gain an understanding of why it has been underappreciated.

Aligning myself with Colledge’s argument that *TLOL* “acts as an index of sorts, a reference point, that provides a clarifying voice with regard to the nature and substance of the Christian character of Dickens’s own religious thought and emergent worldview” (Colledge 2009 15), this paper will return to Dickens’s novels of the 1840s and 50s and apply this lens to his fiction.

Agreeing with his assertion that “*TLOL* can help us see in his novels a unity and coherence in what is often perceived as disparate fragments of a rather inconsistent Christian worldview” (Colledge 2009 15), this paper will then trace the particular features of this worldview as they are displayed in *TLOL* and manifested in the novels he was writing around the time of its composition. In doing so, I will suggest a reading of this largely ignored piece of the Dickens canon as a way of revealing not only the specific version of Christianity displayed in his fiction, but also his particular view of narrative itself as a means of constructing faith. Aligning myself with the work of Colledge, and then calling attention to several unique points of convergence in his novels, I will demonstrate the importance of *TLOL* for the insight it offers into not only Dickens’s specific Christian worldview, but an unspoken literary view of narrative itself.
Surveying the Field

A brief review of over a century of literary study illustrates that two of the primary reasons for nearly perpetual disagreement over Dickens’s particular religious allegiances are the tempestuous religious context from which his literary voice was emanating and the perceived lack of commitment his fiction appears to display to a precise religious doctrine. As Linda Lewis points out in her influential book *Dickens His Parables, and His Readers,* “the Victorian period has been characterized as an era of both orthodox Christian faith and rampant skepticism” (Lewis 6) and it is from this period of religious uncertainty that Dickens’s voice gained popular reception. To illustrate this dichotomy, she cites a variety of prominent writers and their illustrative opinions including Thomas Carlyle, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Robert Browning, and Matthew Arnold. Most significantly, Carlyle’s lamentation in 1843 that “‘there is no religion; there is no God; man has lost his soul, and vainly seeks antiseptic salt’” (qtd in Lewis 6) and Arnold’s much later 1875 comment that “‘men cannot do without Christianity,’ and they ‘cannot do with it as it is’” (qtd in Lewis 6), both demonstrate that for an extended period of time (especially in the latter half of the nineteenth century), the largely unchallenged tenets of Christianity were rapidly becoming a source of intellectual discomfort. In spite of thousands of years of doctrinal teaching and codified creed, it was becoming increasingly clear to many Englishmen that “Christianity must be changed as human knowledge leads intellectual Christians to reject traditional belief” (Lewis 6).

As early as the 1830s this erosion of traditional belief systems in the face of rational, logical, and scientific thought was becoming apparent. Ralph Waldo Emerson visited England in this earlier period and characterized the “spirit of the national church” as having “‘glided away to
animate other activities, and they who come to the old shrine find apes and players rustling old garments” (qtd in Lewis 6). As the dogma of established organized religion became intellectually insufficient in the face of new studies in geology, evolution, and medicine, an increasing number of Western Christians sought explanations in progressively liberal and modernized versions of faith. Offering a useful (albeit extremely generalized) overview of these shifting Victorian religious modes of thought, Lewis explains that “the long Victorian era witnessed Higher Criticism that proposed examining the Bible through a different lens, Darwinian theory that undermined the literal account of creation, increasing numbers who found no relevance in formal religious worship, and the sprouting of Dissenting chapels, many of which blossomed at a rapid rate while Anglicanism withered” (Lewis 6). Carolyn Oulton’s *Literature and Religion in Mid-Victorian England* traces a similar trajectory of Victorian religious issues citing that “the 1850s-60s was of course a period of great religious controversy in England” during which the “religious census of 1851 highlighted the national lack of church attendance; F.D. Maurice was dismissed from his post at King’s College in 1853 for expressing doubts about the orthodox view of Hell; Darwin’s *Origin of Species* was published in 1859; then followed the controversial *Essays and Reviews*, published in 1860” (Oulton 3). Oulton also points to Bishop Colenso’s *Pentateuch* “disproving the myth of the Great Flood by geological methods…in 1863” and the fact that “by 1865 treatises impugning the divine nature of Christ were being widely read” (Oulton 3) as further evidence of this shift in religious discourse. While these issues boiled over in the second half of the nineteenth century, “as early as 1834 the philosopher Thomas Carlyle was propounding a demystified version of Christianity” (Oulton 3) and for the better part of the next fifty years, various sects of organized Christian religion found
themselves facing off in doctrinal and dogmatic debates with an assortment of dissenting positions. The resulting emergence of individual religious parties during the mid-Victorian occurred with a variety of subtle distinctions between each group.

Emma Mason’s chapter “Religion,” in Sally Ledger and Holly Furneaux’s 2011 collection of recent Dickens scholarship *Dickens in Context*, identifies the many forms these dissenting factions took and describes their broad classification as “evangelicalism, an umbrella term for belief systems that favoured an intensely personalized faith derived from a direct and emotional relationship with Christ enabled by repeated study of the Gospels and a focus on the Cross” (Mason 321). This wide definition of evangelical beliefs largely reflects the personal version of Christianity this paper will ascribe to Dickens, but is misleading in the way it suggests (rather unintentionally) a certain amount of unity among these belief systems. In reality, the particular distinctions between the various evangelical sects—and the dogmatic and doctrinal conflicts which erupted between them—contributed greatly to the author’s distrust of organized religion as a whole. More appropriately then, evangelicalism should be “associated with dissent and Nonconformism, which, while doctrinally diverse, share a wariness, if not antipathy, towards the authority of the Church of England” (Mason 321). This larger group that Dickens would have understood as ‘evangelicals’ actually found the majority of its common ground in dissent itself and included Calvinism, Presbyterianism, Congregationalism, Baptism, the Society of Friends (Quakers), and Unitarianism. According to Mason, each of these divisions “directly challenged the cornerstones of Anglicanism (the writings of the Patristic Fathers, the Nicene, Apostolic and Athanasian Creeds, the Thirty-Nine Articles and the Book of Common Prayer”
(Mason 321) in their attempts to reconcile outmoded Christian beliefs with the scientific and intellectual advances of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

While the often volatile doctrinal disputes and corresponding dialogue between these groups continued well into the twentieth century and beyond, they saw a drastic escalation in the early part of the 1830s, resulted in an increase in tensions between different sects, and were certainly not lost on Dickens. In fact, his personal correspondence demonstrates a substantial knowledge of the entire landscape of Victorian Christian discourse and clearly portrays a frustration with both the Church of England, and its multitude of dissenters. Writing to the Reverend R.H. Davies in a letter dated Christmas Eve of 1856, Dickens expresses his exasperation with these debates and shares with Davies that “I discountenance all obtrusive professions of, and tradings in, Religion, as one of the main causes of real Christianity’s having been retarded in this world” (Hartley 313). His disgust with these “tradings” does not, however, imply an ignorance or avoidance of the issues of the day on the part of the prolific author. His communications with Davies, the Unitarian Reverend Edward Tagart, and his “long-time Swiss friend and correspondent” (Sanders 175) W.F. De Cerjat, reflect deep concerns over the issues of the day while portraying a much more open minded and critical approach than many critics are willing to admit. Dickens specifically addressed Benjamin Jowett’s contribution to *Essays and Reviews* which “was seen by many as little short of blasphemous, because he suggested that the

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*a* A number of prominent critics including Phillip Collins simply assert that Dickens avoided the more complicated theological questions of his Christianity in his fiction. Collins argues that “in his religion, as in the rest of his life and work, Dickens was lacking in intellectual rigour. He naively skirted the difficulties he found in the Bible, by the simple device of writing off the Old Testament, and he seems to have been almost unaware of those disputes about Christian Evidences which made ‘honest doubt’ so familiar to his generation” (qtd. in Oulton 23). Although I especially disagree with this sentiment based on the nature of Dickens’s New Testament harmonization in *TLOL* and the complexity of his Evangelical satires, positions like Collins’s must be acknowledged in order to understand the range of interpretations present in the body of scholarship.
Bible should be interpreted historically, with the same thoroughness that would be accorded to
any other important manuscript” (Oulton 23) and, in fact, Dickens “took issue with the
conservative argument” (Oulton 23) in that particular controversy. In a letter of 1863 to de
Cerjat’s wife Maria, Dickens demonstrates support for both Jowett’s work and Colenso’s
Pentateuch as he writes:

The position of the writers of ‘Essays and Reviews’ is, that certain parts of the Old
Testament have done their intended function in the education of the world as it was; but
that mankind, like the individual man, is designed by the Almighty to have an infancy
and a maturity, and that as it advances, the machinery of its education must advance
too….What these bishops and [others that dispute Essays and Reviews] say about
revelation, in assuming it to be finished and done with, I can’t in the least understand.
(qtd in Oulton 23)

After a review of his correspondence, it becomes apparent that this line of questioning and
intellectual inquiry is valuable to Dickens for the greater understanding it affords to the
inhabitants of God’s creation. His agreement in this instance “echoes both that of his Unitarian
friend Reverend Tagart, and Jowett himself” (Oulton 24) and he clearly delivers his opinion that
the Church must at least acknowledge scientific and logical inquiry into the tenets of its belief
system. Later in the same letter to de Cerjat, he articulates a firm grasp of the precarious
situation in which the Church finds itself with little ambiguity:

As I understand the importance of timely suggestions such as [those of Jowett and
Colenso], it is, that the Church should not gradually shock and lose the more thoughtful
and logical of human minds; but should be so gently and considerately yielding as to
retain them, and through them, hundreds of thousands. This seems to me, as I understand the temper and tendency of the time, whether for good or evil, to be a very wise and necessary position. And as I understand the danger, it is not chargeable on those [like Jowett] who take this ground, but on those who in reply call names and argue nothing. (qtd. in Walder 175)

For Dickens, Church officials have a responsibility to acknowledge the value of intellectual inquiry into issues of faith and use it to gradually reconcile traditional beliefs with contemporary study. In spite of his frustration with the often destructive nature of sectarian disputes, he obviously esteems serious religious and scientific investigation and condemns traditional religion for ignoring it. Dickens makes quite clear his belief that “nothing is discovered without God’s intention and assistance, and I suppose every new knowledge of His works that is conceded to man to be distinctly a revelation by which men are to guide themselves” (qtd in Walder 175).

Reverend Tagart, a prominent Unitarian with whom Dickens frequently corresponded, voices an almost identical opinion to that of the author when he argues that:

Science is the hand-maid of religion. All knowledge is eminently subservient to rational piety…Everything that strengthens our acquaintance with nature, every enlargement of the boundaries of human intelligence, every new treasure that enriches the archives of science, appears to me in the same proportion to enhance our ideas of the great Creator, to make our adoration and service more worthy of His perfections. (qtd in Oulton 24)

The very fact that Dickens engaged with Davies, Tagart, and the de Cerjat’s on these topics should preclude arguments that he simply ignored the religious issues of the day. The sentiments
delivered in these letters clearly validate an appreciation for the author as an educated and open-minded participant in religious discourse.

As an engaged member of this dialogue, Dickens may have found fault with “obtrusive professions” and “tradings in Religion,” but his personal experiences with the church contributed to his suspicions of traditional organized religion as well. It is necessary to acknowledge the dangers of ascribing too much significance to an author’s biographical information when discussing the manifestation of religious themes in his fiction, but for the purposes of this discussion, it is imperative to recognize Dickens’s own experience with the Christian church in order to trace the development of his religious ideology and to properly identify the way he defined this “real Christianity” (Hartley 313). Offering a concise and insightful account of his upbringing in Chatham and describing the progress of his relatively liberal Christian opinions, Mason provides an account of his family’s “nominal Anglican sympathies” even as they “began to attend a local Baptist church overseen by their neighbor, the Reverend William Giles” (Mason 318). Her work correctly points out that “Dickens loathed the endless sermons he endured there, writing that he felt ‘steamed like a potato in the unventilated breath of Boanerges Boiler,’ horrified by what he understood to be a cruel and judgmental Old Testament Christianity” (Mason 318-319). Along with a number of other critics, Mason properly identifies this period in his life as an additional source of his later criticism of Sabbatarianism and the generally misguided nature of religious worship centered on suffering and sacrifice in the presence of a wrathful Old Testament God. This paper will elaborate more fully on both Dickens’s Anti-Sabbatarianism and the misery he observed at the hands of organized religion in its discussion of David Copperfield, Jo the crossing sweeper, and Arthur Clennam, but Mason’s point that his
“early suspicions were confirmed [about the dangers of the Sabbatarian question] when Sir Andrew Agnew, MP, attempted to pass the Sabbath Observances Bill” (Mason 319) is important for establishing the personal context of his beliefs. As with the “temperance reforms, aimed at the ‘abuse’ of drink by the poor rather than the high consumption of alcohol by the rich, these Sabbatarian attempts at controlling social behavior derived from a harsh evangelicalism Dickens targeted throughout his work” (Mason 319) and contributed significantly to his notions of evangelical hypocrisy.

While these precise criticisms emanated from his experiences as a child in Chatham, his negative opinions of English Christianity were not limited to the broadly defined evangelicals. As Oulton tells her readers, he may have “struggled with the dogmatic aspect of religion, but he refused overtly to target one faith system in his novels, aware that his audience comprised a diversity of believers” (Oulton 2). In addition to evangelical infighting, Dickens also shows no love for the Catholic Church but remains careful not to alienate any one group of his readers. As an astute businessman, Dickens was well aware of the dangers of estranging members of his audience that could too closely identify with his antagonists and satirical figures. The veiled nature of many of his religious criticisms therefore contributes to the critical inability to classify Dickensian Christianity, but the presence of these critiques is undeniable. Echoing Mason, Oulton recognizes that “Dickens was not brought up in an evangelical household, but it is clear from his writing that he…felt the need to define himself against this type of belief” (Oulton 31). In fact, further biographical and textual analysis makes it increasingly clear that Dickens’s writing deliberately resists being lumped into any of these specific doctrinal camps and supports an argument for reading his version of Christianity as influenced by, but distinctly separate from,
any one sect of organized or traditional religion. As this paper will strive to show, Dickens’s personal Christian faith was founded in the New Testament and viewed dogmatic and doctrinal debates as utterly superfluous to “real Christianity.”

