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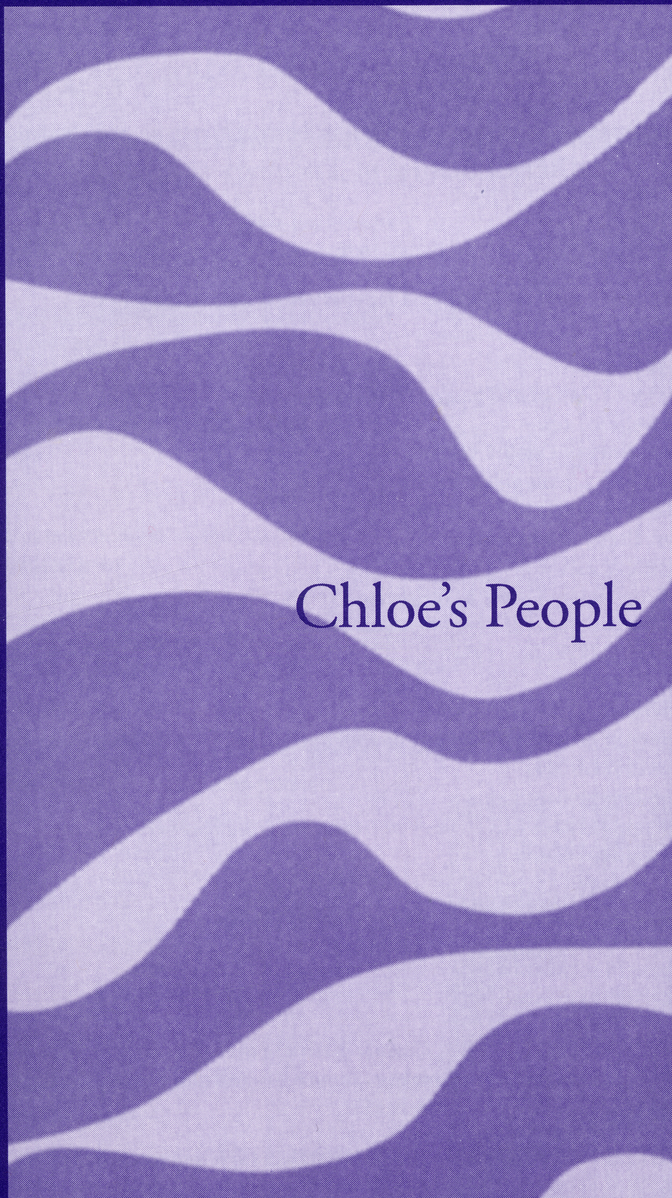

CURRENTS

in Theology and Mission

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in Theology and Mission

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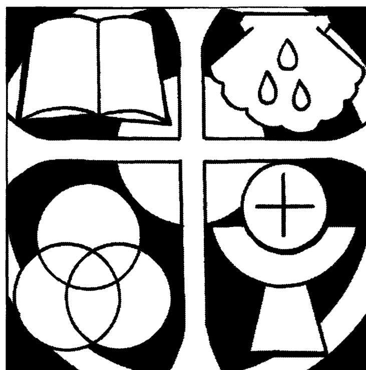

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Craig A. Satterlee

Sunday of the Passion—Seventh Sunday of Easter, Series C
Contributor: George C. Heider

Chloe's People

Chloe was likely a businesswoman from Ephesus whose "people" were probably business agents acting for her. These agents reported to her and to Paul disquieting news from the church in Corinth, notably about serious splits, triumphalism that devalued the cross, and immorality. The articles in this issue, in addition to the one that directly addresses church conflict, deal with issues that can cause division: biblical interpretation, ecumenical relations, mission strategies, and interfaith dialogue. Tradition—the living faith of the dead—and appropriate appreciation of context, our authors insist, can turn potential conflicts into opportunities for growth and mission. We hope you will agree.

Robert Saler brings the theological resources of the Lutheran Confessions into dialogue with contemporary theology by discussing biblical hermeneutics. The key exegetical key used in the Confessions is gospel-formulated-as-promise, with an emphasis on the sacramental/communal dimensions inherent in promise. Promise therefore is more than simple opposition to law. The article suggests that the Lutheran Confessions, properly understood, can incorporate marginalized or disenfranchised "fragments" in radical and prophetic ways. David Tracy has pointed out that the hidden God today "comes to us principally through the interpretive experience and the memory of the suffering of whole peoples, especially the suffering of all those ignored, marginalized, and colonized by the grand narrative of modernity." Because the exegetical category of "promise" presupposes the hiddenness of God—even within God's revelation to human beings—to which the biblical texts bear witness in diverse ways, it can provide means for avoiding the injustices of hegemonic interpretation and for bearing witness to the God whose promises are simultaneously mysterious and sure. To take refuge in the absurd promise of mercy from God disrupts any totalizing schemas that efface what cannot be incorporated. The Cross shatters self-contented isolation and frees us to engage in dialogue with the other without fear.

Winston D. Persaud offers a Lutheran reflection on the document *Eucharist and Ministry*, which was published by the Lutheran–Roman Catholic dialogue in 1970. That document acknowledged that the ministry of the whole people of God and (ordained) Ministry are inextricably bound up with the church's task of proclaiming the gospel to all. Roman Catholic participants conceded that there is no clear biblical evidence that the Twelve were the exclusive Ministers of the Eucharist in New Testament times and also that

there is difficulty in making affirmations about what is necessary in Eucharistic Ministry. On the other hand, they insisted that occasions in the history of the church where priests (rather than bishops) ordained other priests are to be viewed as exceptional and not normal. Nevertheless, the Roman Catholic participants concluded that the Lutheran Church by its devotion to gospel, creed, and sacrament has preserved a form of doctrinal apostolicity. Thirty-five years after *Eucharist and Ministry* was published, the author asks: Would consideration of *missio Dei,* in which the church participates, press us in unprecedented ways to find the way toward intercommunion?

Christopher R. Little points out that "Christianity" made in America is a local phenomenon without universal relevance, as recent mission efforts by evangelicals in Russia and China have demonstrated. American missionaries must make a renewed commitment to contextualization by adopting the model of transculturation. This entails the ability to move from the communicator's culture through biblical cultures to the receptor's culture so that the latter can comprehend God's message. This approach is particularly helpful for mission work in the Arab world. By serving within the honor/shame cultural context of the Arab world, similar to the one in which Christianity initially spread, a brighter day for American missions is possible. The author draws heavily on authors and experiences from the "evangelical" world, but his analysis of the New Testament honor/shame culture and the challenge of witnessing for Christ in a culture other than one's own are relevant to all who want to bear effective witness today.

Jerry L. Schmalenberger discusses congregational conflict, which is a growing phenomenon in Christian communities around the world. Chloe's people in 1 Corinthians reported to Paul that trouble was brewing in the congregation he had started at Corinth. This article reviews publications dealing with levels of conflict (Kenneth Haugk), unmet psychosocial needs that cause people to become dysfunctional in their relationships (Ron Susek), nine common sources of congregational conflict (Roy W. Pneuman), and strategies to solve conflicts (David Augsburger and Dudley Weeks). A special feature of the author's current Asian setting is conflict avoidance in order to save face, with the result that the conflict is never really addressed or resolved. Good preparation can lessen the havoc of conflict—the appointment of a mutual ministry committee, open communication, clear job descriptions for all on the staff, including committee chairs, and well-distributed responsibilities to a number of different people.

Finally, **Harold Vogelaar** has penned an extensive letter to the editor that responds to questions about the nature of Christian-Muslim dialogue at LSTC that were posed in an article by James A. Scherer in our June 2006 issue.

We know nothing about the motivations of Chloe's people or how they informed Paul about their findings. Were they busybodies, antagonists, or peacemakers? Chloe herself possibly typifies one type of woman who belonged to the Pauline community: female heads of households and businesses, women accustomed to social leadership and decision-making roles. Chloe and her people were important enough to evoke the great epistle of 1 Corinthians—not to mention to tie together this issue of *Currents*.

Ralph W. Klein, Editor

The Lutheran Confessional Heritage and Contemporary Hermeneutics

Robert Saler
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

There are at least two compelling reasons why any attempt to bring the theological resources of the Lutheran Confessions into dialogue with the contemporary theological milieu should address the area of biblical hermeneutics. The first depends upon the well-established fact that the Lutheran Confessions understand themselves as deriving their identity from biblical exegesis: "We are certain of our Christian confession and faith on the basis of the divine, prophetic, and apostolic Scripture and have been adequately assured of this in our hearts and Christian consciences through the grace of the Holy Spirit."[1] Like Luther, the confessional authors were less concerned with constructing systematic delineations of theological topics and more interested in explicating the mystery-laden yet comprehensive "logic" of the biblical texts. Any contemporary evaluation of the *theological* vitality of the Lutheran Confessions falls squarely within the realm of *hermeneutical* assessment. Put directly, one can even say that the authentic Lutheran way to judge whether the theology of the Confessions remains valuable for the contemporary age is to determine the tenability of the exegetical framework that the *Book of Concord* (*BC*) brings to bear upon the Bible.