While providing evidence of Dickens’s engagement with Victorian religious controversy, the work of critics like Oulton also clearly defines his complex relationship to Evangelicalism and Unitarianism. Dickens may have displayed an unquestionable interest in the Unitarian Church as a result of his visit to the United States in 1842 where he met the Unitarians John Forster and William Ellery Channing, but *TLOL* provides refuting evidence for claims that he fully ascribed to its doctrine. Critics like Janet Larson argue that *TLOL* “articulates no clear doctrine of the incarnation” and she correctly identifies that each time the manuscript refers to Him by titles that would substantiate Jesus as the Son of God, the author puts them “only in the mouths of characters who ‘said’ or ‘believed’ them” (Larson 11). Semantically, Larson is not wrong, but she seems to overlook the fact that the author still includes these statements at all. Rather than being omitted, they appear alongside events which confirm Christ’s divinity and in no way attempt to convince his children that he is not the Son of God. In addition to His miracles, Dickens tells his children that “conducting His Disciples at last out of Jerusalem as far as Bethany, He blessed them, and ascended in a cloud to Heaven, and took His place at the right hand of God” (*TLOL* 118). These are not the words of an author that is concerned with masking Christ’s divinity. Dickens attended Unitarian Chapels (including Tagart’s) for a short time after his return from America and “was attracted to the faith systems that centralized Christ” (Mason 323), but Oulton is correct when she refers to *TLOL* as confirmation of his opposition to certain aspects of these particular factions of Evangelicals, and Unitarianism in particular. Based on the
larger biographical and epistolary context surrounding its publication, it is certainly probable that in 1846 when he initially began the project of *TLOL*, Dickens was indeed “reacting against the more stringent doctrines of evangelicalism” (Oulton 32) and largely disillusioned with the majority of organized religion. As we will discuss shortly, “in *TLOL*, he had stressed Christ’s immediacy and his relationship to human beings” and while it was “liberal in intent, this book certainly does not provide, as has been claimed, evidence of Unitarian belief” (Oulton 32) or a particular affinity for any one of the evangelical dissenting factions. Dickens’s narrative focuses on Jesus’s actions as an earthly man, but undoubtedly describes him as the Son of God.

Although he may have corresponded with Reverend Tagart and agreed with certain progressive aspects of Unitarian belief, *TLOL* clearly reflects an author and a father that disagrees with Unitarianism on the most central of dogmatic questions and derives his faith from his own reading of the New Testament.

Oulton is justified in her assessment of the author’s resistance to Unitarianism and Evangelicalism and opens her book by avoiding any definite classification of his Christianity. In spite of her reticence towards categorizing his Christian worldview under a single traditional heading, however, Oulton still concludes her first chapter by ascribing a title to his faith and argues that “the religious thought of Dickens and [Wilkie Collins] is most conveniently defined then in terms of Broad Church Christianity” (Oulton 51). While I would hesitate to assign Dickens’s particular brand of Christian belief any one of the traditional titles of dissent, I will defend Oulton’s rhetorical decision to quickly qualify her statement and explain her use of the term “Broad Church Christianity”:

such a definition should not be taken to mean that their beliefs were vague or that they
were lacking in theological awareness. [Dickens and Collins] were as quick to condemn
a purely rational view of the world as they were to denounce harsh religious doctrine.
Both attacked evangelicalism on both moral and theological grounds, and both were in
some degree influenced by the very ethos that they satirized with such virulence.

(Oulton 51)

I am still not convinced that Dickens himself would align himself with the Broad Church
Movement, and suggest rather, that it was just such a practice of religious taxonomy that he
resisted.

While the works of Lewis, Larson, and Oulton are significant for establishing an
appreciation for the complexities of Dickens’s relationship to Victorian spiritual issues, his own
experiences with organized religion, and his intentional resistance to traditional classification,
they also reflect a number of shortcomings found in much of Dickensian scholarship. The aim of
works such as Literature and Religion in Mid-Victorian England is, most often, not to define
Dickens’s specific Christian worldview, but to explain what it is not. On the one hand, this
approach should be applauded for its hesitation to apply a single conventional label to
Dickensian Christianity or to force a reading of his work which supports such a classification.
On the other hand, this approach has frequently devolved into vague academic ambiguity.
Oulton’s work, while thorough, displays a typical hedge in this scholarship and only admits to
being “concerned to assess the impact of evangelicalism on Dickens and Collins in the 1850s and
1860s, and to show that their response was more complex than past criticism has allowed”
(Oulton 2). Ultimately, all she is willing to conclude at the end of her book is that “both Dickens
and Collins were susceptible to the dominant religious motions of their time, and further that
they adapted evangelical teaching to their own more liberal faith” (Oulton 197). Neglecting the importance of *TLOL* for the insight it provides into the Dickens canon and carefully avoiding a definition of his actual beliefs, her work represents a positive contribution to historicizing his faith, but follows the work of many Dickens scholars in refusing to commit to a unified vision of just what his Christian beliefs were. While this type of research has recognized the complexity of characterizing Dickens’s Christian worldview in terms of mid-Victorian religious debate, it has ignored the presence of a specific and coherent articulation of the author’s personal religious beliefs in *TLOL* and its subtler manifestation in his fiction.

Writers as early as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky acknowledged Dickens as “that great Christian writer” (Colledge 2012 2), but scholars and critics have continued to debate the presence of a specific Christian ideology in his work ever since. From the late nineteenth century until 1934, this debate dealt largely with determining if his fiction contained any Christian allegiance at all, and if so, what specific doctrines or dogmas the author subscribed to. In spite of the apparent clarity with which his Russian contemporaries viewed his Christian voice, literary critics have failed to agree definitively on what kind of Christian Dickens thought himself to be, or the way this identity is, or is not, present in his fiction. Even for critics who were able to accurately identify scriptural references and religious undertones in his work, complicated questions remained because of his often negative portrayals of organized religion and the problematic version of Christianity his writing frequently seemed to endorse. Pointing to a lack of consistency and an absence of a unified Christian belief system underwriting his fiction, these critics were unable to conclusively classify Dickens’s specific version of Christianity as displayed in his works. Along with Colledge, I would suggest that with the emergence of the last
Dickens text, *The Life of Our Lord* published by Dickens’s family in 1934, the face of Dickens scholarship should have changed drastically in light of the new insight it provided into these specific religious beliefs.

Unfortunately, as contemporary critics like Colledge and Mason appropriately admit, this has not been the case. Mason asserts that “Dickens’s current status as a warm-hearted but straight-thinking secular novelist derives as much from modern literary criticism’s distrust of all things Christian as it does from current readings of his novels and comments on the subject of religion” (Mason 38). She goes on to discuss a significant disconnect between “twenty-first-century readers [that] relate to Dickens as a benevolent humanist” and his “contemporary audience [that] regarded him as a key defender of a New Testament Christianity under attack from somber High Church and Low Church evangelizing” (Mason 38). In spite of the 1934 publication of *The Life of Our Lord* and the continued work of even the most thorough Dickens biographers, the subtle and more overt Christian messages that were so obvious to his contemporaries remain largely misconstrued as a vague form of humanism written from outside of a church he is criticizing.

This paper is predicated on the belief that being able to identify this disconnect is the first step in reclaiming and delimiting the authentic Christian voice in Dickens’s fiction. Once we are able to conquer the tendency to view “his allusions to the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer and contemporary religious debate…as shallow literary reflections of, rather than comments on, Victorian religious culture” (Mason 38), it becomes possible to more clearly interpret the distinctly Christian (and in fact, largely Anglican) messages delivered in his novels while avoiding the traditional classifications he so strongly resists. While he may have avoided being
directly associated with a single doctrine or Christian sect, it is clear that an understanding existed between author and his readers and “that understanding—as Dickens saw it—was a shared Christian faith, conservative morality, and adherence to family virtues” (Lewis 4-5). A review of TLOL and his fiction from the 40s and 50s ultimately reveals a specific Christian worldview that prevents customary taxonomy while confirming a faith firmly rooted in the New Testament.

Mason is not alone in her indictment of significant gaps in scholarship related to Dickens and religion. Colledge’s work God and Charles Dickens is one of the most recent, and I will argue most progressive, attempts at accurately delimiting the specifics of Dickensian Christianity without attempting to label it within the context of Victorian dissent. His book commences with a discussion of these early failures to appreciate Dickens’s Christian voice by first invoking the work of G.K. Chesterton in 1989 and recognizing him as one of the few scholars to fully appreciate this voice. Nonetheless, he quickly goes on to point out that Chesterton’s work has persistently been contested. Chesterton aptly asserted that:

If ever there was a message full of what modern people call true Christianity, the direct appeal to the common heart, a faith that was simple, a hope that was infinite, and a charity that was omnivorous, if ever there came among men what they call the Christianity of Christ, it was in the message of Dickens. (qtd. in Colledge 2012 1)

Colledge remarks that “even in light of the fact that more recent Dickens scholarship has given some critical attention to Dickens’s religious beliefs and concerns and that this aspect of Dickens’s work is becoming gradually more familiar to readers, such a statement as Chesterton’s remains provocative and, for many, surprising and perhaps even astonishing” (Colledge 2012 1).
To demonstrate such astonishment, he additionally provides a useful survey of the prominent twentieth century Dickens scholars including Humphry House, Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, and more recently Robert Newsom, who continued to be baffled by, or outright deny, the presence of this Christian voice in the author’s work. Citing House’s opinion in the 1940s that Dickens’s “practical humanist kind of Christianity hardly touched the fringes of what is called religious experience, and [that] his work shows no indication of any powerful feeling connected with a genuinely religious subject” (qtd. in Colledge 2012 2), Quiller-Couch’s view that “to begin with, we must jettison religion; or at any rate all religion that gets near to definition by words in a Credo” (qtd. in Colledge 2012 2), and Newsom’s description of “Dickens’s religious views as so inconsistent that they are scarcely intelligible as religious at all” (Colledge 2012 2), Colledge proceeds to state that only very “recent scholarship is at least recognizing—even if a bit superficially and inconsistently—the presence of the religious aspect of Dickens’s work” (Colledge 2012 3).

What I find interesting and what will form the basis for the rest of this discussion, is the fact that all of these opinions and the more progressive studies conducted by critics like Lewis, Mason, and Oulton, have been delivered after the 1934 publication of The Life of Our Lord. Returning to TLOL and several representative works from the 40s and 50s, I will suggest the importance of this document for understanding Dickens’s own version of Christianity as separate from traditional classification but unmistakably present in his literature. Colledge’s earlier work from 2009, Dickens, Christianity, and The Life of Our Lord provides an important assessment of the importance of Dickens’s last published work and will be central to this discussion. This paper will apply his theory of TLOL as a clear enunciation of Dickens’s religious views to a particular
reading of his fiction of the 1840s and 50s while elaborating on his interpretation in several significant ways. Although Colledge cogently argues that “the more carefully TLOL is examined,…the more one becomes convinced that it plays an important role not only in our understanding of Dickens’s Christianity, but also in his entire body of work” (Colledge 2009 2), his study is inherently limited in its scope. Because of the relative novelty of his project, the aim of his work in 2009 was merely to recognize the significance of TLOL and to suggest further investigation into its relationship with the larger canon. With this important work completed and the value of TLOL firmly established, this paper will examine the specific way Dickens’s final piece of writing informs a reading of his novels and suggest its usefulness in understanding not only the author’s Christian worldview, but also his interpretation of the role of narrative itself in both faith and literature.

Dickens, Christianity, and The Life of Our Lord opens with yet another review of criticism surrounding Dickens’s Christian worldview. While similar to his work in 2012 for its usefulness, Colledge’s survey focuses on a few additional modern critics that have, in fact, begun to acknowledge and delimit the writer’s Christian voice. At the risk of contradicting my assertion that few scholars have approached the religious implications of Dickens’s fiction, I must acknowledge the work that has been done and position this paper with respect to its specific shortcomings. Colledge is right to assert that “when Dennis Walder published his Dickens and Religion in 1981, it seemed he had answered the call of K.J. Fielding almost two decades earlier for a more profound investigation into the religious thought of Charles Dickens,” and the subsequent work of Andrew Sanders’s Charles Dickens: Resurrectionist which “considered Dickens’s treatment of death and resurrection in the context of Dickens’s ‘vital and pervasive’
Christianity” (Colledge 2009 vii) cannot be ignored. In addition to Sanders’s suggestion that such “professions” in Dickens’s work are both “‘constant and …heartfelt’” (qtd. in Colledge 2009 vii), Colledge appropriately credits the work of Janet Larson’s *Dickens and the Broken Scriptures*, and the work of Carolyn Oulton for contributions to Victorian religious context. It may seem inconsistent to argue that Dickens scholarship has largely ignored the author’s religious influence in a paper which (up to this point) has so abundantly identified scholars who have explored these ideas, but the specific way Colledge’s work—and as I will establish shortly, the way this paper—positions itself with respect to Dickens and *TLOL* is what justifies commentary on the inadequacies of the field. Both Colledge’s work and my own are greatly indebted to these early investigations into Dickens’s Christian voice, but argue that they have greatly underestimated the insight provided by *TLOL*. What all of these works, including Colledge’s, have largely ignored, however, is the textual archeology of the manuscript and several fairly straightforward explanations for the marginalization of Dickens’s final published work.

**Textual Archeology and the Marginalization of *The Life of Our Lord***

On January 22, 1934 in London, a column appeared in *The Times* under the headline “A Manuscript of Dickens: ‘The Life of Our Lord’ to be Published” (*Times* January 22, 1934) which announced what should have been a momentous addition to both the Dickens canon and its related body of criticism. As it was, however, *TLOL*’s literary value was largely overshadowed by a focus on its complex publication history and new controversial biographical information revealed around the same time. These circumstances combined with the childlike simplicity inherent to his project to result in the actual text of the manuscript being
predominantly overlooked. The column from *The Times* appeared exactly one month and a day after the death of Sir Henry Fielding Dickens, the “last surviving son of Charles Dickens,” and includes the following excerpt from his will:

> I give and bequeath to my wife the original manuscript of my father’s “The Life of Our Lord,” which was bequeathed to my aunt, Georgina Hogarth, in my father’s will, and given by her to me, to hold on the following trusts:—Being his son, I have felt myself constrained to act upon my father’s expressed desire that it should not be published, but I do not think it right that I should bind my children by any such view, especially as I can find no specific injunction against such publication. (*Times* January 22, 1934)

Feeling that he had fulfilled his commitment to his father’s wishes, Henry clearly relinquished control of the manuscript to his family and delivered them from any further obligation to the original “injunction.” His will goes on to “direct that my wife and my children should consider this question quite unfettered by any view of mine” (*Times* January 22, 1934) and unequivocally releases them from the responsibility he had initially been charged with. While explicitly stating that they are no longer bound to either him or his father as far as the manuscript is concerned, the will goes on in rather prophetic detail to describe that “if they decide by a majority that it should be published then I direct my wife to sell the same in trust, to divide the net proceeds of such sale among my wife and all my children in equal shares” (*Times* January 22, 1934). For a man who appeared to be washing his hands of defying paternal wishes, he certainly has a coherent plan for the execution of just such an outcome. In the time since his death it has become more apparent that it was, in fact, Henry Fielding’s view that the manuscript should be published and shared outside of the family. An article from *The New York Times* entitled “Family Votes to Publish
Dickens *The Life of Our Lord,*” and printed a day before the London announcement referred to just such a desire:

Sir Henry, it is understood, wished the work to be published, as he felt that thousands of children throughout the world should be allowed to share in it. Yet he felt that he, personally, was bound by his father’s expressed desire that it not be published.

(*New York Times* January 21, 1934)

Henry’s will offered the family the alternative option of “deposit[ing] it with the Trustees of the British Museum upon the usual terms” (*Times* January 22 1934), but they apparently knew his true opinion and decided to publish it.