Second, and perhaps even more important, the mid-twentieth century and onward has witnessed an exponential growth in studies seeking to develop overtly theological methods for biblical interpretation. The most remarkable feature of this interest in the relationship between biblical exegesis and constructive theology has been the confluence of input from both professional Bible scholars and theologians. One schema for charting the latter group begins in the early twentieth century with Karl Barth's revised commentary on *The Epistle to the Romans*[2] and traces its influence through the "postliberal" appropriation of Barthian hermeneutics as well as those theologians operating in conscious opposition to postliberal methods. Barth's influence has been apparent also among Bible scholars interested in the renewal of explicitly biblical theologies, most notably in the development of "canonical" criticism by

1. "Preface to the Book of Concord," in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (*BC*), ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 14. The "Epitome" of the Formula of Concord expresses this even more forcefully: "We believe, teach, and confess that the only rule and guiding principle according to which all teachings and teachers are to be evaluated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments alone" (*BC* 486).

2. See Gary Dorrien, *Theology Without Weapons: The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000).

Brevard S. Childs[3] but also in the prolific output of Walter Brueggemann[4] and Rolf Rendtorff.[5] Meanwhile, other thinkers, most notably James Barr, have sought to counter the characteristically Barthian disregard for historical-critical inquiry into the Bible by producing texts on interpretive method in which the rich potential of such criticism for aiding constructive theology is defended.[6] Both exegesis and theology draw heavily upon a third source of insight into textual interpretation, namely, the reinvigorated philosophical inquiry into hermeneutical methods that originates in the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey and culminates in such thinkers as Jürgen Habermas, Hans Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, and Jacques Derrida.

The matrix of philosophical, historical, and theological concerns represented in these ongoing debates represents a prominent *topos* in the contemporary theological landscape. Thus, to the extent that the Lutheran confessional heritage can prove to be a hermeneutically interesting conversation partner in this area, the Confessions themselves represent a viable theological option for those seeking to navigate this landscape with integrity.

I engage in this project of evaluating the exegetical strategies foundational to the Lutheran Confessions in the light of contemporary hermeneutical methods, particularly those favored by theologians seeking to apply these methods to biblical exegesis.[7] I begin by suggesting that the primary exegetical key used by the authors of the Confessions is gospel formulated as promise and not as simply the antimony to "law." In this section I argue that the sacramental/communal dimensions of this hermeneutical category should not be overlooked by those seeking to evaluate its merit as a hermeneutical principle.

I then turn to the work of David Tracy and Brueggemann and suggest that one crucial aspect of the so-called postmodern turn in contemporary hermeneutics is a critique of hegemonic modes of interpretation, specifically those that render univocal texts and traditions that are fundamentally plurivocal and in so doing erect totalizing systems that efface the validity of fragments that cannot be included or even recognized by interpreters operating in and with such totalizing schemas. This particular formulation of the postmodern critique serves as the hinge by which we can then ask: To what extent does the Lutheran confessional tradition fall prey to the danger of totalization? and, conversely, What resources does the tradition possess to incorporate marginalized or disenfranchised fragments in radical and prophetic ways?

The remainder of the essay takes up this question by addressing both the exegetical and political valences implicit in Luther's notion of the "hidden God" (*Deus*

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3. Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1979), and *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

4. See especially his *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

5. Rolf Rendtorff, *Canon and Theology: Overtures to an Old Testament Theology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

6. James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).

7. At various points in this discussion, it may appear that I am using the terms "hermeneutical" and "exegetical" interchangeably. The only operative distinction that I would suggest is that, for the purposes of this essay, exegesis refers specifically to the enterprise of biblical interpretation, while the purview of hermeneutics includes any textual (or textually analogous) artifacts.

absconditus), particularly as Luther applies the theme to his exegesis of select biblical narratives. I argue that, *to the extent* that the exegetical category of "promise" presupposes the hiddenness of the God to which the biblical texts witness in plurivocal fashion, it and the Lutheran tradition itself provide hermeneutically useful means for avoiding the injustices of hegemonic interpretation and for bearing witness to the God whose promises are simultaneously mysterious and sure.

Confessional hermeneutics

When thinking about particularly Lutheran modes of exegesis, it seems natural to move first to the distinction between law and gospel in the biblical witness. According to Günther Gassmann and Scott Hendrix, "Law and gospel originated primarily as a way of interpreting Scripture that made the redeeming work of God in Jesus Christ the center of its story. To recover this center was the intent of the Reformation."[8] In Article V of the Epitome (Formula of Concord), the confessors state that they "believe, teach, and confess that the distinction between law and gospel is to be preserved with great diligence in the church as an especially glorious light, through which the Word of God, in accord with Paul's admonition, is properly divided."[9] Thus, while the distinction is internal to the Bible, at the same time its enactment is the hermeneutical responsibility of the Bible's readers—particularly those who seek to preach in accordance with Reformation tenets.

That differentiation between law and gospel as the fundamental exegetical principle of the Lutheran Confessions has left the tradition open to criticism. In his recent attempt to reformulate Protestant conceptions of law and gospel in the Bible, Michael Welker suggests that sharp distinctions between the two terms have hindered the Protestant tradition's ability to understand either.

> From the Reformation onward, a whole series of simple dichotomies and dualities developed to carry through the process of distinguishing and relating law and gospel. The most popular of these dichotomies is that between "demand" and "gift"... Yet, influential as these dualities have been, to the same extent the dichotomies of demand/gift and imperative/indicative have destroyed the actual persuasive power of the doctrine of law and gospel.[10]

Moreover, according to Welker, the conceptual confusion that has resulted from the sharp dichotomies implied in the reformers' understanding of law and gospel is not the most serious charge to be levied against the Reformation tradition: "The imprint of the Crucified and Risen One on our identity in faith is by no means merely internalized. In my opinion, it belongs among the greatest mistakes of the Reformation to have described faith, because of a polemic against law, as a primarily interior and passive comportment."[11] That is, the difficulty with the distinction is not simply that it lends itself to oversimplification but rather that it renders faith primarily an internal affair that serves only to answer the existential anguish brought on by conviction through law. Welker seems to be suggesting that such a conception of faith as the antimony to law renders the Reformation tradition almost solipsistic in its orientation as a "private relationship of the individual to God."[12]

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8. Günther Gassmann and Scott Hendrix, *Fortress Introduction to the Lutheran Confessions* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 63.

9. "Epitome," *BC* 500.

10. Michael Welker, "Security of Expectations: Reformulating the Theology of Law and Gospel," *The Journal of Religion* 66 (July 1986): 237–38.

11. Welker, "Security," 257.

12. Welker, "Security," 258.

To engage in a full critique of Welker's alternative to this dilemma would take us too far afield here. However, a brief summary of his goals in formulating an alternative will be helpful. While Welker does not wish to dispense with the interpretive framework of law and gospel for doing Protestant theology, his concerns lead him to suggest a thoroughgoing revision of "good news" that, in his view, leaves the faithful Christian more open to loving relations with God and creation.

> Not simply a private relationship of the individual to God, but a communication of persons "before God," as Paul says, characterizes faith. That which is primarily communicated in this process is the *freedom* that is experienced in self-knowledge in Christ. . . . This bestowal of freedom for the purpose not of unsettling but of strengthening the neighbor takes place in love. Love is this bestowal of freedom in which the giver and the recipient of love are strengthened in equal measure and, at the same time, open new, richer possibilities of life to each other. It is in love that faith is effective.[13]

Although we may well ask whether the category of "love" can bear the weight that Welker's reinterpretation of gospel places upon it, for our purposes two more pressing questions emerge. The first is whether the Lutheran Confessional heritage's understanding of gospel excludes the dimensions of permeability and relationality that Welker privileges. The second is whether the understanding of gospel put forth by the Lutheran Confessions falls prey to the simple dichotomies that Welker credits with fostering denigrating internalization of faith. Given that the distinction between law and gospel is central to Lutheran exegesis, is the Confessional tradition therefore the fundamental progenitor of the interpretive and spiritual difficulties that Welker decries? If the thrust of Welker's critique is to be believed, it seems that only a substantial conceptual overhaul could allow the Confessional witness to occupy a useful space in this debate.

I contend that the distinction between law and gospel that is operative in the Lutheran confessional tradition is in fact not recognizable in Welker's critique. He may or may not be correct in ascribing these difficulties to the sweep of generalized "Protestantisms" that have emerged in the wake of the Reformation, but to understand the Lutheran account of gospel as *primarily* the "solution" to the problem posed by law is to miss significant features of the confessional documents' remarks on the shape and character of Christian life. As we will see, a corollary of omission of these nuances is precisely the mistake of regarding the confessional account of faith as "a primarily interior and passive comportment" rather than as a fundamentally relational reality.[14] If this contention is correct, what is needed to make the Lutheran confessional hermeneutic a valuable participant in the contemporary theological horizon is not substantial revision but rather a keener understanding of the Confessions' exegetical principles on the Confessions' own terms.