In his introduction to the 1999 Simon and Schuster reprinting of *TLOL*, Charles Dickens’s great-great-grandson, Gerald Charles Dickens, credits his family with originally honoring the author’s wishes after his death sixty three years before that of Henry Fielding. Gerald reports that upon Charles’s death, the “clan closed ranks and protected their secret with great zeal” (*TLOL* 9) and remarks upon its passing quietly in 1870, to his sister-in-law Georgina Hogarth, and from her to Henry Fielding. As evidence of its safekeeping, Gerald adds an anecdote in which Henry’s wife “Marie (or Mumsey, as she was known in the family), carefully hid it under the mattress” (*TLOL* 9) and informs his readers that “my father tells me that marks from her bedsprings are clearly visible!” (*TLOL* 9). The “great zeal” with which the family protected the manuscript apparently had a statute of limitations, however, which expired in 1933 with the death of Henry. Gerald defends the actions of his family at this time by assuring readers that “upon Henry’s death in 1933, the family thought long and hard over the question of *The Life of Our Lord* and decided that the time was now right to publish it” (*TLOL* 11). The family may
have thought “hard” over the decision, but Gerald’s statement that they “thought long” about it remains open for interpretation. Fielding died on December 21, 1933 and exactly one month later, announcements appeared in both the London and New York *Times*’ regarding **TLOL**’s publication.

These articles regarding **TLOL** represent the first of many which occupied literary and legal newspaper columns during the succeeding months of 1934. What Gerald’s 1999 introduction conspicuously omits is any mention of the lengthy legal dispute that ensued between the families of Georgina Hogarth and Henry Fielding Dickens which became the central topic of such articles. The fierce battle over copyright fueled and dominated the discourse surrounding **TLOL** and in many ways eclipsed its significance as a new Dickens text. In an incredible twist of “Bleak” irony, the author’s family is cited in nearly a dozen articles from *The Times* reporting on their role in the proceedings of the Chancery Court of London throughout 1934. With multiple rulings in June, July, November, and December, the articles detailing the progress of the “High Court of Justice: Chancery Division” and “Court of Appeals” (*Times* June 7, 1934) eerily resemble Dickens’s assessment in *Bleak House* that “never can there come fog too thick, never can there come mire too deep, to assort with the groping and floundering condition which this High Court of Chancery, most pestilent of hoary sinners, holds, this day, in the sight of heaven and earth” (*BH* 14). Just as “Jarndyce and Jarndyce drones on” (*BH* 15) in the novel, accounts of “Dickens vs. Hawksley and Others” (*Times* June 7, 1934) continue to fill the columns of American and British newspapers throughout the year. In spite of nearly eighty one years of temporal distancing between the events of *Bleak House* and the death of Henry Fielding, it would
appear that not much had changed in the Chancery Court. These articles are characterized by the same obfuscatory legal language used by the author himself and read like the original satire:

This was an originating summons taken out by Lady Marie Therese Louise Dickens, the executrix and trustee of the will of Charles Dickens, and of the will of his sister-in-law, Georgina Hogarth, for the determination of the question whether the manuscript of the work of Charles Dickens generally known as “The Life of Christ” passed to Georgina Hogarth by virtue of the bequest to her contained in his will of “all my private papers whatsoever and wheresoever,” or whether it fell into his residuary estate; and whether the copyright in that work became vested in Georgina Hogarth and ought to be held on the trusts of her estate or fell into the residuary estate of the testator. (Times June 7, 1934)

With participants in the case such as “Mr. Charles Russell [who] appeared for the plaintiff; Mr. R.P. Croom-Johnson, K.C., and Mr. F.E. Skone James for the children of Sir Henry Fielding Dickens, who were beneficially interested in the estate of Georgina Hogarth: and Mr. F.R. Evershed, K.C., and Mr. E.J. Macgillivray for Miss Ethel Dickens, a grandchild of the testator, who represented the residuary legatees under the will of Charles Dickens” (Times June 7, 1934), readers of these articles half expect Chizzle, Mizzle, and Drizzle to make a long overdue appearance in the twentieth century proceedings. It would appear that the family had become embroiled in their own suit in which “innumerable children had been born into the cause; innumerable young people have married into it; innumerable old people have died out of it” (BH 16). When the court finally settled on the judgment that “the manuscript passed to Georgina Hogarth under the bequest to her,” but that the “bequest of the manuscript did not operate to pass the copyright, and therefore proceeds of sale of the copyright…ought to be held on the trusts
applicable to the residuary estate of Charles Dickens” (*Times* December 8, 1934), the publication rights passed to the family of Sir Henry Fielding Dickens.

In addition to the overwhelming spectacle of the sadly ironic Chancery Court proceedings, *TLOL*’s literary impact was dismissed for other reasons. Several months after its original publication, P.W. Wilson’s review “What Dickens Wrote About Jesus: ‘The Life of Our Lord,’ Written for His Children” appeared in *The New York Times* along with the rather disparaging subheading “Bears but Little Mark of Its Great Author’s Personality” (*New York Times* May 20, 1934). In a review which goes on to describe the unfortunate circumstances surrounding the publication of the manuscript, the closest Wilson comes to praising the work itself is in his opening lines:

> It was not for profit, not for publicity, but as a domestic and paternal privilege that Charles Dickens took up the most lucrative pen in the literature of his day and dedicated it freely to the brief but earnest manuscript printed for the first time in this unusual little book. (*New York Times* May 20, 1934)

The article’s subsequent focus on publication history and expansion upon the brief negative appraisal in its subheading are representative of the way that *TLOL* was largely received by its reviewers in 1934.

Along with the distracting legal publicity of the copyright suit, several other factors contributed to the lack of a positive and critical reception of *TLOL*. Compared with the rest of the canon, critics like Wilson dismissed the text as a genuine profession of the author’s faith because of new biographical information brought to light in recently available personal correspondence. Wilson, in particular, was concerned by some of the more unsavory portions of
the author’s life that had been freshly discovered and refers to the author as being “pilloried by coincidence as a kind of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” (New York Times May 20, 1934).

Accompanied by his initial review of TLOL upon its publication, Wilson published a more protracted account of Dickens’s questionable treatment of his wife in his May thirteenth contribution to The New York Times: “The Tragedy of Charles Dickens Revealed: New Light on the Foundering of His Marriage Is Found in Letters Published for the First Time After Being Guarded Forty Years” (New York Times May 13, 1934). As a result of these new letters, many of Dickens’s detractors cited his own hypocrisy as a cause for dismissal of the “unusual little book,” and many readers shared Wilson’s ironic view of the author’s own deceit because “if any man had a horror of hypocrisy, it was the creator of Mr. Chadband and Uriah Heep” (New York Times May 13, 1934). According to critics like Wilson, this duplicity reflected a significant reason for Dickens’s hesitation to publish TLOL and led to the opinion that “short of destroying the manuscript, therefore, the novelist did all in his power, during his lifetime, to prevent its publication, either then or in the future. His veto was absolute” (New York Times May 20, 1934). Rather than exploring the Christian worldview expressed in the children’s book or assessing its value in the larger corpus, critics focused on the decisions surrounding its secrecy and ignored it for its literary significance.

The few serious reviews that TLOL received contained comparable sentiments and reflected a similar privileging of the publication history of the manuscript over its literary worth.

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b It is important to make a distinction here between scholarly engagement and public reception. While I argue that TLOL has been largely ignored for the critical insight it provides into Dickens’s Christian worldview, it would be absurd to argue that it was ignored in a more general sense. Upon its publication in 1934, it became an immediate bestseller and the manuscript was sold for a high price again in 1939 (English Journal 426) and continues to be one of his highest grossing books.
In addition to the text’s hindered emergence into the public eye and the intrigue surrounding the author’s marriage, the original reception of Dickens’s New Testament also seemed to be colored by a tendency to dismiss TLOL as a thoughtful expression of his faith because of its original audience. As Colledge points out, “that it was written for his children is often cited as a primary reason why TLOL should not be considered a serious attempt by Dickens to communicate anything substantial about his faith” (Colledge 2009 4). For critics like Newsom, “given the intended audience, it is hardly fair to infer the specifics of Dickens’s faith from this slight work” (qtd. in Colledge 2009 4). A review of the body of criticism from 1934 onwards yields a picture of an underappreciated text as a result of its unique publication history, the emergence of controversial biographical information about its author, and most fallaciously, its original intended audience.

Preliminary reviews like that of Wilson refer to the words of Dickens’s sister-in-law Georgina Hogarth and share her account of the author’s decision never to publish the document, but the majority of them fail to appreciate it as evidence of the seriousness with which he undertook this piece of writing. Georgina’s comments are included in their entirety in Gerald Charles Dickens’s 1999 introduction in which she expresses her intimate knowledge of the author’s deliberation over publication:

I must now tell you about the beautiful little New Testament, which he wrote for his children. I am sorry to say it is never to be published…He would never have it printed, and I used to read it to the little boys in manuscript before they were old enough to read writing themselves…I asked Charles if he did not think it would be well to have it printed, at all events for private circulation, if he would not publish it. He said he would
look over the manuscript and take a week or two to consider. At the end of the time he
gave it back to me and said he had decided never to publish it, or even to have it privately
printed. He said I might make a copy of it for Peggy (Mrs. Dickens) or any one of his
children, but for no one else, and he also begged that we would never even hand the
manuscript, or a copy of it, to anyone to take out of the house. (*TLOL* 8)

Rather than the incredible reverence with which Dickens approached *TLOL* that this account
suggests, critics and scholars have typically chosen to cast his decision not to publish the
manuscript in light of his questionable personal life. With the emergence of Colledge’s recent
work, however, theories explaining the document’s privacy now range from Wilson’s
intimations of hypocrisy to a more flattering—and more accurate—opinion that the deliberate
privacy of the document stems from its position as a special gift from a father to his children.
The latter of these theories more suitably implies that Dickens’s refusal to publish *TLOL*
emerged less out of a fear of his own duplicity and more from a sense of the gravity and
responsibility with which he approached its writing. As Colledge points out, “there are good
reasons…to believe that Dickens did intend *TLOL* to be a deliberate and serious expression of
his Christian thought, as well as the expression of the essence of Christianity as he understood it”
(Colledge 2009 3). The same evidence that critics like Newsom supply for dismissing *TLOL*
actually supports an attentive reading of the work and deserves further investigation. The fact
“that *TLOL* was written by a father expressly for his children’s moral and religious instruction, a
fact often used to dismiss any seriousness of purpose in *TLOL,*” is precisely why it should be
read critically and “seems rather to point to Dickens’s serious intent” (Colledge 2009 3).
That *TLOL* was written for the benefit of children with simplified language and construction has also been largely misinterpreted as proof of a less sophisticated notion of Christianity. In reality, this should also be taken as evidence of thoughtful intellectual and spiritual engagement and paternal responsibility on the part of the author. From frequent references to the religious beliefs of his children throughout his lifetime, Dickens’s correspondence makes it clear that he was “quite concerned about and involved in the religious instruction of his children, and that instruction was not something that he would have indiscriminately left to others or taken less than seriously” (Colledge 2009 3). The fact that “*TLOL* was a central part of that instruction and would have commanded his care and attention” (Colledge 2009 3) recommends itself as a fundamental expression of own beliefs. In a letter to his son Edward upon his emigration to Australia in 1868, Dickens demonstrates a concern, even into adulthood, for the spiritual well-being of his children:

I put a New Testament among your books, for the very same reasons, and with the very same hopes that made me write an easy account of it for you, when you were a child; because it is the best book that ever was or will be known in the world, and because it teaches you the best lessons by which any human creature who tries to be truthful and faithful to duty can possibly be guided. As your brothers have gone away, one by one, I have written to each such words as I am now writing to you, and have entreated them all to guide themselves by this book, putting aside the interpretations and inventions of man. (Hartley 424)
The emphasis Dickens places on the role of *TLOL* in Edward’s early development, and on the role of the New Testament in his guidance as an adult, reflects the gravity with which he approached his children’s religious instruction.

In addition to being an expression of affection and concern from a father to his children, Colledge appropriately cites two other reasons for viewing the *TLOL* as evidence of “an essential and serious treatment of Dickens’s Christian thought” (Colledge 2009 3). For Colledge, a piece of writing “taken up with the presentation of the life of Jesus, so central to Dickens’s worldview and his understanding of Christianity, [also] suggests serious intention in its conception and composition” (Colledge 2009 3). While I agree that *TLOL* reflects his Christian worldview and therefore can be used to illuminate his fiction, Colledge’s use of Jesus Christ as the central topic of the text to support this argument seems to expose a logical fallacy. When arguing generally that *TLOL* should be read as a serious expression of Dickens’s Christian faith, and specifically that the presence of Jesus Christ at its topical center is evidence of this, it seems that he is applying a self-serving and circular rationalization to his argument. If we accept his premise from the beginning that *TLOL* directly reflects the Christian beliefs of the author, it should be no surprise that the manuscript focuses on the serious subject of Christ. That being said, from the concern his epistolary communication displays with the state of the Christian church and the spiritual welfare of his children, it does seem logical to assume that Dickens would approach a retelling of the life of Jesus Christ from a conscientious and thoughtful position. Although I can’t fully agree with Colledge’s rhetorical decision to use the document’s focus on Jesus as justification for the reading of *TLOL* as a serious reflection of Dickens’s Christian worldview, it
is an important point which we will return to shortly. Jesus Christ is most certainly the central feature of *TLOL* and the Christian worldview underlying Dickens’s fiction.

The third justification that Colledge provides for advocating the seriousness of *TLOL*’s creation is one that bears repeating and will play an important role in a discussion of his fiction. Colledge argues that “*TLOL* bears the marks of careful composition and painstaking crafting” (Colledge 2009 3) and should therefore be examined more earnestly. This third point does indeed “indicate that Dickens was intent upon creating a narrative history of Jesus that would convey to his children a precise and deliberate expression of the essence of what he understood to be ‘real Christianity’” (Colledge 2009 3-4). In a letter dated June 28, 1846, he writes of having “half of the children’s New Testament to write, or pretty nearly” and then informs the letter’s recipient John Forster that “I set to work and did *that*” (Hartley 168). This reference to the manuscript only affords its readers with a rough estimate of when Dickens began writing *TLOL* and scholars have been left to speculate over the time of its completion.\(^c\) Regardless of how long it took to compose, however, there is evidence within the project itself to confirm attentive intellectual and personal commitment. As a harmonized version of all four Gospels of the New Testament, *TLOL* may have been written for children, but it was by no means an unsophisticated endeavor. In an attempt to merge the lives of Christ as told by Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and certain portions of Acts, Dickens is forced in *TLOL* to make decisions about the most effective arrangement of the varying accounts in order to produce a unified and intelligible

\(^c\) Colledge surmises that the complexity of Dickens’s project of harmonization serves as evidence that the writing of *TLOL* most likely took several years and wasn’t completed until 1849. While some critics view his letter to Forster as a sign that it was completed in a short period of time, there are no additional records to confirm either opinion. Colledge’s point that “a careful assessment…of Dickens’s crafting of *TLOL* points to a rather involved process of composition that almost certainly extended beyond a few hours or even a few days” (Colledge 2009 9) seems to be the significantly stronger argument, but remains inconclusive.
CHAPTER 4

Dickens’s TLOL: A Christian Theological and Theological Novel

chronicle for his children. In spite of their often contradictory details, Dickens is able to produce through his own organization, “a reasonably smooth-flowing narrative” complete with “explanatory, hortatory, interpretive and transitional passages” (Colledge 2009 10). The fact that Dickens is able to accomplish this is especially impressive when considering that “of the over fourteen thousand words of TLOL, roughly 80 percent of them are given to episodes taken directly from the New Testament Gospels, harmonized by Dickens and paraphrased to a greater or lesser degree” (Colledge 2009 10) with selected occurrences taken from Acts. The result is a logical and comprehensive account of the life of Jesus combined with noteworthy commentary and explanations by the author to his children. The difficulty of “this process of harmonization, with its necessary attention to the narrative and rhetorical details of each Gospel account, not to mention the need for chronological and episodic consistency…is one of the most fascinating characteristics of TLOL” and perhaps “more significantly…it is this process of harmonization that suggests the seriousness of purpose with which Dickens wrote” (Colledge 2009 10).