Let us revisit the Epitome's assertion that the distinction between law and gospel is the *sine qua non* for interpreting the scriptural witness. When one compares the

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13. Welker, "Security," 258–59.

14. To be fair to Welker, it should be emphasized that his critique is of the Reformation tradition as a whole and not specifically the Lutheran confessional documents. My point here is simply that, however valid his critique might be for other aspects of the Protestant tradition, it does not pertain in the case of the Lutheran Confessions. Thus, I am using his argument as a sort of benchmark to highlight the achievement of the confessors in avoiding these difficulties, even where the tradition has not always—a point that I reiterate later on.

more succinct formulation of this principle in the Epitome with the extended version of Article V in the Solid Declaration, however, a new valence emerges. The latter renders the statement as follows:

> The distinction between law and gospel is a particularly glorious light. It serves to divide God's word properly and to explain correctly and make understandable the writings of the holy prophets and apostles. Therefore, we must diligently preserve this distinction, so as not to mix these two teachings together and make the gospel into a law. For this obscures the merit of Christ and *robs troubled consciences of the comfort that they otherwise have in the holy gospel when it is preached clearly and purely.* With the help of this distinction these consciences can sustain themselves in their greatest spiritual struggles against the terror of the law.[15]

At first glance, this article seems to reinforce the critique advanced by Welker, because philosophical strands standing between the worldview of the Confessions and our own intellectual milieu have tended to give "conscience" language somewhat individualistic connotations. However, within the ambit of the confessional writings, the enterprise of comforting troubled consciences is almost invariably imbued with sacramental implications. This is particularly true in Melanchton's theology. As Gassmann and Hendrix point out, the entire argument that Melanchton advances in Article 12 of the Apology "hinges on the principle of law and gospel as the biblically based Lutheran alternative to the medieval sacrament of penance."[16] In other words, Melanchton's texts draw a substantial link between exegesis and sacramental practice. Moreover, this is not an isolated moment in the Confessional corpus. For example, the Smalcald Articles demonstrate that Luther was inclined to highlight the Ten Commandments as a privileged occurrence of law in the Bible; however, in the Small and Large Catechisms his most detailed account of the conscience's terror before the demands of the Ten Commandments (law) and its consolation in the gospel occurs in his explication of the practice of confession, which for Luther was nothing other than the loving proclamation of God's mercy to those exhibiting contrition and repentance.[17] Law and gospel becomes the necessary precursor to proper exercise of the office of the keys.

Law and gospel becomes the necessary precursor to proper exercise of the office of the keys.

Far from being a solitary encounter between the lone penitent and the biblical text, confession is here understood in fully relational terms. The office of the keys necessitates that one person (not necessarily an ordained pastor but any baptized

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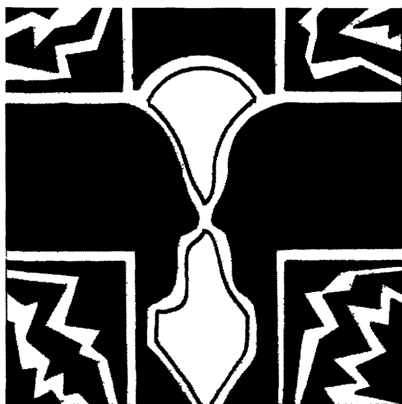
15. "Solid Declaration," *BC* 581; emphasis added. To be sure, the sacramental orientation of the distinction is present in the Epitome as well: "When, however, law and gospel are placed in contrast to each other . . . we believe, teach, and confess that the gospel is not a proclamation of repentance or retribution, but is, strictly speaking, nothing else than a proclamation of comfort and a joyous message which does not rebuke nor terrify but comforts consciences against the terror of the law, directs them solely to Christ's merit, and lifts them up again through the delightful proclamation of the grace and favor of God, won through Christ's merit" ("Epitome," *BC* 501).

16. Gassmann and Hendrix, *Fortress Introduction*, 59.

17. "Small Catechism," *BC* 360–61.



Christian) become the mouthpiece for God's word of forgiveness. The confessional documents are not unified as to whether this occasion should be considered as a sacrament per se,[18] but there can be no question that the practice takes on a sacramental character in its mode of gospel proclamation. But how does "gospel" function in such a sacramental framework?

The salient feature of the Confessions' view of sacraments is that the mode of gospel operative in them is consistently described in terms of God's *promise*. "Lutheran sacramentology moves within the dialectic of 'promise' and 'faith': God made his word of promise visible in specific rites, and [humanity] participates in these rites by faith alone, without the condition of human merit."[19] The dimensions of gospel-as-promise far exceed simple opposition to law; "gospel" here comprehends both individual consolation and communal relations.[20] For Welker, the simple dichotomies that tend to emerge when gospel is simply posited as the "solution" to the "problem" of law have the deleterious effect of rendering faith as a "primarily interior and passive comportment." However, to regard gospel as promise (in the latter term's sacramental valence) avoids both of these difficulties. First, in the Lutheran Confessions' view, participation in sacramental realities is not simply external ornamentation placed upon a fundamentally individualized faith; rather, the most robust definition of faith offered in the Confessions is one that seizes upon the sort of promises from God that always contain sacramental (and thus, communal) overtones. Second, following the Formula of Concord's corrective upon any and all forms

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18. In particular, Melanchton seemed amenable to the idea of listing confession as its own sacrament. However, other confessional documents speak of the practice as comprehended in the first sacrament—that is, baptism. For a fuller discussion of this ambiguity, see Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), esp. chap. 6.

19. Gritsch and Jenson, *Lutheranism*, 73. This dialectic is present throughout the entire confessional corpus, beginning with Article XIII of the Augsburg Confession: "Accordingly, sacraments are to be used so that faith, which believes the promises offered and displayed through the sacraments, may increase." Augsburg Confession, *BC* 47.

20. From this perspective, it seems to me unfortunate that Carl E. Braaten, in his *Principles of Lutheran Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), insists so strongly on this dichotomy as providing the substantive content of the term "gospel." According to him, the Confessions "reach back to the law as a fundamental presupposition of the gospel. The gospel is not the word of God apart from the law" (p. 111). As I indicate below, I am not arguing that the law/gospel dialectic is not essential to Lutheran theology, for it surely is; however, I am suggesting that any assertion of the gospel as the dialectical counterpoint to law should strive to retain the sacramental connotations that I have identified in gospel-as-promise. I am confident that the valence of promise retains both of these without substantial tension.

of synergism as well as its statement on good works,[21] the "passivity" of such faith refers to its character as an unearned gift from God. It is not a warrant for quietism or privileging of inactivity vis-à-vis the neighbor. To put the point as strongly as possible, gospel as *promise* resonates with overtones of community, vulnerability, and commitment to the well-being of the neighbor that can be lost if the substantive content of the gospel is seen primarily as the opposite of law. When the gospel takes on the sacramental valence of promise as opposed to simple opposition to the law, it achieves a richer resonance as both an exegetical principle and as a key for Christian praxis. This does not dispense with the framework of law/gospel, but it does suggest that gospel has important nuances beyond what this duality often implies.

It seems a truism that Lutheran exegesis, including that of the Confessions, tends to operate with a canon-within-the-canon principle. According to Martin Luther,

> All the genuine sacred books agree in this, that all of them preach and inculcate [*treiben*] Christ. And that is the test by which to judge all books, when we see whether or not they inculcate Christ. For all the scriptures show us Christ, Romans 3[:21]; and St. Paul will know nothing but Christ, 1 Corinthians 2[:2]. Whatever does not teach Christ is not yet apostolic, even though St. Peter or St. Paul does the teaching. Again, whatever preaches Christ would be apostolic even if Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod were doing it.[22]

This is what allowed Luther to privilege some texts (the Gospels, Romans, Galatians) while unapologetically disparaging others (James, Revelation). Although the Confessions themselves do not claim this principle as forcefully as Luther, careful reading of the *Book of Concord* suggests that here, too, the "inner canon" that norms interpretation of all Scripture is that which witnesses explicitly to the gospel.

Subverting hegemony in interpretation and praxis

Of the various terms of critical theory currently in circulation, few have suffered from more ambiguity, overuse, and overall lack of conceptual clarity than "postmodernism." The work of Brueggemann is instructive in that his use of the term is consistently accompanied by specific definitions of what is at stake in the discussion. This clarity extends to his work on postmodern biblical interpretation. In a recent article, "Biblical Theology Appropriately Postmodern," Brueggemann seeks to outline a new agenda for biblical hermeneutics that takes seriously the common task shared by both exegesis and religious praxis: the subversion of hegemony. Brueggemann defines the hermeneutical manifestation of hegemony as the imposition of univocity upon a fundamentally plurivocal text:

> The text of the Hebrew Scriptures is profoundly plurivocal and does not admit of settled, enforceable larger categories. This reality in the text of course has been long recognized in Jewish interpretation that proceeded—since the ancient rabbis—by way of commentary, as distinct from a Christian propensity to systematization. This plurivocal quality intrinsic to the text is now deeply reflected in pluralism in interpretation: a plurality of methods, a plurality of interpreting communities, and a plurality of provisional grids of interpretation.[23]

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21. See Epitome, *BC* 492, 498.