Concerned with the eternal well-being of his children, the gravity of teaching them about Jesus Christ, and the careful and complex work of creating a single coherent account of “Our Saviour” (TLOL 38), Dickens clearly intended TLOL to be a serious reflection of his Christian faith.

Colledge’s three primary justifications for the importance of TLOL to an analysis of Dickens’s specific Christian worldview are well defended and display his own painstaking engagement with both TLOL and the New Testament itself. I would argue a fourth motive for more thoughtful consideration of the text with respect to this Christian worldview and the clarification it provides in tracing its manifestation in Dickens’s literature. In addition to the weight of these individual features of its composition and the fact that its Jesus-centric message
reflects his engagement and concern with Victorian Christian discourse, I would argue that the unique value of *TLOL* emerges from the resulting combination of these elements. As a serious and thoughtful collection of only the most significant aspects of his Christian beliefs condensed into a single coherent narrative, *TLOL* offers readers a distilled version of Dickensian Christianity and a direct articulation of his Jesus-centric belief system. An examination of the distinct literary and theological decisions made by Dickens in this process of distillation and harmonization and the practical applications he suggests for his children throughout the text ultimately yields exactly the same version of faith that is reflected in his novels of the 40s and 50s in a more unified and streamlined narrative.

**“Real Christianity”**

In order to trace the slightly more subtle and complicated representation of this Christian worldview found in Dickens’s fiction, it is first necessary to examine the theological decisions portrayed by the arrangement of *TLOL*. An appreciation for the specific facets of Christ’s life that Dickens chooses to include in the narrative will assist us in delimiting the boundaries of his faith in both *TLOL* and in his fiction. Once we have articulated the way his “real Christianity” is depicted in *TLOL*, the real work of locating its presence in his fiction can begin. Dickens’s last published work opens with the telling salutation “My Dear Children” (*TLOL* 17) and proceeds to inform his audience of the importance of the story before them. This salutation and the passage which follows it provides us with evidence of the personal nature of the manuscript already discussed, as well as several significant literary and theological features of the narrative. The voice that develops in the initial lines of *TLOL* is that of a father *speaking* directly to his children. Meant to be read aloud, it is clear that Dickens envisions a preliterate group of listeners
not yet able to approach the New Testament for themselves and being introduced to Jesus Christ for the first time. This part of his perspective as both author and father becomes increasingly important as we examine the specific aspects of Christ’s life that he chooses to draw his children’s attention to, and adds additional significance to the way he foregrounds his chronicle of the life of Jesus. After the salutation, Dickens informs his children that “I am very anxious that you should know something about the History of Jesus Christ…for everybody ought to know about Him” (TLOL 17) and goes on to offer his justification for the importance of the narrative:

No one ever lived who was so good, so kind, so gentle, and so sorry for all people who did wrong, or were in any way ill or miserable, as He was. And as He is now in Heaven, where we hope to go, and all to meet each other after we are dead, and there be happy always together, you never can think what a good place Heaven is, without knowing who He was and what He did. (TLOL 17)

These opening remarks are some of the most telling with respect to Dickens’s literary and theological goals in composing the manuscript and reveal a father that is acutely aware that a life of faith must begin as soon as a child may be introduced to these guiding principles, and an author relying on narrative as his means of communicating them. For children unable to read the New Testament and not fully equipped to understand the complex and supernatural elements of such a belief system, the speaker of “My Dear Children” clearly sees it as a paternal responsibility to impress upon his children the importance of following Christ at the earliest possible age. Directing this important work towards a preliterate audience, Dickens must also recognize the need for delivering his message in the most concentrated and intelligible way
possible. The author clearly reflects his belief in narrative as the most effective way to reconstruct the foundation of his children’s faith, and sets out to do so. The fact that Dickens saw the necessity of beginning a Christian education before his children were able to read for themselves, and the related information it offers about the developmental stage of his audience, suggests further support for reading *TLOL* as an essentialized version of the author’s Christian teachings. Additionally, it provides significant insight into the mind of the author who seeks out narrative as the most effective format for the construction of faith.

This passage also offers readers the first of several places in the text where Dickens, the father, imparts his own interpretation or commentary on the New Testament, and Dickens, the author, establishes the authorial tone and poetic license that will characterize the remainder of the narrative. In the process of harmonizing and chronologically arranging the varying accounts of the Gospels, Dickens does not hesitate to include his own particular brand of storytelling and frequently embodies the same language and diction for which he has become so famous. For the purposes of this discussion, however, it is most useful to acknowledge the way that Dickens chooses to focus his reader’s (or listeners’) attention on several particular facets of the life of Christ without emphasizing a particular doctrine. Instead of propounding a specific religious practice through his interpretation, the author chooses merely to present the events of Jesus’s life almost exclusively as they appear in the New Testament. Dickens does so in order to present Christ as the example for his children to emulate regardless of organized religious doctrine.\(^d\)

Finally, these opening lines establish the basic structure of *TLOL* as a “history” and will assist us

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\(^d\) The scope of this paper precludes me from examining—in as much detail as Colledge—the particular decisions Dickens makes when reconciling certain disparities between the various Gospels. The author’s decision to include two separate accounts of the Last Supper provides a useful example. For an excellent discussion of these specific disparities, and Dickens’s conscientious decision regarding the Last Supper, see Colledge 2009 10-11.
in positioning the work as a member of its own unique subgenre within mid-Victorian religious writing.

As Colledge points out, TLOL fits into a broad category of “juvenile Gospel narrative” that includes the distinctive genres of “Gospel harmonies” and “modern Lives of Jesus” (Colledge 2009 23-24). Characterized by a belief in the relative accuracy of the original Gospels and a focus on providing harmonization and accepted doctrinal interpretation, the Gospel harmony took a number of different shapes in the nineteenth century, but was by no means a new literary form when Dickens began TLOL. The second and slightly less prevalent of these two genres were the Lives of Jesus which “had their genesis in the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment historical studies” and generally “reconstructed a biography or history of Jesus that challenged the historical accuracy of the Gospels as well as the traditional portrait of Jesus that emerged from them” (Colledge 2009 24). While TLOL opens by referring to itself as a “History,” Dickens is in no way challenging the Gospels in the way other contemporary Lives would have. If anything, TLOL favors the Gospel harmony genre, but still distinguishes itself from this larger body of work. Rather than concerning himself with the doctrinal implications of a specific interpretation of the Gospels, Dickens’s apparent concern is for recreating the essential elements of the life of Jesus in a way that his children can understand and is “more interested in the story itself and for its own sake, and rejects the imposition of a preconceived conceptual framework that, in his mind, would prejudice a portrait of Jesus derived from the Gospels alone” (Colledge 2009 22). For Dickens, the life of Jesus itself is the center of Christian teaching and stands on its own as the directive by which to guide one’s life. In this way, TLOL distinguishes itself from Gospel harmonies and Lives of Jesus and can more appropriately and simply be
termed a Christ Narrative. By relying on his editorial and authorial abilities to shape a coherent and unified story of the life of Christ, Dickens creates a rich dramatic experience for his children which facilitates the clearest understanding and deepest form of faith construction. In this way, the narrative form itself contributes to the faith it informs.

In order to fully appreciate the way this belief system materializes in both *TLOL* and in his fiction, it is useful to identify four particular areas of focus that Dickens carefully highlights with respect to “Our Saviour.” The author meaningfully includes every miraculous instance of Christ providing for His Disciples, healing the sick, offering charity and compassion to the poor and helpless, and demonstrating His power over death. In the course of the narrative of His birth and the events that follow, Dickens carefully presents each New Testament instance from His life that fits into these four categories of good works, and provides thorough explanations to his children of the important example they provide. In his inclusion of each of these events (as previously noted), the author remains sensitive to their knowledge level and provides his own commentary when necessary. The particular language that the father uses when introducing his children to the topics of miracles is particularly informative. After concisely relating the supernatural events surrounding the birth of Jesus, Dickens explains that it “was very wonderful, but God ordered it to be so” (*TLOL* 21), and clearly provides a divine explanation for these remarkable events. He continues on with the story of King Herod and the “dreadful murder [which] was called the Murder of the Innocents” (*TLOL* 22) and turns to his account of Jesus’s baptism by John. According to the author and father, after Jesus was baptized “the sky opened, and a beautiful bird like a dove came flying down, and the voice of God, speaking up in Heaven, was heard to say ‘This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!’” (*TLOL* 28). Guiding
his children to through their first significant leaps of faith, he is careful to explain that such amazing things are only possible through God. Having plainly established these divine beginnings and explaining the power of God who “ordered it to be so,” Dickens is ready to begin telling his children of Jesus’s good works. Following His baptism, Dickens writes, “Jesus Christ then went into a wild and lonely country called the wilderness, and stayed there forty days and forty nights, praying that He might be of use to men and women, and teach them to be better, so that after their deaths, they might be happy in Heaven” (TLOL 28-29). Perhaps more importantly, Dickens goes on to inform his children that:

> When He came out of the wilderness, He began to cure sick people by only laying His hand upon them; for God had given Him power to heal the sick, and to give sight to the blind, and to do many wonderful and solemn things of which I shall tell you more bye and bye, and which are called the Miracles of Christ. (TLOL 29)

The author’s diction in this passage is demonstrative of several important features of his faith. Clearly concerned with imparting Christ’s desire to “be of use to men and women” and to ensure their opportunity to enter Heaven, Dickens is careful to establish Christ’s industriousness and selflessness as the example to follow. Additionally, it is useful to point out the emphasis the author places on the particular way that Jesus accomplishes these “wonderful and solemn things.” By pointing out that these feats are accomplished “by only laying His hand upon” the people that he heals or comforts, Dickens identifies one of the crucial elements of Jesus’s narrative and Dickensian Christianity itself. In his version of the narrative, Dickens makes Jesus an accessible earthly example to follow by focusing on him as a physical man, while also
locating his divine power in the effortless actions of his hands. Before continuing, the conscientious father is careful to explain the concept of “miracles”:

I wish you would remember that word [miracles], because I shall use it again, and I should like you to know that it means something which is very wonderful and which could not be done without God’s leave and assistance. (TLOL 29)

Having properly familiarized his children with the idea of these wonderful events and placing them at the center of his narrative, Dickens then goes on to include each of them in detail. Along with the miracles of Christ, the author also notably includes each of His parables. Told by Christ in order to explain the type of faith expected of His followers, Dickens includes every one of them almost exactly as they appear in the New Testament and clearly portrays his faith in narrative structure itself for fashioning his children’s belief system.

In this way, TLOL shows that the most significant and distilled version of his Christian worldview is indeed a “Jesus-centric” one which values first and foremost, Jesus Christ as the example for all Christians to follow. Secondarily, a review of the content of TLOL suggests the value and burden that Dickens placed on storytelling. In his more thorough examination of Dickens’s process of harmonization, Colledge eventually concludes that there are six fundamental elements to the Christian belief system that TLOL suggests. These elements bear repeating and serve as a foundation from which to approach Dickens’s fiction. First, “implicit in TLOL is God, the heavenly Father, who providentially looks to the affairs of the lives of men and women, who has established a moral world of right and wrong” and who holds men and women accountable (Colledge 2009 16). Secondly, it is incumbent upon men and women to do what is right “not simply because doing so brings the reward of heaven after death, but more importantly
because doing what is right is an end in itself” (Colledge 2009 16). Additionally, those who do wrong “must seek the forgiveness of God and, whenever it is applicable, the forgiveness of the person wronged” (Colledge 2009 16). In the absence of this remorse or forgiveness, “judgment awaits those who obstinately refuse to seek [it]” (Colledge 2009 16). The fourth and fifth elements that Colledge identifies in Dickensian Christianity are perhaps the most significant and, I would argue, encompass the other four elements. According to Colledge, “inasmuch as men and women are accountable to God and His moral standard, they have in Jesus the exemplar through whom they observe how to discharge their moral responsibility and to do the right…they are to imitate Him in his moral and relational example” (Colledge 2009 16). The fifth element relates directly to its predecessor and points out that “one of Jesus’s outstanding character traits in TLOL is his concern for and attendance upon the needs of his fellows” (Colledge 2009 16). Even a cursory reading of TLOL demonstrates this and recommends Colledge’s further assertion that:

He is the exemplar of how human beings are to act toward one another. They should be humble, unassuming, and ready to lend a hand; the true mark of duty and loyalty to God is the degree to which human beings fulfill their duty toward their fellow creatures.

(Colledge 2009 16)

Finally, TLOL clearly establishes that for Dickens, “God’s world is a locus of supernatural events and influence” where “healings are performed, evil spirits are cast out, the dead are raised, and other miraculous events occur” (Colledge 2009 16) including most importantly, Jesus’s death upon the Cross and Resurrection for the pardon of Man’s sin. In this way, TLOL is structured in a straightforward narrative structure in order to offer his audience a basic retelling of the events
of Jesus’s life. In doing so, Dickens emphasizes Christ as the center of a life of faith, and this narrative as the key to understanding it.

**Criticism, Contrast, and Contact: Dickensian Christianity at Work**

Although this worldview is explicitly delivered in *TLOL*, it is also more subtly expressed by that “great Christian Writer” throughout his novels of the 40s and 50s. In order to fully appreciate the ways these more embedded teachings emerge, it becomes useful to apply Colledge’s theory that *TLOL* be used as a type of lens—or as he refers to it, an index—for approaching the fiction. With an understanding of the author’s distrust of hypocritical and misguided evangelicals, his belief in Jesus Christ as the ultimate example, and an appreciation for his use of narrative to construct this faith for his children, we can begin to see his fiction as an extension of his worldview. Just as he employs a narrative structure to implore his children to follow the example of Christ and not be tied to specific doctrine, he implicitly conveys the same tenets of his personal faith through his fictional narratives. Although these religious beliefs are often overshadowed by scathing social commentary and criticism of organized religion, the Jesus-centric beliefs apparent in *TLOL* also underscore novels like *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House*, and *Little Dorrit*. Dickens’s Christian values inform the entirety of his fictional canon on a variety of levels, but these novels written in 1849, 1853 and 1857 respectively, offer the richest site for an examination of the author’s particular perspective. Composed shortly after *TLOL*, these works reflect the ideology present in his children’s manuscript and most clearly display his complicated relationship with mid-Victorian organized religion.