22. Quoted in B. A. Gerrish, "The Word of God and the Words of Scripture: Luther and Calvin on Biblical Authority," in *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 55.

23. Brueggemann, "Biblical Theology Appropriately Postmodern," in *Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures*, ed. Alice Ogden Bellis and Joel S. Kaminsky (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 98–99.

> "Above all one must avoid modernity's . . . central temptation: the drive to systematize, to render a totality system."

The "Christian propensity to systematization" of which Brueggemann speaks tends to foreclose the radical dialectics and deconstructive conversations (such as Job's profound questioning of the Wisdom tradition that is reflected in texts like Proverbs or the tension between the truth claims put forth by the psalms of lament and those of praise) that are intrinsic to the text itself in favor of a closed system that privileges some voices but not others. The first step toward countering this is "the recognition that the Christian tradition of interpretation has a deep propensity to give closure, to end the dialectic, to halt the deconstruction, and to arrive as quickly as possible at closure."[24] Brueggemann is here speaking with specific reference to the Hebrew Bible, but many New Testament scholars have argued that the canonical texts of the New Testament are engaged in a similar process of plurivocal, intertextual commentary, as even the most superficial nonsynthetic reading of the four Gospel witnesses shows.[25]

However, deconstruction is not the last word for Brueggemann's position. Instead, his conception of postmodern exegesis favors the continual development of localized readings that are aware of their own grounding assumptions. In his view, this self-awareness necessarily fosters a concomitant sense of finitude that heightens the interpreter's (or the interpreting community's) openness to alternative hermeneutical frameworks.

> No apology for local, provisional reading. Apology is to be made for the cultural seduction of forgetting that our reading is local and provisional and imagining it is total and settled. That seduction, very strong in hegemonic Christianity, leads me to read only in isolation or in the company of other readers like myself. Precisely because the text advocates, sponsors, and insists upon many other readings, my local, provisional reading must perforce be done in the presence of other serious readings . . . that endlessly subvert my own preferred reading.[26]

It should be noted that for Brueggemann such mindfulness of the provisional character of interpretation has political, religious, and ecclesial dimensions in addition to simply interpretive ones. Just as hegemonic interpretation has legitimated the exclusion and violence perpetrated by the powerful against the disenfranchised throughout history, an "appropriately post-

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24. Brueggemann, "Biblical Theology Appropriately Postmodern," 103.

25. See Bart D. Ehrman's opening remarks in his introductory textbook on the subject: "In order to anticipate my approach, I might simply point out that historians who have carefully examined the New Testament have found that its authors do, in fact, embody remarkably different points of view. These scholars have concluded that the most fruitful way to interpret the New Testament authors is to read them individually rather than collectively. Each other should be allowed to have his own say, and should not be too quickly reconciled with the point of view of another. . . . Following this principle, scholars have been struck by the rich diversity represented within the pages of the New Testament." *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 13.

26. Brueggemann, "Biblical Theology Appropriately Postmodern," 106.

modern" framework welcomes participation of the other in the play of deconstruction and reconstruction.

As a starting point for rendering Brueggemann's exegetical point in philosophical language, we may profitably consider an exchange between Tracy (a Roman Catholic theologian) and Derrida (the father of French deconstruction) that took place at a conference titled "Religion and Postmodernism" at Villanova University in 1997.[27] The title of Tracy's paper, "Fragments: The Spiritual Situation of Our Times," gives some indication of the two arcs that he pursues in his discussion: assessment of post-Enlightenment intellectual cartography and the necessary role of fragments within that map. First, he gives an account of the failure of various modernities (particularly the Enlightenment, culminating in the writings of Kant and Hegel) to fully repress aspects of history and reality that cannot be assimilated into an overarching and unified schema. The repression of these "other(s)" necessitated the emergence of alternate modes of thought, modes that are grouped (again, perhaps too easily) under the heading of postmodernism: "Most forms of postmodernity are explosions of once-forgotten, marginalized, and repressed realities in Enlightenment modernity: the other, the different, above all . . . the fragments," which, by Tracy's definitions, "disallow any totality system by demanding attention to the other, especially the different and marginal other." One such "other" is "any saturated form of the religious phenomenon."[28] After tracing an interpretive line through such early critics as Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Gerschom Scholem, Tracy concludes that the legacy of these thinkers necessitates that fragments be considered "a dominant metaphor for twentieth-century Western thought both early and late"; moreover, this age that is defined by the inevitability of fragmentation "is not so bad a place to be."[29] He argues that the preservation of the fragment—be it a literary/philosophical form, a subject, a field of inquiry, or an individual—is a salutary principle for contemporary method.

> Above all one must avoid modernity's (not only Hegel's) central temptation: the drive to systematize, to render a totality system. To render any totality system present is to efface the fragment, the distinct and potentially explosive image in favor of some larger conceptual architectonic of which the fragment is now made a part.[30]

By recovering saturated and irrepressible fragments of the past as well as consciously respecting the integrity (so to speak) of fragments within current theological/philosophical speculation, contemporary thinkers can mine the benefits of what previously has been considered a hindrance to these disciplines. In other words, fragments *qua* fragments become sites for potential insight and affirmation of plurality rather than problems to be solved within a larger schema.

Tracy goes on to link the notion of the fragment with the enterprise of naming God. Moreover, his suggestion seems to be that God cannot be named (by humans, at least) as any kind of totality system because our conceptions of God must retain the possibility of being challenged by (and reconfigured in light of) the alternate witness of the other, the fragments that cannot be fully thematized in them. For projects

27. This has been published as *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

28. David Tracy, "Fragments: The Spiritual Situation of Our Times," in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, 171.

29. Tracy, "Fragments," 173.

30. Tracy, "Fragments," 178.

like my own that seek to insert characteristically Lutheran principles into this critique, it is striking that Tracy elsewhere chooses to explicate this principle of alterity using the *Deus absconditus* of Luther. In his essay "The Hidden God: The Divine Other of Liberation" Tracy makes explicit the political and practical ramifications of modern totalities and God's mysteries.

> The Hidden-Revealed God at its most fearsome and radical has reentered theological thought again. But that entry is not now principally through the estranged and alienated self of the earlier existentialist theologians, those admirable and deeply troubled moderns. The entry of the Hidden-Revealed God now comes to us principally through the interruptive experience and the memory of the suffering of whole peoples, especially the suffering of all those ignored, marginalized, and colonized by the grand narrative of modernity. . . . Into that interruption the apocalyptic God of power, hope, and awe often becomes at once the God of Lamentations and Job and the God of Exodus, struggle, and joy. The Hidden God returns to undo the power of the modern *logos* over God in many modern theologies.[31]

Careful attention to Tracy's point here shows that he is not simply referring to theodicy; rather, his description of the hidden God is a variation on the totality/fragment distinction outlined above. Here, however, that distinction takes on explicitly political as well as religious dimensions. The "fragments" here are not just intellectual schemas that cannot be thematized within larger interpretive edifices but rather whole human populations that find their needs, values, and worldviews disenfranchised by the controlling narrative of modernity. The function of the *Deus absconditus*, then, is one of simultaneous rupture and liberation: rupture in that the totalizing narratives are exposed as (in Brueggemann's terms) "local, provisional" systems rather than universally comprehensive and valid interpretations of reality, and liberation in that this disruption allows previously silenced voices a new hearing in intellectual, religious, and political realms. When coercive univocity is theo-logically expanded into plurivocity (or, better, when God becomes the means by which existing plurivocity asserts itself against illusory univocity), our interpretation becomes both more humane and, perhaps even more important, more reflective of the complex world in which all human interpretation must happen.

This is the essential hinge upon which the intersection of biblical exegesis and hermeneutically libratory practice hangs: The exegetical principles by which one interprets the identity-giving texts of one's own tradition mirror one's willingness to have those principles be sufficiently open-ended to allow continual dialogue between familiarity and alterity. As I argue below, the Lutheran tradition has rarely succeeded at achieving such a hermeneutical stance. However, I also contend that the tradition contains resources that may permit contemporary Lutherans to reappropriate their key exegetical principle (gospel-as-promise) in ways that boldly affirm plurivocity and lovingly seek dialogue with the Other. One of these key resources is Luther's notion of the hidden God as that God is revealed through Scripture.

Luther, *Deus absconditus*, and biblical hermeneutics

Luther's Old Testament commentaries are perhaps where we see most clearly how he understands promise to be the central mode by which God relates to human beings. "Faith is assuredly nothing else—nor can it be anything else—than giving assent to a

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31. David Tracy, "The Hidden God: The Divine Other of Liberation," *Cross Currents* 46 (Spring 1996): 8.

promise. . . . The only faith that justifies is the faith that deals with God in His promises and accepts them."[32] Because the enterprise of human faith remains the same across all of human history, Luther regarded certain Old Testament figures as models of that faith and thus used their stories as illustrations of the character of God's promises. Likewise, these narratives provided him with exemplars of proper human response to those promises. While Luther remained clear that trust in God is never a human possibility (and thus requires God's gratis donation of it in its entirety), he nonetheless valued the stories of Noah, Abraham, and Isaac for their vivid depictions of the trials of faith lived amid the uncertainty of the world, the devil, and (most important) God.