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*e The presence of these Christian messages in nearly every other Dickens novel should become apparent in the course of this discussion. Most notably, *Oliver Twist*, *Barnaby Rudge*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and obviously, *A Christmas Carol* all contain portions of the elements identified here. The three novels selected will serve as representative examples because of their particular distillation of these elements.*
Three particularly informative features of these novels distinguish them as representative of Dickensian Christianity and recommend them for further study. The first of these features is their presentation of hypocritical evangelical characters characterized by the volume of their professions of faith and charity, and their inability to actually enact any positive change around them. The second of these features is the binary Dickens creates between Old Testament-focused Christians fixed on a belief in a wrathful and judgmental God and his female characters which epitomize lives spent emulating Christ. By creating these character foils with varying degrees of subtlety, the author delivers a clear message regarding what it means to practice “real Christianity” and delivers a caustic reprisal to characters that don’t. The third and final feature shared by these novels is the particular way that Dickens distills his definition of doing “good” into evocative scenes of human contact. In its most basic and effective form, Dickensian Christianity emerges in the simplest of actions with the profoundest of consequences. In his duplicitous Christian philanthropists, his Old and New Testament Christian foils, and the power of physical touch, Dickens’s belief that “it is Christianity TO DO GOOD ALWAYS—even to those who do evil to us” and that “if we do this, and remember the life and lessons of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and try to act up to them, we may confidently hope that God will forgive us our sins and mistakes, and enable us to live and die in peace” (TLOL 122) becomes readily apparent.

The characters exhibited in the most unflattering light in these three novels can be identified by two distinct characteristics. Although a number of them fit snugly into both categories, it is useful to make the distinction between those whom Dickens condemns for their hypocrisy, and those he critiques for their utter misinterpretation of biblical teachings. Both of these groups epitomize the “obtrusive professions” that Dickens warned against which “included
religious clichés and platitudes, hypocrisy, insincerity, lip service, and sanctimonious jargon” (Colledge 2012 28), but Dickens reserves special levels of contempt for both his hypocritical philanthropists and his Old Testament Churchmen. Most clearly showcasing the insincerity of evangelical philanthropy in *Bleak House*, Dickens offers up the ‘charitable’ Christians Mrs. Jellyby, Mrs. Pardiggle, and the Reverend Mr. Chadband as emblematic of mid-Victorian hypocrisy. Imparted through the words of Mr. Jarndyce, but most certainly echoing the voice of the writer himself, this message is delivered early in the novel:

> there were two classes of charitable people; one, the people who did a little and made a great deal of noise; the other, the people who did a great deal and made no noise at all.


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(*BH* 124)

While there is an abundance of literary criticism regarding the commentary he makes on overseas charities of the time, it is worth examining these characters’ shortcomings in light of their presentation as professed Christians.\(^f\)

In his less-than-subtle introduction of Mrs. Jellyby in the fourth chapter of *Bleak House*, appropriately titled “Telescopic Philanthropy” (*BH* 49), Dickens renders a misguided character who “has devoted herself to an extensive variety of public subjects at various times and is at present (until something else attracts her) devoted to the subject of Africa” (*BH* 49). Meanwhile,\(^f\)

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\(f\) In a chapter titled “The Topicality of *Bleak House*,” in their critical book *Dickens at Work*, John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson discuss in some detail the ways in which Charles Dickens was impacted by the work of Thomas Carlyle, “the diagnosis [Dickens] accepted of the troubles of mid-Victorian England,” and several character relationships he develops in *Bleak House* in order to “translate this diagnosis into the terms of his own art” (Butt, Tillotson 178-179). Specifically, they point to passages from Carlyle’s *Latter-Day Pamphlets* in which he “define[s] two attitudes currently adopted” regarding the struggles of “‘the great dumb inarticulate mass’” (Butt, Tillotson 178), “one being to admit the miseries and pronounce them to be incurable except by Heaven, the other being to alleviate the evil by charities, ‘to cure a world’s woes by rose-water’” (Butt, Tillotson 178). Their discussion of “rose water” philanthropists downplays the Christianity of these characters but is an insightful piece of scholarship regarding Dickens’s views on charity.
her youngest child is described as “one of the dirtiest little unfortunates [Esther] ever saw,” introduced as “very hot and frightened, and crying loudly, fixed by the neck between two iron railings,” and being attended to by “a milkman and a beadle” (BH 51). The reader’s first image of Peepy with his head between the railings is a rather heavy-handed illustration of the consequences of Mrs. Jellyby’s misplaced energy. As she struggles valiantly to educate the distant and absurdly exotic “natives of Borrioboola-Gha” (BH 53), her family is in need of basic supervision and care. In a slightly more restrained, but equally demonstrative passage, Dickens’s narrator goes on to refer to Peepy in a parenthetical aside, as “self-named” (BH 54). Neglected from his earliest stages, Peepy’s namelessness embodies the void left by his mother’s philanthropy abroad. During this scene—and later as one of her “poor little things fell downstairs…the dear child’s head recorded its passage with a bump on every stair” (BH 52)—Mrs. Jellyby’s “face reflected none of the uneasiness which [Esther, Ada, and Richard] could not help showing in [their] own faces” (BH 52). Dickens goes on to condemn this lack of domestic concern and her deficiencies as a mother which certainly come as a result of her efforts for distant goodwill. Mrs. Jellyby is described “with handsome eyes, though they had a curious habit of seeming to look a long way off…as if…they could see nothing other than Africa!” (BH 52). Blinded by her desire to appear charitable, her “obtrusive professions” manifest themselves in the contrast between her humanitarian efforts abroad and the filth and neglect of her home and children.

While these initial descriptors of Mrs. Jellyby’s misplaced Christian charity establish a precedent for future references to her character, Dickens’s focus on the ‘noise’ of her charitable efforts throughout the remainder of the novel revolves almost exclusively around her symbolic
epistolary efforts. The volume (pun intended) of her postal correspondence becomes the quantifiable and futile ‘noise’ which she makes in the name of Christian benevolence. The mere fact that her charity is entirely contained within the mailing of letters regarding a detached African colony “on the left bank of the Niger” (BH 53) is itself symbolic of her mistaken sense of moral responsibility. Supported by Dickens’s sarcastic chapter title, Mrs. Jellyby’s literal and figurative distancing and the consequential “telescopic” nature of the “good” she is doing make her increasingly deplorable. Drawing the reader’s attention to this postal futility, the narrator refers to her “room, which was strewn with papers and nearly filled by a great writing-table covered with similar litter” (BH 53) and depicts her “sitting in quite a nest of paper” (BH 58) or “in the midst of a voluminous correspondence, opening reading and sorting letters, with a great accumulation of torn covers on the floor” (BH 380). At each new reference, the author censures Mrs. Jellby’s public show of compassion through the symbolic ‘noise’ of her epistolary charity. By establishing the immensity of her letter-writing and the contrasting neglect of her youngest son as symbols of her wasted effort and energy, Dickens fashions a derisive critique of Englishmen making a show of philanthropy abroad, while England at home—quite literally, her home—is in shambles.

With a comparable lack of subtlety and a significantly more literal reference to the volume of her ‘noise,’ Dickens manifests a similar reproach of Mrs. Pardiggle. Introduced as “a formidable style of lady, with spectacles, a prominent nose, and a loud voice” (BH 124), Mrs. Pardiggle’s longwinded speeches are delivered “with great volubility” (BH 124), a “commanding deportment” (BH 127), and “in the same loud tone” which “indeed [Esther] overheard…all the way to the Brickmaker’s” (BH 129). These dialogues consistently—and with great specificity
and volume—enumerate the excessive monetary donations of both herself and her five boys, and while Peepy’s name is self-given, “you may have seen their names in a printed subscription list (perhaps more than one)” (BH 124). Mrs. Pardiggle’s professions of charity are similar to Mrs. Jellyby’s in the contrast they create with both her mistreatment of her sons and her attempts to do any actual good when presented with a genuine opportunity. She pretentiously tells Esther and Ada that “the quantity of exertion (which is no exertion to me), the amount of business (which I regard as nothing) that I go through, sometimes astonishes myself” and that “this gives me a great advantage when I am making my rounds” (BH 128). That Mrs. Pardiggle refers to her philanthropic efforts as “rounds” implies a circularity to her similarly futile endeavors and is further augmented by her proud declaration of persistence: “if I find a person unwilling to hear what I have to say, I tell that person directly, ‘I am incapable of fatigue…and I intend to go on until I have done’” (BH 128). These passages and the scenes which surround Mrs. Pardiggle’s role in the novel support a notion of habitual and ineffective harassment of people in the name of an adamant (albeit disingenuous) desire to assist them. She is never afraid to discuss “with a great show of moral determination” or talk “with much volubility” (BH 130) about the aims of her great benevolence, but she is disappointingly oblivious to the very real needs of the impoverished and miserable. In the presence of poverty and illness in the Brickmaker’s home, Mrs. Pardiggle is unable to relate on a basic human level with the people she might actually impact in a positive way. Esther and Ada become “painfully aware” in this scene “that between us and these people there was an iron barrier, which could not be removed by our new friend” (BH 133) and it becomes apparent that for Dickens, Mrs. Pardiggle is reprehensible because of her incapacity for genuine empathy. It is her inability to realize that “the most miserable, the
most ugly, deformed, wretched creatures that live, will be bright Angels in Heaven if they are
good here on earth” (TLOL 33) which prevents her from being truly charitable. Leading the way
into the house, loudly commenting on “the untidy habits of the people” inside and accosting
them for their wretchedness, Esther observes that “her voice had not a friendly sound, I thought;
it was much too business-like and systematic” (BH 130) and clearly reflects her disapproval of
Mrs. Pardiggle’s cold and intrusive attempt at charitable intervention. Judged by Esther and the
reader to be wholly ineffective and portrayed by Dickens as all but irredeemable, her actions are
diametrically opposed to the injunction he writes to his children to “never be proud or
unkind…to any poor man, woman, or child” (TLOL 33). “If they are bad” Dickens continues:

think that they would have been better if they had had kind friends, and good homes, and
had been better taught. So, always try to make them better by kind persuading words;
and always try to teach them and relieve them if you can. And when people speak ill of
the poor and miserable, think how Jesus Christ went among them, and taught them, and
thought them worthy of His care. And always pity them yourselves, and think as well of
them as you can. (TLOL 33-34).

Mrs. Pardiggle may “attend Matins…at half-past six o’clock in the morning all the year round,
including of course the depth of winter” (BH 125), but she is decidedly self-righteous,
hypocritical, and incapable of “real” Christian charity.

Equally ineffective and perhaps even more loquacious is the “gorging vessel” (BH 409),
Reverend Mr. Chadband, who “is attached to no particular denomination; and is considered by
his persecutors to have nothing so very remarkable to say on the greatest of subjects” (BH 303).
This same group of “persecutors,” which surely includes Dickens, also “denied that there was
any particular gift in Mr. Chadband’s piling verbose flights of stairs, one upon another” (*BH* 307) and is surely disappointed that “it must be within everybody’s experience, that the Chadband style of oratory is widely received and much admired” (*BH* 307) in mid-Victorian England. Prone to dialogue of a greater length and more circuitous nature than either Mrs. Jellyby’s letters or Mrs. Pardiggle’s pretensions, Mr. Chadband employs a frustrating and repetitive style of rhetorical questioning in his apostrophes without enacting any actual moral benevolence. Demonstrating this rhetoric, Mr. Chadband addresses the “Tough Subject” (*BH* 359), Jo “which [he] desires to improve for the spiritual delight of a select congregation” (*BH* 408) by informing him that:

> you are to us a pearl, you are to us a diamond, you are to us a gem, you are to us a jewel, And why, my young friend?...it is because you know nothing that you are to us a gem and jewel. For what are you, my young friend? Are you a beast of the field? No. Are you a bird of the air? No. Are you a fish of the sea or river? No. You are a human boy, my young friend. A human boy. O glorious to be a human boy! (*BH* 413)

This oration continues for several pages and eventually concludes with Jo’s (and the reader’s) bewilderment and leaves Mr. Chadband’s persecutors believing “that it is no wonder that he should go on for any length of time uttering such abominable nonsense, but that the wonder rather is that he should ever leave off, having once the audacity to begin” (*BH* 314). With a similar display of garrulous tedium during their next meeting, Mr. Chadband once again delivers a discourse to Jo which leaves him only knowing that he “would rather run away from him for an hour than hear him talk for five minutes” (*BH* 415). In fact, Jo is significantly less well off at the end of each of these interventions than before they begin. As with Mrs. Pardiggle, Mr.
Chadband is face to face with poverty and wretchedness which he could easily assuage, but his arrogance and “obtrusive professions” preclude him from doing any real ‘good.’ Dickens’s judgment of Chadband is unequivocal and according Sir Henry Fielding Dickens:

What he did hate and despise was the cant of religion, of the Pecksniffs, Chadbands, and Stigginses in life, and these he attacked with all the weight of his genius. (qtd in Colledge 2009 142)

In a letter of 1861, Dickens notably explained this hatred to the Presbyterian minister David Macrae. Dickens writes “I have so strong an objection to mere profession of religion, and to the audacious interposition of vain and ignorant men between the sublime simplicity of the New Testament and the general human mind to which our Saviour addressed it, that I urge that objection as strongly and as positively as I can” (Hartley 364). While Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle are condemned mostly for their hypocrisy and inadequacy with regards to alleviating human suffering, Reverend Chadband is afforded an additional level of caustic scorn as he attempts to intercede in the spiritual life of Jo the unfortunate street sweeper. Characterized by “no particular denomination,” Chadband generically represents all of these “vain and ignorant” Evangelicals and is further castigated for his “audacious interposition” and his attack on Jo as a sinner. Dickens displays frustration with any rigid adherence to doctrine for doctrine’s sake, but finds Chadband’s evangelical principles particularly offensive. The fact that Jo is accosted based on the doctrine of original sin makes his attack especially deplorable. The Reverend interrogates Jo asking him:

And do you cool yourself in that stream now, my young friend? No. Why do you not cool yourself in that stream now? Because you are in a state of darkness, because you are in a
state of obscurity, because you are in a state of sinfulness, because you are in a state of bondage. My young friend, what is bondage? Let us, in a spirit of love, inquire. (BH 313-314)

The only “state of bondage” that Jo is truly and keenly aware of is that of hunger and poverty: he receives no benefit from Chadband’s “spirit of love.” Sarcastically referring to Chadband as a “gorging vessel” and focusing on his tremendous eating habits, Dickens further widens the gulf between him and his starving victim. In this way, Dickens’s insensitive clergyman is indeed “a classic caricature of what [Dickens] saw as the bogus and hypocritical posture of the most objectionable forms of Dissent” (Colledge 2009 144) and represents all that is wrong with evangelical Christianity. So focused on dogmatic teaching and expiation of original sin, the Chadbands of the mid-Victorian have lost sight of the Jesus-centric message in the New Testament.

In the same way that Dickens clearly inserts his own voice into John Jarndyce’s observations about the two kinds of charitable people; the author’s voice makes a similarly unmistakable appearance in this scene with Chadband and Jo. Signaling this shift in narrative voice even more plainly here, the omniscient narrator addresses Jo directly at the conclusion of his interaction with the Reverend and despondently and futilely reassures him that:

There is a history so interesting and affecting even to minds as near the brutes as thine, recording deeds done on this earth for common men, that if the Chadbands, removing their own persons from the light, would but show it thee in simple reverence, would but leave it unimproved, would but regard it as being eloquent enough without their modest aid—it might hold thee awake, and thou might learn from it! (BH 415)
Jo’s ignorance of the “interesting history” found in the New Testament makes him a person to be pitied and assisted rather than hounded and condemned for his sins. Undoubtedly, Dickens’s assurance to Jo reflects the same frustrations delivered in his correspondence with Macrae and parades Reverend Chadband’s diatribe as an “audacious interposition of [a] vain and ignorant” man whose “modest aid” to the New Testament essentially prevents it from being accessible to Jo. Contrary to the author’s caution to his children to think only that people like Jo “would have been better if they had had kind friends, and good homes, and had been better taught” (*TLOL* 34), Chadband ignores the fact that this “interesting history” is also addressed to people like him, is blinded by the doctrine of original sin, and emerges in *Bleak House* as the perfect antithesis to “real Christianity.”

Although Reverend Chadband exemplifies Dickens’s philanthropic hypocrites, his belief in original sin and total depravity aligns him with the second and even more dangerous group of Dickensian Christians. Characters like the Murdstones, Miss Barbary, and most notably, Mrs. Clennam represent the perils of a belief system rooted in the Old Testament and restricted by their focus on dogma and creed. In his portrayals of these evangelical ‘churchmen,’ Dickens identifies several significant points of friction between his New Testament-centered definition of Christianity and the way these characters enact their faith. In Dickens’s last will and testament—the final communication he would have with his children—the author writes “I commit my soul to the mercy of God through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and I exhort my dear children humbly to try to guide themselves by the teaching of the New Testament in its broad spirit, and to put no faith in man’s narrow construction of its letter here or there” (qtd. in Colledge 2012 26). Worse than the ‘charitable’ hypocrites, Dickens abhorred the groups of people he saw
taking advantage of this “narrow construction” of doctrine for the purposes of self-serving sectarianism and evangelicalism. For Dickens, the “center is not the church, it is not Christian activity (or activism), it is not Bible study, it is not theology or doctrine, it is not programs, paradigms, or models—the center is Jesus” (Colledge 2012 50) and there are serious negative consequences when “these things can slip to the center and push Jesus to the periphery” (Colledge 2012 50). Similar to Reverend Chadband, the Murdstones, Miss Barbary, and Mrs. Clennam each demonstrate the destructive forces of this Old Testament belief and blind adherence to doctrine. In each of these characters, Dickens creates the image of the professed God-fearing Christian that inflexibly observes the customs and practices of traditional religion and concentrates on the expiation of sin at the cost of genuine faith and love. What makes these characters especially sinister in Dickens’s portrayals is their abuse of positions of power to magnify their damaging influences. In each case, “such figures as Mr. and Mrs. Murdstone, Miss Barbary and Mrs. Clennam are all the more threatening because their social status as Anglican evangelicals lends authority to their pronouncements” (Oulton 48) and the immediate victims of their misguided religion are always defenseless children.

When David becomes acquainted with Edward and Jane Murdstone and their epitomizing “firmness” (DC 60), the semantics of their temperance and pious condescension is immediately apparent. Dickens consistently refers to their religious piety and cruel and oppressive authority over David in language which mirrors the dogmatic and doctrinal professions he so staunchly opposed. Ostensibly narrated by a retrospective adult David, the Murdstones are introduced in these terms:
Firmness, I may observe, was the grand quality on which both Mr. and Miss Murdstone took their stand. However I might have expressed my comprehension of it at that time, if I had been called upon, I nevertheless did clearly comprehend in my own way, that it was another name for tyranny; and for a certain gloomy, arrogant, devil’s humour, that was in them both. (DC 60)

David goes on to describe the nature of this firmness in religious terms by stating that “the creed, as I should state it now, was this. Mr. Murdstone was firm; nobody else in his world was to be firm at all, for everybody was to be bent to his firmness” (DC 60) and asserts that “the gloomy taint that was in the Murdstone blood, darkened the Murdstone religion, which was austere and wrathful” (DC 63). In addition to using charged terms like “creed” and “religion” which are described as “austere and wrathful,” Dickens’s narrator directly links his painful childhood memories to the strict practical devotion to Christian customs displayed by his antagonists.

Reflecting back on these excruciating formative experiences, David informs his readers that:

I well remember the tremendous visages with which we used to go to church, and the changed air of the place. Again, the dreaded Sunday comes round, and I file into the old pew first, like a guarded captive brought to a condemned service. Again, Miss Murdstone, in a black velvet gown, that looks as if it had been made out of a pall, follows close upon me…Again, I listen to Miss Murdstone mumbling the responses, and emphasizing all the dread words with a cruel relish. Again, I see her dark eyes roll round the church when she says ‘miserable sinners,’ as if she were calling all the congregation names. Again, I wonder with a sudden fear whether it is likely that our good old clergyman can be wrong, and Mr and Miss Murdstone right, and that all the angels in
Heaven can be destroying angels. Again, if I move a finger or relax a muscle of my face, Miss Murdstone pokes me with her prayer book, and makes my side ache. (DC 63)

Living up to their ominous namesake, the Murdstones practice cold, mechanical adherence to religious custom while terrorizing a defenseless child and their actions highlight the hypocrisy of both their Christian religion, and what David refers to as the “Murdstone religion.” Wielding her sense of piety as a weapon of condescension against “miserable sinners” and teaching David of “destroying angels” from behind her “pall,” Jane Murdstone introduces David to an unfeeling and menacing form of Christianity more concerned with praxis than faith or good works.

Dickens continues to couch this treatment of David in similar religious terminology as the narrator tells of “the gloomy theology of the Murdstones [which] made all children out to be a swarm of little vipers (though there was a child in the midst of the Disciples), and held that they contaminated one another” (DC 66). At its core, this “gloomy theology” also echoes the notions of original sin and infant depravity that Dickens was so averse to. According to the Murdstone’s interpretation of this doctrine, the focus of Christianity is to root out and destroy the inherently sinful nature of David and all other children. While Edward and Jane’s physical and psychological abuse of David would be considered evil regardless of any religious pretensions, the fact that they drag him off to church to make a show of their piety makes them all the more damnable in the eyes of the author.

The same rigid adherence to religious practice and dogmatic belief in original sin is repeated in Esther’s narrative in Bleak House. Just as the Murdstones rely on their inflexible devoutness to justify their treatment of David, Miss Barbary and Mrs. Pardiggle employ a similar belief system to rationalize their treatment of Esther and the Brickmaker’s family respectively.
The reader is introduced to Miss Barbary through the colored perspective of the impressionable Esther as Dickens comments on the effects of such an upbringing on a small child. Esther tells the reader that “I was brought up, from my earliest remembrance—like some of the princesses in the fairy stories, only I was not charming—by my godmother” (BH 28). According to young Esther, Miss Barbary “was a good, good woman!” (BH 28), and Dickens imaginatively aligns her experiences with “princesses” and connotations of the evil “godmother” of similar “fairy stories.” Dickens calls on a long tradition of suffering children to augment the injustice of Esther’s situation while presenting her godmother as an evangelical Christian. Similar to the Pardigles, Chadbands, and Murdstones, Miss Barbary “went to church three times every Sunday, and to morning prayers on Wednesdays and Fridays, and to lectures whenever there were lectures; and never missed” (BH 28). To Esther, “she was always grave and strict” (BH 28), and evidently provides a confusing example to the narrator in her formative years. Her mistaken opinions of her godmother, and consequently herself, are the most telling and indeed most tragic aspects of the cold relationship with her caretaker:

She was so very good herself, I thought, that the badness of other people made her frown all her life. I felt so different from her, even making every allowance for the differences between a child and a woman; I felt so poor, so trifling, and so far off; that I never could be unrestrained with her—no, could never even lover her as I wished. It made me very sorry to consider how good she was, and how unworthy of her I was; and I used ardently to hope that I might have a better heart…but I never loved my godmother as I ought to have loved her, and as I felt I must have loved her if I had been a better girl. (BH 28)
The psychological effects of Esther’s upbringing result in her misinterpretation of her own guilt and sin, and most significantly, find their source in Miss Barbary’s belief system. Esther’s guardian informs her that “Your Mother…is your disgrace, and you were hers” and exhorts her to “pray daily that the sins of others be not visited upon your head, according to what is written” (BH 30). This warning emerges suggestively from the Old Testament and is derived from the book of Numbers which depicts a wrathful and often unforgiving God that “punishes the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation” (NRSV Bible, Numbers 14.18). Miss Barbary continues to reveal the tenets of her faith by adding that “submission, self-denial, diligent work, are the preparations for a life begun with such a shadow on it” and informing her ward that “you are different from other children, Esther, because you were not born, like them, in common sinfulness and wrath. You are set apart” (BH 30-31). Not only does Miss Barbary believe in “common sinfulness” of children, but she maintains that Esther’s sin is particularly monstrous because of her mother’s depravity. Ultimately, it is her incapacity for forgiveness and her perpetuation of Old Testament dogma which prevent her from showing any true Christian benevolence to Esther.

Miss Barbary’s treatment of Esther and Mr. and Miss Murdstone’s treatment of David are particularly immoral in the eyes of Dickensian Christianity as displayed in TLOL because of the nature of the victims. On several occasions throughout TLOL, Dickens refers to Jesus’s dealings with children both on earth and in Heaven. He is careful to relate each of Jesus’s interactions with children as they appear in the New Testament and includes his own commentary on these accounts. The author recounts to his children the story of Jesus answering his Disciples’
question “who is greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?” (TLOL 60) and includes his reaffirmation of the importance of this lesson at its conclusion:

Jesus called a little child to Him, and took him in His arms, and stood among them, and answered, ‘A child like this. I say unto you that none but those who are as humble as little children shall enter into Heaven. Whosoever shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me. But whosoever hurts one of them, it were better for him that he had a millstone tied about the neck, and were drowned in the depths of the sea. The Angels are all children.’ Our Saviour loved the child and loved all children. Yes, and all the world. No one ever loved all people, so well and so truly as He did. (TLOL 60-61)

Dickens adheres closely to the language used by all three of the Synoptic Gospels from which he draws the lesson of Jesus answering the question “Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?” but he conspicuously omits the extended descriptions found in both Matthew and Mark regarding the other recommended punishments for those who interfere with children. Matthew’s account includes an even more gruesome warning:

woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes! If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown in the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire. (NRSV Bible, Matthew 18.7-9)

Mark provides a similarly graphic discussion of how to avoid stumbling blocks, but Dickens’s version of the story is an interestingly sanitized hybrid of all three of the Synoptics. His
decisions are incredibly meaningful because of what he chooses to pass on to his children. Excluding the excessive suggestions of dismemberment found in Matthew and Mark, while maintaining the gravity of Jesus’s millstone imagery, Dickens imparts the magnitude with which Jesus implored his disciples to protect children, while avoiding the wrathful extremity of the first two accounts. For Dickens, Jesus’s answer to the question “Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?” (NRSV Bible, Matthew 18.1) is far more important for what it says about guarding children than for what it might suggest about God’s fury. Although it must be acknowledged that orphans and young children are also victimized in Dickens’s novels by characters with little or no religious affiliation, the layers of Christian hypocrisy and misconstrued dogma added to these characters make them particularly detestable.

Each of these negatively portrayed churchmen reflect Dickens’s distaste for the belief in original sin and infant depravity, narrow construction of doctrine, cruelty to children, and a focus on the Old Testament account of a wrathful God that directly contradict the lessons of *TLOL*. While Mrs. Pardiggle, Mr. Chadband, the Murdstones, and Miss Barbary all contain one or more of these elements of misguided “churchianity” (Colledge 2012 28), however, none of them embody the term ‘churchman’ as wholly as *Little Dorrit*’s Mrs. Clennam. In her treatment of her adopted son, her strict adherence to religious practice for its own sake, and her sordid interpretation of an Old Testament God, Mrs. Clennam typifies Dickensian evangelicalism.

Along with Peepy, David and Jo, Arthur Clennam suffers as a child at the hands of his pious guardian and comes to associate pain and suffering with religious practice. Upon his return to London at the beginning of the novel, Arthur is tortured by the sound of the “maddening church bells of all degrees of dissonance” (*LD* 43) which “had revived a long train of miserable
Sundays” and reminded him of the “dreary Sunday of his childhood” (LD 44). Although the opening pages of this chapter echo sentiments delivered in Dickens’s anti-Sabbatarian pamphlet of 1836 titled *Sunday Under Three Heads* in which he “argues that Sabbath pleasures should not be forbidden” (Lewis 8), the more substantial criticism leveled through Arthur’s reaction is towards religious practice itself. After an elaborate description of the stifling effects of Sabbatarian restrictions, the narrator turns his attention to a history of Arthur’s religious experiences.\(^g\) In the “dreary Sunday of his childhood,” Arthur recalls sitting “with his hands before him, scared out of his senses by a horrible tract which commenced business with the poor child by asking him in its title, why he was going to Perdition?” (LD 44) and displays Dickens’s disgust with the practice “that was so common in the Christianity of Dissenters and Nonconformists—that of using Christian teaching to frighten children into desired religious and moral behaviors” (Colledge 2012 5-6). The narrator goes on to detail Arthur’s memory of the “sleepy Sunday of his boyhood, when, like a military deserter, he was marched to chapel by a picquet of teachers three times a day, morally handcuffed to another boy…when he would willingly have bartered two meals of indigestible sermon for another ounce or two of inferior mutton” (LD 45). Here, Arthur’s mistreatment echoes that of Jo in *Bleak House* and once again raises questions about the efficacy of preaching unintelligible sermons to children in need of basic necessities like food and tenderness. Dickens’s scornful critique continues with Arthur’s memory of “the interminable Sunday of his nonage; when his mother, stern of face and unrelenting of heart, would sit all day behind a bible” (LD 45). Finally, Arthur’s fourth and final

\(^g\) Dickens’s mostly resisted Sabbatarianism from a moral and social standpoint as opposed to a religious one, and therefore remains a secondary concern in this project. For useful context regarding the Sabbatarian debate and Dickens’s opposition to it, see Lewis 7-10 and Walder 177-179.
memory is of the “resentful Sunday of a little later, with a sullen sense of injury in his heart, and no more real knowledge of the beneficent history of the New Testament, than if he had been bred among idolaters” (LD 45). Once again connecting him with Jo who had “never heard of such a book” (BH 415), Dickens displays Arthur’s lack of this “real knowledge of the beneficent history of the New Testament” (LD 45). Fascinatingly, however, while Jo’s ignorance of Christian faith emanates from a complete lack of education or exposure, Arthur’s Christian illiteracy occurs in spite of (and perhaps because of) a life of compulsory church attendance and overexposure to church doctrine. All four of these Sunday experiences form the basis of Arthur’s relative lack of faith throughout the novel and the dysfunctional relationship with his mother. Additionally, they connect him directly with characters like David, Esther, Jo, and all of Dickens’s victims of inflexible Christian practice.