This last statement points to the backdrop against which Luther sees all of the Old Testament narratives taking place: the hidden God. As B.A. Gerrish points out in an influential essay, in Luther's theology God's hiddenness has two forms.[33] First, Luther distinguishes between God as he[34] reveals himself (in the biblical texts, the Incarnation, and the sacraments) to humans and the Divine Nature in and of itself.[35] This latter is the "majesty" or "uncovered God" to which Luther often refers.[36] This God is hidden outside of history and outside of revelation. Second, Luther describes God's hiddenness even within God's revelations to human beings. God's hiddenness within revelation names the condition whereby God relates to humanity in a manner that seems utterly contradictory and irrational. Whether one is discussing the cross, the Incarnation, or God's direct commands as witnessed to by Scripture, God continually alienates Godself from human reason. God's promises must be trusted in faith rather than apprehended in reason precisely because those promises come to humans in a form that seems contradictory. For that reason, faith in the true God is often a lonely undertaking that subjects one to the full brunt of reason's hostility.

One of the earliest examples of the trials of faith is Noah, with whom (for reasons that will become clear) Luther always identified: "Noah is an illustrious and grand example of faith. He withstood the opinions of the world with heroic steadfastness and was able to believe that he was righteous, but that all the rest of the world was unrighteous."[37] One of the narrative points upon which Luther focuses is the fact that Noah chooses to take a wife *after*

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32. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis 15–20*, vol. 3 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1961), 24.

33. Gerrish, "To the Unknown God: Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God," in *The Old Protestantism and the New*, 131–49.

34. I follow Luther's use of masculine language for God in this section only with the understanding that it is appropriate to explications of Luther's theology and not my own proposal.

35. "God in his essence is altogether unknowable; nor is it possible to define or put into words what He is, though we burst in the effort. It is for this reason that God lowers Himself to the level of our weak comprehension and presents Himself to us in images, in coverings, as it were, in simplicity adapted to a child, that in some measure it may be possible for Him to be known by us." Luther, *Lectures on Genesis 6–14*, vol. 2 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1960), 45.

36. "And let us be satisfied with this picture, as it were; and let us shun that inquisitiveness of human nature which wants to investigate His majesty. For God's incarnation was foretold in order that we might have a definite pattern for recognizing and taking hold of God." Luther, *Lectures on Genesis 21–25*, vol. 4 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964), 133.

37. Luther, *Lectures on Genesis 6–14*, 87; see also *Lectures on Genesis 21–25*, 26.

he receives the message from God that the whole world will be destroyed. However, Noah's belief in and expounding of God's promise to destroy the entire earth with the exception of him and his family enacts an even more fundamental contradiction in the world's eyes, because it is at odds with two of God's own earlier promises: Genesis 3:15's prophecy concerning the Seed that will crush the head of Satan and God's statement to Adam that humanity was designed by God to have dominion over all of the earth.

> Undoubtedly the descendants of the patriarchs who perished in the Flood vastly overstated their argument about the prestige of the church. They charged Noah with blasphemies and lies. "Stating that God is about to destroy the whole world by the Flood," they maintained, "is the same as saying that God is not compassionate and not a father, but a cruel tyrant. Noah, you are preaching the wrath of God! Has not God promised deliverance from sin and death through the Seed of the woman? . . . We are God's people, and we have outstanding gifts of God."
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> There is no doubt that the children of the world cited all these objections to Noah when he was preaching about the coming total destruction, and that they openly charged him with lying; since the household, the state, and the church were established by God, God would not utterly destroy what He had established. They maintained that man was created in order to procreate and to have dominion over the earth, and therefore that water would not overwhelm and destroy him.[38]

Luther equates Noah's interlocutors with the false church which distorts God's promises to fit its own dictates of rationality; by implication, then, Noah is linked with the persecuted minority of true believers who trust in God's promises despite their seeming incoherence and the logical impossibility of apprehending them through reason. Characteristically, Luther does not charge Noah's opponents with a lack of religion; they are "godless" not because they lack a god but because they are unable to seize hold of the commands of the true God in faith. The result is that they fulfill their own desire for status before the true God by clinging to their imagined merits. In doing so, they respond to a god of their own fashioning.

The parallels between Luther's exegesis and his understanding of the ecclesiological differences between the medieval Church and the Reformation are obvious; however, more than polemics is occurring here. The deeper issue has to do with the precise character of the saving faith that both Noah and the true church display. The question of whether or not one possesses this faith is fraught with soteriological significance, so a central concern for Luther is to delineate its characteristics correctly.

Interestingly, for all his disparagement of Noah's antagonists and his own sixteenth-century opponents, Luther never denies the validity of the point that he ascribes to them concerning the irrationality of Noah and the Reformation's preaching. Again, not only does God's injunction to Noah to both get married and preach the world's destruction make no sense; even more distressingly, God's apparent decision to eliminate his creation appears to negate his earlier promises to humanity. Here God is hidden within his own revelation, covered over by the alienating character of his messages. The faith for which Luther praises Noah, however, is precisely that which holds fast to both sides of the contradiction without attempting to reconcile them. "After the verdict had been rendered about the destruction of the world, he obeys God, who calls upon him to marry, and believes God, that even if the entire world should perish, he himself will be saved together with his children. This is an

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38. *Lectures on Genesis 6–14*, 53, 64.

outstanding faith, worthy of our reflection."[39] Noah is a model for the faith of the true church because, since there was no question of his being able to apprehend God's promises with his reason, it was necessary for him to relate to God in a relationship of pure trust unaided by his understanding.

The character of such trust is the subject matter of one of the most important texts in the entire Bible for Luther's project, namely Gen 15:6: "And he believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness." Abraham, the "he" in this verse, is the father of faith because he is the Bible's first explicit example of *sola fide, sola gratia.*

Luther reads Gen 15:6 in light of Rom 4:20–24 ("No distrust made [Abraham] waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised. Therefore his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness. Now the words 'It was reckoned to him' were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also") and Rom 15:4 ("For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope").

As with Noah, the chronology of Abraham's story is particularly important to Luther's exegesis. Prior to the Lord's calling Abram in Gen 12:1, Luther ascribes to Abram a lifestyle that is perfectly ethical by any reasonable standard. The fact that Abram was a virtuous man, however, did not alter the fact that he was partaking of the idolatrous religion of his ancestors. Only God's summons empowered Abram to go forth out of that state of affairs. He could not have extracted himself by any other means: "This blessing of deliverance from idolatry has its source, not in his own merits or powers but solely in a God who pities and calls him."[40] Abraham had to undertake the lonely journey of faith in response to a summons that could not be squared with the worldview that had previously made sense to him. His initial gesture of faith is to place his will in subjection to God's word, and Luther has no illusions about the fact that this is never an easy task for anyone.

On Luther's account, "faith is assuredly nothing else . . . than giving assent to a promise.

Moreover, once Abraham has gone forth according to God's command, he is greeted with the defining promise of his narrative, as God tells him that his advanced age and childless state will not prevent God from making his descendants as numerous as the stars (Gen 15:5). This is the promise to which Abraham's peerless faith reacts with trust, and his assent becomes the occasion of his full righteousness before God. "How, then, did Abraham attain righteousness? In this way: God speaks, and Abraham believes what God is saying."[41] On Luther's account, "faith is assuredly nothing else—nor can it be anything else—than giving assent to a promise . . . the only faith that justifies is the faith that deals with God in his promises

39. *Lectures on Genesis 6–14*, 27.
40. *Lectures on Genesis 6–14*, 246.
41. *Lectures on Genesis 15–20*, 21.

and accepts them."[42] Prior to Abraham's doing any works that might have justified him before God according to his own merits, righteousness is imputed to him solely because God has provided him with the capacity to believe that God can achieve what God promises.[43] God's gift of faith is the necessary and sufficient condition for righteousness.

> God's gift of faith is the necessary and sufficient condition for righteousness.

Abraham is more than just an example of a life lived in a state of constant readiness to believe God's promises, for Genesis 22 raises the stakes dramatically when Abraham is forced to face a trial of faith greater than anything that previously has been revealed in the Old Testament. "For here Scripture states plainly that Abraham was actually tempted by God Himself, not concerning a woman, gold, silver, death, or life but concerning a contradiction of Holy Scripture."[44] This is an example of God's hiddenness within revelation par excellence: Like Noah, Abraham is faced with a command from God that seems to stand in direct opposition to the promise that defined Abraham's faith, namely that Isaac would be the heir by which Abraham's descendants would become as numerous as the stars. By ordering Abraham to kill Isaac, God tempts Abraham toward despair (the inevitable precursor to hatred of God) or toward mistrust of God's good will toward him. The child that was to be the pledge of God's fulfilling his promise to Abraham now becomes the wedge driving him away from trust in such a fickle and brutal deity.

Abraham's solution to this profound existential quandary resembles that of Noah. He obeys and holds fast to both sides of the contradiction in God's word without subordinating or mitigating either one.[45] In Abraham's case, Luther describes this as taking *refuge* in the fundamental promise amid the storms created by temptation, most especially the temptation that comes from God. "Our only consolation is that in affliction we take refuge in the promise."[46] Abraham's ability to do this stems from his trust not just in God's words to him but in God's very nature: Despite the fact that God continually comes to human beings *sub contrariis*, God does not lie. Thus, though God "seems to be dealing with us as though he had forgotten his promises, faith in the Word must nevertheless be retained, and the promise must be stressed—namely, that it is true and dependable—even if the manner, time, occasion, place, and other particulars are unknown. For the fact that God cannot lie is sure and dependable."[47] In the case of Abraham and Isaac, the particular object of trust is the fact that God is powerful enough to hold opposites together: Isaac will be sacrificed as a burnt

42. *Lectures on Genesis 15–20*, 48.

43. "For righteousness is given to Abraham not because he performs works but because he believes. Nor is it given to faith as a work of ours; it is given because of God's thought, which faith lays hold of." *Lectures on Genesis 15–20*, 22.

44. *Lectures on Genesis 21–25*, 92.

45. Luther also attributes this faith (manifested as Christlike obedience) to Isaac. *Lectures on Genesis 21–25*, 114.

46. *Lectures on Genesis 21–25*, 93.

47. *Lectures on Genesis 21–25*, 97.

offering *and* will be the means by which Abraham's descendants range over the earth.[48] The simultaneous retention of opposites is abhorrent to reason, but it is the primary mode of God's relation to humanity. Faith is what grasps this. Thus, the salvation of Isaac (which comes about when God once again issues a command that contradicts a previous one) is ultimately less central to Luther's exegesis than the anguished but steadfast faith that Abraham and Isaac display throughout the story.

The theme that unites all three instances of Luther's exegesis is that faith in the promise is primarily trust that God is powerful enough to bring about that which reason declares to be impossible. Translated into the language of justification, this is the essence of *sola fide*: a doctrine that is absurd according to all human categories but is a sure refuge for Christians whose lives of trust ensure that they will be assailed by doubt, despair, and the trials of faith. The narratives of the patriarchs are valuable to Luther because they depict not saints whose merits contribute to their own salvation but rather virtuosos of trust whose assent to God's promises becomes the foundation of their righteousness before a hidden but ultimately merciful God. The main point here is that, in Luther's exegesis, faith in the gospel as promise is inextricable from the hiddenness of the God who makes the promise. Faith in the gospel and God's hiddenness are equally biblical truths.

Given the critique of inwardness that we dealt with above, a serious question arises here: Does Luther's exegesis of these narratives return the notion of faith to a solely existential grasping of a privatized promise? Put differently, does Luther's account of God's promises fail to resonate with the same sacramental overtones that I ascribed to the Confessions?

There are two reasons to believe that it does not fail. The first thing to remember is that from the time of his earliest theological writings (especially the three 1520 treatises *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, and *The Freedom of a Christian*) Luther consistently links faith in God's promises to both salutary sacramental practices and "freedom" to serve the neighbor without fear or calculation of merit. Second, as we saw in Tracy and Brueggemann, to the extent that the hidden God acts to destabilize totalizing systems, it necessarily forces dialogue with the other that has been unincorporated into the (previously) comprehensive interpretive framework. I certainly do not wish to claim that Luther himself (or the tradition that followed him) carried this theological principle through to a stance that was open to such correction and dialogue.[49] Rather, my point is that such a stance does not contradict the foundational exegetical principles that he employed and may in fact be a more consistent

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48. "These trials of the saintly patriarch have been set before us in order that we may be encouraged in our own trials and say with Abraham: 'Though my son Isaac dies, nevertheless, because he believes in God, the very grave in which his ashes will lie will not be a grave but will be a bedchamber and a sleeping room.' 'On the contrary,' says reason, "the opposite is manifest. The flesh turns to dust, and worms consume it.' But this neither hinders nor annuls the Word of God, for these two statements which God makes to Adam—"You are dust, and to dust you shall return" and "The Seed shall crush the head of the serpent"—belong together." *Lectures on Genesis 21–25*, 97.

49. To be sure, both here and in the section that follows it is necessary to retain this distinction between what Lutherans (including the confessors) *have* done historically and what Lutheran principles allow contemporary Lutheran theologians to do. My argument depends on there being a (potentially sizable)

outworking of this theology than the polemics to which he (and the tradition that bears his name) was given.[50]

For now, it is important to recognize another link between Tracy's invocation of the hidden God as a libratory force and Luther's use of it as an exegetical principle. For Luther, both forms of God's hiddenness (hiddenness within and without revelation) place continual reservations upon the constructions that fallen human reason erects to reach, Babel-style, religious truths. This led Luther to a strong theology of the Cross by which human reason must finally take refuge in the primary site of God's irrational mercy. To take refuge in the Cross is to take refuge in the absurd promise of mercy from God, and when taken to its extreme this reality disrupts any totalizing schemas (including hermeneutical strategies of interpreting the witness to God's mercy, for example the Bible) that efface what cannot be incorporated. Although nearly half a millennium separates Luther's Bible reading from our own, in this regard he is our contemporary. His "premodern" and "precritical" exegesis may well be among our most vital resources when carrying out interpretation in the shadow of modernity's failures.

Witness to mercy in many voices

Based on the above sections, we can now identify three baseline assertions to guide our conclusions. First, the gospel that serves as the privileged exegetical key for the Lutheran Confessions can be conceived most appropriately as God's *promise*—with all of the sacramental overtones that the term takes on in the *BC*. Second, any biblical hermeneutics that seek to be, in Brueggemann's phrase, "appropriately postmodern," must avoid erecting frameworks of totalizing interpretation that marginalize and exclude the "fragments" of alterity that could potentially serve as a corrective upon hegemony, both intellectual and political. Third, gospel as promise is the key hinge from which Luther derives the essentials of the biblical witness; however, his notion of promise is inextricable from his contention that the *Deus absconditus* is an equally biblical reality. Thus, one of the most important points of contact between the Bible's witness and human reality is that both are sites for the inbreaking of a God whose promises shatter human reason—and, tellingly, all totalizing structures/strictures that would seek to domesticate God through nomination and systematization—even as they are fully validated in Christ. The task of drawing conclusions for contemporary interpretation and practice, then, will be to synthesize these claims into a reformulation of Confessional orthodoxy in light of their content.

A new confessional orthodoxy

Luther felt that to attempt to diminish the radical impact of the *Deus absconditus* was to fall into the dangerous and idolatrous trap laid by theologies of glory. From this perspective, the main question at stake in the Confessions' biblical exegesis is this:

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gap between historical practice and future possibilities; however, one could suggest that any tradition that wishes to remain vital from age to age must perpetually include possibilities for reinterpretation that have not necessarily been instantiated in its history. I contend that this is certainly true in the case of the theological legacy of the Lutheran Confessions.

50. Nowhere is this failure of dialogue and self-correction more sadly evident than in the reprehensible suggestions that Luther made concerning Europe's Jewish population in his later writings.

To what extent does the gospel-as-promise in the Confessions presuppose Luther's hidden God? To be sure, the *Deus absconditus* is never explicitly referenced in the *BC*. Perhaps that is the main reason why, historically, Lutheran Orthodoxy failed to allow this theological notion—or at the very least its radical implications for exegesis and theology—to penetrate the scholastic rigors of its confessionalism. Having outlined the links between God's promises and God's hiddenness in Luther's theology, however, we are in a position to imagine a new kind of Confessional orthodoxy that takes seriously the idea that to have the gospel-as-promise as one's primary exegetical principle is to practice the kind of interpretation that Brueggemann and Tracy both advocate: nonhegemonic, open to continual correction through a dialectic of deconstruction and reconstruction, respecting of biblical plurivocity, and self-aware in its finitude. This more radical notion of gospel-as-promise possesses the sort of permeability and communal relationality that Welker prizes and brings our methods of exegesis and our sacramental practices fully into alignment—something that should be the goal of every Lutheran seeking to honor the spirit of Reformation ecclesiology.

To the extent that the exegetical hinge of gospel-as-promise employed by the Confessions presupposes the libratory and totality-shattering *Deus absconditus* of Luther's own exegesis, such explicitly Confessional exegesis stands as a theologically interesting, textually plausible, and hermeneutically sophisticated contribution to contemporary thinking about the relationship between the Bible and constructive theology. It is trust in the mysterious grace of this God and taking refuge in the promises that render null and void all efforts to capture God in concepts that marks true allegiance to the Confessions. The Lutheran Confessions are ultimately nothing more than a witness to the Bible's witness, and both witness to a God whose Cross shatters self-contented isolation and frees us to engage in dialogue with the other without fear.