The author’s description of Arthur’s “interminable Sunday” is particularly useful in its characterization of his mother. Her emblematic Bible is “bound like her own construction of it in the hardest, barest, and straitest boards, with one dinted ornament on the cover like the drag of a chain, and a wrathful sprinkling of red upon the edges of the leaves—as if it, of all books! were a fortification against sweetness of temper, natural affection, and gentle intercourse” (LD 45) and reflects her narrow focus on Old Testament Christian teachings. What is unique about Mrs. Clennam when compared with Dickens’s other churchmen, however, is the way Dickens offers—certainly not a source of redemption, but at least—an explanation for her own misguided belief system. After the climactic revelation scene in which the full truth of her past is made plain to the reader, Arthur’s adopted mother briefly occupies a unique position of both victim and reprobate. Far from the irredeemable murderer Rigaud who is condemned to a deus ex
machinistic death by structural collapse, Mrs. Clennam is offered the chance to explain the origin of her transgressions:

‘You do not know what it is,’ she went on, addressing [Rigaud], ‘to be brought up strictly, and straitly. I was so brought up. Mine was no light youth of sinful gaiety and pleasure. Mine were days of wholesome repression, punishment, and fear. The corruption of our hearts, the evil of our ways, the curse that is upon us, the terrors that surround us—these were the themes of my childhood. They formed my character, and filled me with an abhorrence of evildoers. (*LD* 807)

Unlike the characters previously discussed, Dickens traces the source of her warped Christian worldview to her own evangelical instruction at the hands of her father and offers a more complicated character study. The author cannot exonerate Mrs. Clennam, however, because her faith has become so twisted that she has lost sight of even the traditional Old Testament God. She goes on to implore her listeners to consider her helplessness upon discovering her husband “to have sinned against the Lord and outraged [her] by holding a guilty creature in [her] place” and asks “was I to doubt that it had been appointed me to make the discovery, and that it was appointed to me to lay the hand of punishment upon that creature of perdition? Was I to dismiss in a moment—what was I! but all the rejection of sin, and all the war against it, in which I had been bred?’ (*LD* 808). Incapable of forgiveness and horrendously misconstruing her relationship with God, even after forty years and “this Nemesis now looking her in the face, she still abided by her old impiety—still reversed the order of Creation, and breathed her own breath into a clay image of her Creator” (*LD* 808). Mrs. Clennam has turned her faith into its own idol and has distorted her doctrine into one of law and punishment in order to justify her actions. By
reversing the “order of Creation,” she has ordained herself as an instrument of eternal Judgment and sees it as her moral responsibility to enforce atonement in the sinners around her. In the course of her frantic defense, Arthur’s guardian expresses her belief that just as “those who were appointed of old to go to wicked kings and accuse them” (LD 809), she feels a responsibility to condemn and punish Arthur’s birth mother for her sins. She inquires of her audience “were they not ministers and servants? And had not I, unworthy, and far-removed from them, sin to denounce?” (LD 809) and further demonstrates a drastic misconstruction of Christian faith. As with Miss Barbary, all of her biblical allusions in this passage come from the Old Testament and are designed to rationalize her lack of forgiveness. However, as Stephen Wall points out in his notes to this passage in the 2003 Penguin Classics edition, even her Old Testament vision is blurred:

Mrs. Clennam’s self-vindication rests on a grotesque distortion of Dickens’s faith in a merciful God. Her words here imply a faith in her own justification by faith, and her emphasis on ‘penitence, in works’ and the punishment of offenders in what follows reveals a correspondingly dark conviction of the essentially irredeemable nature of those others whose lives have come into contact with her own. (Wall 982)

For Mrs. Clennam, her faith and righteousness make her “appointed to be the instrument of their punishment” and not only excuse, but actually require her to take Arthur from his mother in order to exact “the penitence, in works, that was demanded of her” (LD 809). To her, the suffering she causes cannot be anything but the necessary work of a wrathful God. Mrs. Clennam tells Rigaud and Flintwich that “if the presence of Arthur was a daily reproach to his father, and if the absence of Arthur was a daily agony to his mother, that was the just
dispensation of Jehovah” (*LD* 810). Here, Mrs. Clennam suggestively evokes the name “Jehovah,” once again expresses her belief in “the Old Testament God, associated with vengeance, by comparison with the New Testament’s God of Love” (*Wall* 982), but misconstrues her own role as an instrument of this vengeance. In an ironic literary twist highlighting an additional parallel between her and Miss Barbary, Mrs. Clennam attempts to justify herself once again—this time to Amy—by referencing Exodus:

> I was stern with [Arthur], knowing that the transgressions of the parents are visited on their offspring, and that there was an angry mark upon him at birth. (*LD* 824)

Echoing Miss Barbary’s reference to the angry God in Numbers, her statement presents an intentional paradox created by the author. Ultimately, she is blind to the fact that her own transgressions are those from which Arthur needs protection. What makes Mrs. Clennam unique among the Dickensian churchmen, is the incredible depth of her Christian delusion and the pity that it nearly conjures in the reader. Pleading with Amy to understand her motivation, she asserts that “I have done…what it was given me to do. I have set myself against evil; not against good. I have been an instrument of severity against sin” and asks “have not mere sinners like myself been commissioned to lay it low in all time?” (*LD* 825). Led by her perverted interpretation of the Old Testament, Mrs. Clennam connects herself with “the old days when the innocent perished with the guilty, a thousand to one” and “the wrath of the hater of the unrighteous was not slaked even in blood, and yet found favor” (*LD* 825) and embodies a wretched devotion to her role in the punishment of sinners. As the antithesis of New Testament love and forgiveness, Mrs. Clennam has mangled her faith into a self-serving justification for her mistreatment of those around her.

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Pairing each of his undesirable churchmen with heroic Christian foils, Dickens undeniably illuminates points of friction between religious practice and genuine faith. It is in these contrasting character pairings that his belief system becomes most evident. If the narrative of *TLOL* offers a distilled version of Dickensian Christianity which opposes these hypocritical and misguided forms of faith, these conflicting character pairs offer a parallel level of distillation to his Jesus-centric message. In this pivotal discussion between Amy Dorrit and Mrs. Clennam, Dickens depicts his most unfortunate churchman in bold relief with his Christian heroine and reveals a primary tactic in imparting his message of “real Christianity.” By pairing these character foils, Dickens poignantly reminds his readers that “it is Christianity to do good always” and that pride and narrow construction of doctrine often become more evil than secularism or atheism. Little Dorrit’s response to Mrs. Clennam’s attempt at self-vindication proposes the undeniable New Testament counterpoint found in *TLOL*. Amy tells her that “angry feelings and unforgiving deeds are no comfort and no guide to you and me” and goes on to implore her to “be guided, only by the healer of the sick, the raiser of the dead, the friend of all who were afflicted and forlorn, the patient Master who shed tears of compassion for our infirmities” (*LD* 825-826). For Amy and the author of *TLOL*, “we cannot but be right if we put all the rest away, and do everything in remembrance of Him” in whose life “there is no vengeance and no infliction of suffering” (*LD* 826). Just as Amy believes that “there can be no confusion in following Him, and seeking for no other footsteps” (*LD* 826), Dickens reminds his children “always to show that we love Him by humbly trying to do right in everything” and that “if we do this, and remember the life and lessons of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and try to act up to them, we may confidently hope that God will forgive our sins and mistakes, and enable us to live and die in peace” (*TLOL* 122).
In stark contrast to Mrs. Clennam’s obtrusive professions, rigid adherence to misinterpreted Old Testament teachings and consequent alienation of her son, Amy’s New Testament faith and desire to emulate Jesus allow her to ‘save’ Arthur in all of that term’s evocative meanings. Dickens may trace the source of Mrs. Clennam’s delusional faith to her miserable beginnings, but his portrayal of Amy makes it apparent that they do not justify her actions or her worldview. As the “Child of the Marshalsea” (*LD* 83), Little Dorrit enacts the teachings of *TLOL* in spite of her emergence from far more wretched circumstances than those of Arthur’s mother. The heroine and namesake of *Little Dorrit* is born within the prison walls, symbolically delivered to her christening by the turnkey (who is also her Godfather), and in spite of her position as the youngest in the family, “she took the place of eldest of the three, in all things but precedence” (*LD* 87). Dickens goes on in the introduction to her narrative to describe Amy as “the head of the fallen family; [who] bore, in her own heart, its anxieties and shames” (*LD* 87) and presents her as the selfless protector of the family and central source of compassion throughout the novel. While Mrs. Clennam seeks to rationalize her sins in terms of her ill-fated childhood, Amy—whose nativity is the very definition of hardship and suffering—requires no such excuses:

What her pitiful look saw, at that early time, in her father, in her sister, in her brother, in the jail; how much or how little of the wretched truth it pleased God to make visible to her; lies hidden with many mysteries. It is enough that she was inspired to be something which was not what the rest were, and to be that something, different and laborious for the sake of the rest. Inspired? Yes. Shall we speak of the inspiration of a poet or a priest,
and not of the heart impelled by love and self-devotion to the lowliest work in the
lowliest way of life! (LD 86)

Turning to industriousness and noble toil for the benefit of an ungrateful family, Dickens’s
heroine exerts herself “through how much weariness and hopelessness, and how many secret
tears” and “drudged on, until recognized as useful, even indispensable” (LD 86-87). Amy’s
work ethic and desire “to be that something, different and laborious for the sake of the rest”
echoes the prayer of her prototype in TLOL who prayed to His father that He might “be of use to
men and women” (TLOL 29) and as Dickens closes Amy’s introductory chapter, his language
echoes the preliminary statements of TLOL and casts her narrative in a similar light. In the same
way that he expresses to his children that he is “very anxious that [they] should know something
about the History of Jesus Christ” because “no one ever lived who was so good, so kind, so
gentle, and so sorry for all people who did wrong, or were in any way ill or miserable” (TLOL
17), the author instructs the reader of Little Dorrit that “this was the life, and this the history, of
Little Dorrit” (LD 93) and clearly expresses his desire that they should hear the narrative because
she is “worldy wise in hard and poor necessities” and “innocent in all things else” (LD 93).

Stoically bearing misery and privation in the early portions of the novel and humbly and
graciously negotiating dangerous wealth and prosperity later in her narrative, Amy remains the
symbol of unmoving faith and constant devotion to others. As Dennis Walder points out,
Dickens’s later novels are often “dominated by single, obsessive themes…and in Little Dorrit the
obsessive centre would seem to lie in the contrasting views of Mrs. Clennam’s imprisoning Old
Testament ethos and Little Dorrit’s liberating New Testament spirit” (Walder 171). This contrast
is fully evolved by the time Mrs. Clennam makes her confession in the climactic scene discussed
above, and Dickens brings the two characters together in one final (and less-than-subtle) juxtaposition of Old and New Testament Christianity.

In addition to her role as foil to Mrs. Clennam’s version of the Christian faith, Amy plays the part of Dickensian heroine by facilitating the salvation of the male protagonist. In *Little Dorrit*, this character is obviously Arthur Clennam who is exceptional because of the precarious position of his faith throughout the novel. Mrs. Clennam observes that she has seen him “grow up; not to be pious in a chosen way (his mother’s offence lay too heavy on him for that), but still to be just and upright” (*LD* 824) and her aptly neutral description of his character highlights his locus on the fault line between the outmoded Old Testament faith of his mother and the New Testament Faith of Amy Dorrit. Walder is correct when he refers to Amy as Arthur’s “only medium of salvation in this world” (Walder 192) and it is solely with her assistance that he can complete “his slow regeneration as he frees himself from the negative, imprisoning forces [Mrs. Clennam] has exerted upon him” (Walder 191). It is in the final scene of Arthur’s redemption that Dickens combines the romantic and Christian love stories between the two characters and compels Amy to transcend the role of exemplary Disciple and take on the role of Savior. Amy’s steadfast faith and exemplary love and compassion throughout the novel ultimately culminate in her nursing Arthur back to physical and spiritual life. In these final chapters, Arthur refers to her as his “Good angel!” (*LD* 848) and describes her in similarly divine terms as she “ascended winged to his heart, bringing the heavenly brightness of a new love” and appears in the “room where the old love had wrought so hard and been so true” (*LD* 854). Amy’s narrative has come full circle at this point and she is seen in the final two chapters back in her original room within the Marshalsea prison still working tirelessly for her family and waiting on Arthur. Dickens’s
male protagonist is still not fully aware of his feelings for the devoted heroine at the outset of this scene and is prepared to make one final attempt at resisting any romantic feelings. Of course, the reader is well aware by this point that this can never come to fruition and Amy’s unwavering faith and forbearance, which has been the only constant throughout the novel, must be rewarded by the transition to romantic love and regeneration for both characters.

The recurring trope of the Christ-like female heroine manifests itself in *David Copperfield* and *Bleak House* in nearly identical ways with both Agnes Wickfield and Esther Summerson. As the archetypal practitioners of Dickens’s “real Christianity,” these characters are essential to his Christian message for a number of reasons. Just as Amy serves as a foil for Mrs. Clennam, Agnes and Esther embody similarly contrasting images with the Murdstones, Pardigges, and Chadbands of the other novels. Humbly and industriously toiling for the benefit of others and constantly demonstrating compassion and empathy to those in need, all three of these characters exemplify what it means to “DO GOOD ALWAYS.” In addition to serving as foils to these hypocrites and churchmen, Amy, Agnes, and Esther ultimately guide their male counterparts to salvation and are rewarded by romantic love. In the case of Amy and Agnes, this love emerges through the transition of familial Christian affection to passionate and profound love between them and their male protectors. Dennis Walder is one of several critics that has recognized these characters as “semi-divine images of deliverance” and goes on to argue correctly that these “icons suggest the possibility of deliverance or redemption” (Walder 144-145). David speaks of Agnes in these terms and describes the spiritual happiness he finds with her:

> Clasped in my embrace, I held the source of every worthy aspiration I had ever had; the
centre of myself, the circle of my life, my own, my wife; my love of whom was founded on a rock. (DC 869)

In addition to Walder, Hillis Miller addresses this “transposition of religious language into the realm of romantic love which began with the poets of courtly love, and which finds its most elaborate Victorian expression in Wuthering Heights” (qtd. in Walder 146). According to Miller, “David has that relation to Agnes which a devout Christian has to God, the creator of his selfhood, without whom he would be nothing” (qtd. in Walder 147). This description resonates in the relationship between Amy and Arthur as well, and provides further evidence of the similarities between these feminine Christian examples. Although Bleak House follows this pattern to some degree, Esther doesn’t experience the same transformation between her and John Jarndyce. Instead, her selfless devotion to him leads her to dutifully accept her role as mistress of Bleak House in spite of her romantic love for Allan Woodcourt. Ultimately, however, she is rewarded for this final act of self-sacrifice by her marriage to Woodcourt while being spared the potentially awkward marriage to her benevolent and fatherly protector.

The way that Dickens communicates the imminence of this conversion of Christian affection to romantic love in Little Dorrit, exemplifies the third and final feature of these novels which make them the most useful site of an analysis of Dickensian Christianity. The method the author employs in portraying the final evolution of Amy and Arthur’s relationship is an artful aestheticism that recurs in each of his novels as well as TLOL. A closer analysis of Amy and Arthur’s climactic scene reveals a singular focus on the imagery of human contact and exemplifies Dickens’s presentation of touch as the most basic form of Christian love and compassion. While TLOL offers a condensed account of Dickensian Christianity and his
character foils offer an equivalent distillation of his fictional Christian message, his focus on basic human contact can be seen as an additional step in magnifying and simplifying his belief in what it means “TO DO GOOD ALWAYS.” In all three of these novels, Dickens relies on the power of tenderness and compassion as expressed through touch to portray Jesus-centric Christianity in its barest form.