A Lutheran Reflection on *Eucharist and Ministry*

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In relation to the theme of Round X of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue USA, "The Church as Koinonia of Salvation: Its Structures and Ministries,"[1] of the three documents previously published (*Eucharist and Ministry*,[2] *Facing Unity*,[3] and *The Porvoo Common Statement*[4]), I find *Eucharist and Ministry* particularly helpful. In what follows,[5] I highlight some of the essential points in *Eucharist and Ministry* in relation to the critical question of a valid Ministry. I do so by relying on direct quotations so that the text speaks for itself.

I am keenly aware that, since 1970, when *Eucharist and Ministry* was published, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, through two of its predecessor church bodies—The American Lutheran Church (ALC) and the Lutheran Church in America (LCA)—has been ordaining women into the Ministry of Word and Sacrament.[6] This now poses the question of *who* can be validly ordained, in conjunction with the question of *what* constitutes a valid ordination. For the ELCA, the practice of ordaining women into the Ministry of Word and Sacrament is not open to renegotiation.

The focus of *Eucharist and Ministry* is on the "valid Ministry in relation to the eucharist."[7] In the Foreword, Paul C. Empie and T. Austin Murphy note that after the "remarkable advance in convergence toward a common understanding" of "The

1. *The Church as Koinonia of Salvation: Its Structures and Ministries*, Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue—X, ed. Randall Lee and Jeffrey Gros, FSC (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005). The official statement was finalized at the April 2004 meeting of Round X of the Lutheran–Roman Catholic Dialogue USA, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

2. *Eucharist and Ministry*. Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue IV. New York: U.S.A. National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation, and Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1970.

3. *Facing Unity*. Models, Forms and Phases of Catholic–Lutheran Church Fellowship. Roman Catholic/Lutheran Joint Commission. Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1985.

4. *The Porvoo Common Statement*. Conversations between The British and Irish Anglican Churches and The Nordic and Baltic Lutheran Churches. First published by the Council for Christian Unity of the General Synod of the Church of England, 1993.

5. A version of this essay was originally presented at a meeting of the L–RC Dialogue USA, Round X, Fort Lauderdale, FL, 2–5 November 1999. This version contains a few necessary and critical emendations.

6. In its constitution (adopted on 3 December 1976), The Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC), which joined the ALC and LCA in forming

Eucharist as Sacrifice,"[8] "It seemed natural to take up as the next point the question of intercommunion. . . . A weekend of conversation on this subject quickly revealed that one could not even discuss the matter without considering the *key question of a valid Ministry in relation to the administration of the eucharist*" (p. 3; emphasis added).

On the mission of the church, in which all share, both lay and ordained, and the distinction between the ministry and the Ministry, paragraph #9 of the statement "Eucharist and Ministry: A Lutheran–Roman Catholic Statement," "Common Observations on Eucharistic Ministry," reads:

> The church has, then, the task of proclaiming the gospel to all, believers and unbelievers. This task or service of the whole church is spoken of as "ministry" (*diakonia*). In the course of this statement, we employ the term ministry (lower case *m*, with or without the definite article) in this sense. The ministry of the church, thus defined, will be distinguished from the (or a) Ministry, a particular form of service—a specific order, function or gift (charism) within and for sake of Christ's church in its mission to the world. The term Minister in this document refers to the person to whom this Ministry has been entrusted. *We are convinced that the special Ministry must not be discussed in isolation but in the context of the ministry of the whole people of God.* (p. 9; emphasis added)

The reader needs to keep in mind the clear and unambiguous declaration in the foregoing that both the ministry and the Ministry are fundamentally and inextricably bound up with the church's "task of proclaiming the gospel to all, believers and unbelievers," and "Christ's church in its mission to the world." In the pursuit of visible unity of the church, this evangelical and missional commitment undergirds the dialogue itself.

On the question of the Special Ministry, its peculiar character and function, the statement adds, in paragraphs #12 and #13:

> Just as the church is to be seen in the light of God's love, his act in Christ, and the work of the Spirit, so also the Ministry is to be seen in light of the love of God, his saving act in Jesus Christ, and the ongoing activity of the Holy Spirit. This Ministry has the twofold task of proclaiming the gospel to the world—evangelizing, witnessing, serving—and of building up in Christ those who already believe—teaching, exhorting, reproving, and sanctifying, by word and sacrament. For this twofold work, the Spirit endows the Ministry with varieties of gifts, and thus helps the church to meet new situations in its pilgrimage. Through proclamation of the word and administration of the sacraments, this Ministry serves to unify and order the church in a special way for its ministry.
>
> The Ministry stands with the people of God under Christ but also speaks in the name of Christ to his people. On the one hand, the Ministry as part of the church's ministry stands under the Word and the Spirit, under judgment as well as under grace. But it also has a special role within the ministry of the people of God, proclaiming God's Word, administering the sacraments, exhorting and reproving. (pp. 10f.)

In the "common observations" it is noted, also, that both the Lutheran stress on "succession in apostolic doctrine" and the Roman Catholic understanding of "apostolic succession" are well grounded. "Historical studies have shown that in the New Testament and patristic periods there was stress on doctrinal succession; there also arose an emphasis on succession in apostolic office as a very important way of ensuring doctrinal succession and thus providing a sign of unity and defense against heresy" (p. 12).

In the "Reflections of the Lutheran Participants," the centrality of the gospel in

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the ELCA, in 1988, made it clear that women were eligible for ordination.

7. *Eucharist and Ministry*, 10.

8. This was the focus of Round III. See *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue I–III*, ed. Paul C. Empie and T. Austin Murphy (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1965).

determining when and where the church truly exists, and the consequent need for the office of ministry are given the place of prominence. Of special note is the positive appraisal of the Roman Catholic Church's Ministry and sacraments. In paragraphs #24 and #25, the Lutheran participants state:

On the basis of their confessional writings, Lutherans also affirm the churchly character of the Roman Catholic community and the validity of the Roman Catholic Church's Ministry and sacraments. For Lutherans the church exists wherever there is a community of believers among whom the gospel of God's grace in Christ is responsibly proclaimed and applied and the sacraments are administered in accordance with our Lord's intention. The responsible proclaiming and applying of the gospel and administration of the sacraments require that persons be set aside for this office and function.

Some Lutherans have had misgivings in the area of Roman Catholic commitment to the gospel. Nevertheless, Lutherans have always held that as long as the gospel is proclaimed in any Christian community in such a way that it remains the gospel and as long as the sacraments are administered in that community in such a way that they are channels of the Holy Spirit, human beings are through these means reborn to everlasting life and the church continues to subsist in these communities. *We believe that the Roman Catholic church meets these criteria.* (pp. 17f.; emphasis added)

Notwithstanding these positive affirmations, the Lutherans are sanguine about some remaining obstacles to "pulpit and altar fellowship." Thus in paragraph #33, we read:

Although we see our common statement as removing some of the obstacles that separate Roman Catholics and Lutherans, there are still problems to be discussed before we can recommend pulpit and altar fellowship. The common statement that precedes these reflections does not provide an adequate basis for the establishment of such a fellowship. Nor does it constitute approval by either community of every practice fostered or tolerated by the other community. (p. 21f.)

The concluding paragraph (#35) of the statement by the Lutheran participants is instructive.[9] There are no grounds for not recognizing the Roman Catholic Church as "an authentic church of Jesus Christ" or its ordained Ministers as fully valid. Authenticity and validity are unequivocally stated.

As Lutherans, we joyfully witness that in theological dialogue with our Roman Catholic partners we have again seen clearly a fidelity to the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments which confirms our historic conviction that the Roman Catholic church is an authentic church of our Lord Jesus Christ. For this reason we recommend to those who have appointed us that through appropriate channels the participating Lutheran churches be urged to declare formally their judgment that the ordained Ministers of the Roman Catholic church are engaged in a valid Ministry of the gospel, announcing the gospel of Christ and administering the sacraments of faith as their chief responsibilities, and that the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ is truly present in their celebrations of the sacrament of the altar. (p. 22)

In appraising the "Reflections of the Roman Catholic Participants," the critical question that is before us is: Do Roman Catholics consider Lutheran eucharistic Ministry "to be deficient in what Catholics have hitherto regarded as essential elements"? (see p. 23). In paragraph #36, the Roman Catholic participants write:

At first glance the Roman Catholic attitude toward the Lutheran eucharistic Ministry would seem easily determinable. A simplified expression of the traditional Roman Catholic outlook is that those who preside at the eucharist do so in virtue of being ordained by a bishop who stands in succession to the apostles who received from

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9. Here already we see a positive openness that would contribute to the "harvest" which the *Joint Declaration*, signed on 31 October 1999, represents. See *The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge, U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000).