In the course of their discussion, Amy’s hand records the progress of their love and poignantly delivers what the characters are yet unable to utter at this point in the novel. After fondly identifying her as “Dear girl. Dear Heart. Good Angel” (*LD* 848), the reader is told that “[Arthur] lifted her hand to his lips” (*LD* 848), and her hand begins its symbolic progression. As Arthur attempts to recall the events of his illness, the discussion shifts to a relatively straightforward account of how often Amy has been at his bedside, but the reader is well aware of the inevitable trajectory of the conversation and of what is conspicuously left unsaid. His heroine humbly admits “that I have been here at least twice, every day” (*LD* 848) and hints at the level of her devotion, but Arthur remains poised to release her from her sense of obligation to him. It is at this point, however, that the narrator acknowledges that “he might have released the little light hand, after fervently kissing it again; but that, with a very gentle lingering where it was, it seemed to court being retained” (*LD* 848-849). Here, Arthur suggestively “took it in both of his, and lay it softly on his breast” and endeavors once more to repel any stirring passions:

“Dear Little Dorrit, it is not my imprisonment only that will soon be over. This sacrifice of you must be ended. We must learn to part again, and to take our different ways so wide asunder. (*LD* 849)
It is apparent to the reader that his “imprisonment” and her “sacrifice” will, in fact, “soon be over,” but it is the movement of Amy’s hand from his lips to his heart and both characters’ refusal to break the embrace that allows the reader to comprehend what Arthur cannot fully articulate. Continuing its journey, “the hand he held, crept up a little nearer to his face” (LD 849) and it is only after the last vestiges of doubt are removed by her pleading inquiry “O my dearest and best, are you quite sure you will not share my fortune with me now?,” that the two are depicted “locked in arms” with her “held to his heart, with his manly tears upon her own cheek” (LD 850). The effect of the hand imagery eventually reaches its apex as Amy “drew the slight hand round his neck, and clasped it in its fellow-hand” (LD 850) and Dickens completes their transition into regenerative love. By signaling the climactic movement of the scene through the simultaneously plain and poignant image of Amy’s hand, Dickens reveals one of his primary literary techniques and displays love and affection in its purest form of expression. The warmth and gentleness of Amy’s appendage appears in stark contrast to Mrs. Clennam’s “wrathful hand” (809) which is “clenched” when she “vigorously” and “repeatedly struck [it] upon the table” (LD 809) in her own defining moment. Amy and Arthur’s realization of romantic love from its initial foundations of New Testament compassion leads to Arthur’s salvation and rewards Amy for her tireless efforts as an exemplary Disciple. Mrs. Clennam believes she has been “appointed to.. lay the hand of punishment” (LD 808) while Amy’s hand represents the healing hand of Christ.

Signaling their regeneration and relegating the pages that follow to mere dénouement, this crucial point in the narrative is significant from both a literary and theological perspective. Bringing Arthur and Amy’s narrative to its logical conclusion, rewarding Dickens’s Christ-like
heroine, and “saving” the male protagonist from a life of disillusioned Christian faith, this scene also epitomizes the power of touch in the aesthetics of Dickensian Christianity.

In stark contrast to the ‘noise’ produced by the voluminous correspondence of Mrs. Jellyby, the self-glorification of Mrs. Pardiggle, and the circuitous nonsense of Mr. Chadband, Dickens portrays with a few tender moments, a similar idealization of true Christian ‘charity’ in *Bleak House*. While Mrs. Jellyby “has so much to think of, in connexion with Boorioboola Gha” and finds it “so necessary [she] should concentrate on [herself]” (*BH* 381-382), her children are neglected and in want of simple juvenile necessities. Conversely, the tenderness and motherly care displayed by Esther and exemplified in her treatment of the “self-named” Peepy directly opposes the actions of Dickens’s professed philanthropist. Paralleling the juxtaposition of Amy Dorrit and Mrs. Clennam, this relationship subverts Mrs. Jellyby’s grand humanitarian efforts by understating the basic care that Esther provides for her son. When “the unfortunate child who had fallen down the stairs” enters the room, Dickens’s narrator notes that Peepy “interrupted the correspondence by presenting himself, with a strip of plaster on his forehead” (*BH* 54) and once again couches Mrs. Jellyby’s neglect in terms of her epistolary efforts with his pun on “correspondence.” She goes on to implore him to “‘Go along, you naughty Peepy!’” before “[fixing] her fine eyes on Africa again” (*BH* 54). Once again revealing her unfortunate priorities, his mother “proceeded with her dictation” and it is here that Esther “ventured quietly to stop poor Peepy as he was going out, and to take him up to nurse” (*BH* 54). Dickens’s adverb once again illuminates Jarndyce’s commentary on the ‘noise’ of charitable people and it is Esther’s silent action with the child which has the greatest impact. Peepy, who “looked very much astonished at [Esther’s tender action] and at Ada’s kissing him;…soon fell fast asleep in
[Esther’s] arms, sobbing at longer and longer intervals, until he was quiet” (BH 54-55) and completes a simple but moving image which accents the tragedy of Mrs. Jellyby’s misguided charity.

Dickens recreates this type of exemplary affection in the home of the Brickmaker and accomplishes a similar comment on Mrs. Pardiggle’s character. Upon her departure from the room, Ada and Esther “approached the woman sitting by the fire, to ask if the baby were ill” (BH 133) and “Ada, whose gentle heart was moved by its appearance, bent down to touch its little face. As she did so, [Esther] saw what happened and drew back. The child died” (BH 134). In an incredibly emotional moment, Ada’s tender act underscores a heartbreaking loss, and as she “[sinks] to her knees beside it,” Dickens’s narrator writes “such compassion, such gentleness, as that with which she bent down weeping, and put her hand upon the mother’s, might have softened any mother’s heart that ever beat” (BH 134). The author continues to describe that “the woman at first gazed on her in astonishment, and then burst into tears” (BH 134) and elicits a powerfully empathetic response from the reader. The anguish and compassion displayed by Ada’s humble physical act, and the passionate reaction of its recipient, augments the condemnation of Mrs. Pardiggle’s failed attempt at philanthropy.

Although there are a number of comparable character pairings and corresponding images of human touch and benevolence in Bleak House, Dickens achieves his most affective and effective commentary of Christian charity by contrasting Jo’s experiences at the hands of (figuratively) Mr. Chadband, and (literally) Guster. Although the Snagsby’s maidservant remains a minor character throughout the novel, her actions are no less exemplary of true Christian charity and her position as a similarly destitute character lends her actions an additional
level of generosity. As Mr. Chadband has “to wrestle, and to combat, and to struggle, and to
conquer, for [Jo’s] sake” (*BH* 414) through the inane ramblings previously discussed, the
depressed young Jo suffers and falls asleep. After being accosted for a second time by the
Reverend’s convoluted dissertations, Jo arises from his tormented slumber and prepares once
again to depart for his life on the streets. Left with nothing but confusion and shame after his
encounter with Chadband, Jo makes his way out of the house, “but down-stairs is the charitable
Guster” (*BH* 415). A common servant described as “warding off a fit,” the narrator informs the
reader that Guster “has her own supper of bread and cheese to hand to Jo” (*BH* 415). Invoking
the New Testament lesson of “a poor widow who dropped in two mites, each half a farthing in
value, and then went quietly away” (*TLOL* 80), Guster clearly reflects Jesus’s lesson:

> Jesus, seeing her do this, as He rose to leave the place called His Disciples about Him,
> and said to them that that the poor widow had been more truly charitable than all the rest
> who had given money that day; for the others were rich and would never miss what they
> had given, but she was very poor, and had given those two mites which might have
> bought her bread to eat. (*TLOL* 80)

After offering Jo her bread, Guster delivers a sympathetic question to him regarding his hunger
and the loss of his parents. It is here that Dickens’s narrator informs the reader that “Jo stops in
the middle of a bit, and looks petrified. For this orphan charge of the Christian Saint whose
shrine was at Tooting, has patted him on the shoulder; and it is the first time in his life that any
decent hand has been so laid upon him” (*BH* 416). In a few short sentences, the lowly Guster
accomplishes more Christian charity that Mr. Chadband does in the entirety of the novel.
In *David Copperfield*, Dickens creates a similar focus on the importance of physical contact, but its most ‘touching’ manifestation is accomplished by its conspicuous absence. In his most brutal victimization at the hands of the Murdstone religion, David receives a savage beating and is sentenced to confinement. Dickens’s unfortunate narrator remembers vividly that “he beat me then, as if he would have beaten me to death… [and] then he was gone; and the door was locked outside; and I was lying fevered and hot, and torn, and sore, and raging in my puny way, upon the floor” (*DC* 69). In the pages that follow, David miserably chronicles his starvation for human contact and the excruciating pain caused by his solitude:

The length of those five days I can convey no idea of to any one. They occupy the place of years in my remembrance. The way which I listened to all the incidents of the house that made themselves audible to me; the ringing of bells, the opening and shutting of doors, the murmuring of voices, the footsteps on the stairs; to any laughing, whistling, or singing, outside, which seemed more dismal than anything else to me in my solitude and disgrace…all this appears to have gone round and round for years instead of days, it is so vividly and strongly stamped on my remembrance. (*DC* 70)

On the final night of his incarceration the clearly established agony of his isolation is temporarily assuaged when David is awakened by his compassionate nurse whispering at the keyhole. As a result of the Murdstone’s ‘firmness,” Peggotty is unable to open the door and offer David any physical comfort. Because of this, the keyhole becomes the focus of both characters’ affection. In the absence of corporeal contact, both David and Peggotty console one another by proxy through their contact with the keyhole. David informs the reader at the beginning of the scene
that “I could hear Peggotty crying softly on her side of the keyhole, as I was doing on mine” (DC 71) and goes on to describe their emotional communication:

Then Peggotty fitted her mouth close to the keyhole, and delivered these words through it with as much feeling and earnestness as a keyhole has ever been the medium of communicating, I will venture to assert: shooting in each broken little sentence in a convulsive little burst of its own. (DC 71)

As David’s devoted nurse goes on to plead that he never forget her, she “fell to kissing the keyhole, as she couldn’t kiss” him and at the conclusion of their brief but demonstrative communication the narrator recalls “we both of us kissed the keyhole with the greatest affection—I patted it with my hand, I recollect, as if it had been her honest face—and parted” (DC 72). The Murdstone’s malevolence has prevented the previously demonstrative Clara from providing David and Peggotty with any love or affection, and these characters have turned to each other as their only source of comfort. Denied the ability to communicate this tenderness and compassion in a physical way, the keyhole becomes the surrogate for their emotive expressions of love.

**Narrative as Faith Construction**

The most fundamental acts of human kindness and empathy from the most humble and unassuming characters in these novels are intentionally juxtaposed with pretentious and voluble claims to philanthropy and “obtrusive professions” of Christianity to complete Dickens’s satire of mid-Victorian evangelical hypocrisy. Supporting Mr. Jarndyce’s assertion that “there were two classes of charitable people” (BH 124), Esther comforts Peepy, Ada merely touches the face and hand of a dying child and grieving mother, and Guster even more modestly pats Jo’s
shoulder to “make no noise at all” in stark contrast to the misguided action and inaction of their foils. Through his depictions of these character pairings and the simple acts of human compassion which subvert the ‘audible charity’ of their counterparts, the author leads his readers to conclude that the Mrs. Jellybys, Mrs. Pardiggle and Mr. Chadbands of the world “certainly did make, in this, as in everything else, a show that was not conciliatory, of doing charity by wholesale, and of dealing in it to a large extent” (BH 133). Similarly, Amy’s hand records the passage of Arthur Clennam from the shadows of his mother’s Old Testament wrath into the arms of her regenerative New Testament love and highlights a similar example of genuine Christian devotion. Although it is accomplished by proxy in *David Copperfield*, the imagery and significance of bodily contact is no less evocative and reinforces the magnitude of the simplest acts of sympathy and empathy.

Taken individually, these scenes of physical contact might simply be attributed to an effective literary aesthetic with incidental implications for Dickens’s Christian worldview. Equally effective in a portrayal of secular passion or benevolent humanism, his focus on the imagery of touch is not unique in and of itself, but when placed in conversation with the distilled version of Jesus-centric Christianity present in *TLOL*, and in concert with the character pairings of Dickens’s churchmen and female icons, Dickens’s specific literary technique emerges as a significant source of magnification of Jesus’s edict to “DO GOOD ALWAYS.”

In his 1861 letter to the Presbyterian minister David Macrae, Dickens was responding to Macrae’s criticism of his portrayal of evangelical Christians. Macrae’s disapproval emerged from his perspective that “while portraying ‘hypocrites as they deserved, [Dickens] had not, on the other side given us amongst his good people, any specimens of earnest Christianity to show
that Christian profession may be marked and yet sincere’” (Hartley 364). In his response, the prolific author assured his detractor of his deep misinterpretation of his work:

With a deep sense of my great responsibility always upon me when I exercise my art, one of my most constant and most earnest endeavours has been to exhibit in all my good people some faint reflections of the teachings of our great Master, and unostentatiously to lead the reader up to those teachings as the great source of all moral goodness. All my strongest illustrations are derived from the New Testament: all my social abuses are shown as departures from its spirit; all my good people are humble, charitable, faithful, and forgiving. Over and over again, I claim them in express words as disciples of the Founder of our religion; but I must admit that to a man (or woman) they all arise and wash their faces, and do not appear unto men to fast. (Hartley 364)

An examination of his representative fiction from the 1840s and 50s and the specific literary techniques he employs within it supports his statement in its entirety. By portraying his “good people” in all their various forms, Dickens has repeatedly depicted characters that emulate the basic goodness of the “Founder of our religion” without making an explicit show of their connections with organized religion. Because of this intentional refusal to classify these characters in terms of traditional Christian taxonomy, critics from Macrae to Oulton have been unable to categorize his specific version of Christianity. Additionally, as a result of “Dickens’s lack of connection to the Church by way of attendance, worship and involvement, talk of his Christian conviction is too often met with more than a little skepticism” (Colledge 2009 138). However, Colledge is right to point out that this “should not be construed as indifference or cynicism toward Christianity” (Colledge 2009 138). On the contrary, it is Dickens’s deep seated
belief in the spirit of the New Testament and his distrust of “narrow construction” of doctrine which prevents him from committing to any one of these classifications. In their adherence to or departure from Jesus’s guiding example, each of his fictional characters represents a portion of his complex and serious Christian convictions. Charles Dickens “undoubtedly thought of himself as a Christian and likely as one having keen insight into what being a Christian really meant,” but he was “never convinced, however, that being part of the Church had much to do with being a Christian” (Colledge 138). Therefore, when he set out to instruct his children and his audience in the lessons of faith, he chose to approach both of these solemn tasks with a grave appreciation for his paternal and authorial responsibilities and an astute appreciation for the power of narrative in the construction faith.
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