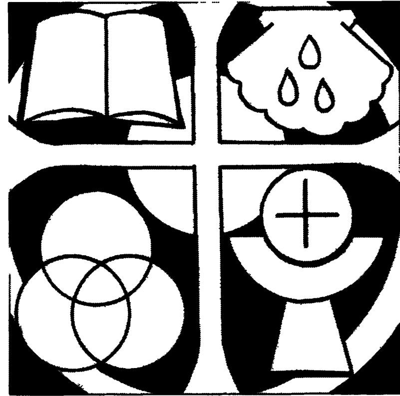
Christ the commission, "Do this in commemoration of me." (p. 23)

After examining the problem, the RC participants in the dialogue conclude that "our traditional objections to the Lutheran eucharistic Ministry were seen to be of less force today, and reasons emerged for a positive reappraisal" (pp. 23f.).

In the section titled "Historical Arguments," RC participants show a keen awareness of the ambiguity in determining on the basis of the New Testament who were "qualified" to preside over the eucharist and how the presiders were appointed. The RC participants write in paragraph #38:

It is impossible to prove from the New Testament that the only Ministers of the eucharist were the apostles, their appointed successors, and those ordained by their successors. Modern biblical investigations have shown that there were several different concepts of "apostle" in the New Testament. While Luke-Acts is representative of a strain of New Testament thought that would equate the apostles with the Twelve and hence with those whom Jesus commanded, "Do this in commemoration of me," Paul is representative of a wider (and perhaps earlier) view whereby men, like himself, could be apostles even though they had not been disciples of Jesus during his lifetime. There is no clear biblical evidence that the Twelve were the exclusive Ministers of the eucharist in New Testament times or that they appointed men to preside at the eucharist. (On the other hand, we may add that neither is there evidence that all Christians were eligible Ministers of the eucharist.) . . . We must insist, however, in face of this silence, how difficult it is to make affirmations about what is necessary in the eucharistic Ministry. (p. 24)

While recognizing the ambiguity in the history of the emergence of the episcopate as a separate and higher office than that of the presbyterate (the bishop was preeminent over the presbyters), that Trent had not wished to go against Jerome, who had maintained that difference between the two was not by divine ordination, and that "*in the history of the church there are*



instances of priests (i.e., presbyters) ordaining other priests, and there is evidence that the church accepted and recognized the Ministry of priests so ordained," it is clear that the RC participants see the latter (italicized here) as exceptions that do not constitute sufficient grounds for recognizing Lutheran practice of ordination as "normal" (p. 25).

Without doubt, the "almost exclusive practice" has been that "the only Minister of the eucharist was one ordained by a bishop who had been consecrated as heir to a chain of episcopal predecessors." Yet, the RC participants go on to give a positive summation of Lutheran practice of ordination, noting that "in this long history there are lacunae, along with exceptions that offer some precedent for the practice adopted by Lutherans" (p. 25). In short, there are openings that may facilitate overcoming the historical negative appraisal.

In this vein, the RC participants admit to shortcomings in the past, and under the heading "Theological Arguments" they show an admirable openness: "The negative appraisal of the Lutheran eucharistic Ministry that has been traditional among Catholics was not based solely or even

chiefly on an analysis of the historical evidence favoring episcopal ordination. Theological factors entered prominently into this appraisal. Here again, however, as we Catholic participants in the dialogue examined the difficulties, we found that they no longer seemed insuperable" (p. 26).

Rejecting the "dubious" notions of apostolicity that lead to the objection that "while the Lutheran communities do constitute churches, they are defective churches in an essential note that has ramifications for the eucharistic Ministry, namely, apostolicity," the RC participants conclude that "despite the lack of episcopal succession, the Lutheran church by its devotion to gospel, creed, and sacrament had preserved a form of doctrinal apostolicity" (pp. 26f.). In addition, "while there are differences of emphasis and phrasing in the theologies of our respective churches, there is also a gratifying degree of agreement as to the essentials of the sacred Ministry" (p. 27).

In response to the question "Do Lutherans see the sacred Ministry as something beyond or distinct from the general ministry of all believers?" the RC participants note that "it is quite clear that the Lutherans have a concept of a *special* Ministry in the church" (p. 28). But fundamental differences remain that need further work. They continue,

> . . . *we do find the statement by the Second Vatican Council that the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood differ from one another in essence and not only in degree.* On the Lutheran side, there is the affirmation "We say that no one should be allowed to administer the word and the sacraments in the church unless he is duly called" [AC, 14]. Theologians of both churches need to clarify further the relation between clergy and laity and to analyze the biblical concept of the royal priesthood of God's people in order to see if that concept really tells us anything about eucharistic ministry. (pp. 28f.)

The RC participants are heartened by the Lutheran voices in the dialogue who spoke to the question of the "sacredness" of the ordained Ministry.

> Despite the difference of terminology in reference to the sacramentality of ordination, we have heard our Lutheran partners in the dialogue affirming what to us would be the essentials of Catholic teaching on the subject, namely, that ordination to a sacred Ministry in the church derives from Christ and confers the enduring power to sanctify. We heard the affirmation that "The church has the command to appoint Ministers. . . . God approves the Ministry and is present in it." [In a footnote added here, reference is made to "Reumann ('Ordained Minister and Layman in Lutheranism,' in *Eucharist and Ministry*) section 26, 238."] "All three American Lutheran churches understand the Ministry of clergymen to be rooted in the *Gospel*." [In a footnote here, reference is made to Reumann ("Ordained Minister and Layman in Lutheranism," in *Eucharist and Ministry*) "section 73, 265."] Like the Roman Catholic, the Lutheran too sees ordination as conferring a spiritual authority on the recipient in a once-for-all fashion—namely, the power to sanctify through proclamation . . . of the word of God and the administration of the sacraments. (p. 29)[10]

The RC participants suggest a way of adhering to the "binding" doctrine of Trent (regarding those who were not ordained by bishops) by pointing to the changed context of the twentieth century vis-à-vis the sixteenth century:

> . . . we have found in the course of our dialogue with the Lutherans that in the twentieth century there is a much broader agreement on theological questions related to the eucharist than there seems to have been in the sixteenth. Thus the whole context of the discussion of Lutheran Ministry has changed. There is indeed something of permanent value for the church in Trent's rejection of abuses; but, without settling the

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10. The reference here is to Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "A Lutheran View of the Validity of Lutheran Orders," in *Eucharist and Ministry*, 215.

question of the past, one might well conclude that the abuses Trent rejected are not present now. (p. 31)

The heart of the RC statement, paragraph #54, which appears in bold print in the original text, reads thus:

> As Roman Catholic theologians, we acknowledge in the spirit of Vatican II that the Lutheran communities with which we have been in dialogue are truly Christian churches, possessing the elements of holiness and truth that mark them as organs of grace and salvation. Furthermore, in our study we have found serious defects in the arguments customarily used against the validity of the eucharistic Ministry of the Lutheran churches. In fact, we see no persuasive reason to deny the possibility of the Roman Catholic church recognizing the validity of this Ministry. Accordingly we ask the authorities of the Roman Catholic church whether the ecumenical urgency flowing from Christ's will for unity may not dictate that the Roman Catholic church recognize the validity of the Lutheran Ministry and, correspondingly, the presence of the body and blood of Christ in the eucharistic celebrations of the Lutheran churches. (p. 31f.)

In the explanatory statement immediately following this paragraph, the RC participants add that they do not think that solving the problem of Lutheran orders is necessary in order to make the statement in paragraph #54. The sentence that then follows is curious—not because in it they state their refusal "to decide" but because of the use of "constitutive" and "confirmatory": "Nor do we attempt to decide whether recognition by the Roman Catholic church would be constitutive of validity or merely confirmatory of existing validity" (p. 32).

The RC participants are clear that the "age-old" practice of ordination by a bishop as well as episcopacy remain normative. The proposed deviation is only a temporary step.

> In speaking of the recognition of a Lutheran Ministry not ordained by bishops, we are not in any way challenging the age-old insistence on

The RC participants are clear that the "age-old" practice of ordination by a bishop as well as episcopacy remain normative.

> ordination by a bishop within our own church or covertly suggesting that it be changed. While we believe that the church of Jesus Christ is free to adapt the structure of the divinely instituted Ministry in the way she sees fit (so long as the essential meaning and function of apostolic Ministry is retained), we affirm explicitly that the apostolic Ministry is retained in a preeminent way in the episcopate, the presbyterate, and the diaconate. We would rejoice if episcopacy in apostolic succession, functioning as the effective sign of church unity, were acceptable to all; but we have envisaged a practical and immediate solution in a *de facto* situation where episcopacy is not yet seen in that light. (pp. 32f.).

The proposal is in relation to the Lutherans only. Before any recommendation concerning the Ministries and eucharistic celebrations of other church communities might be made, the latter would have to be studied in a manner similar to what has been done with respect to the Lutherans.

Why this openness to the Lutherans? The long and intensive dialogue between Lutherans and Roman Catholics had led the latter to say, "Our outlook on the possibilities of accepting the Lutheran eucharistic Ministry has been greatly determined by our increasing awareness that so much of Lutheran doctrine, practice, and piety is sound from the Catholic viewpoint, par-

Would consideration of *missio Dei*, in which the church participates, press us in unprecedented ways to find the way toward intercommunion?

ticularly in the areas of the church, Ministry, and eucharist" (p. 33).

The closing paragraph (#59) includes both caution and encouragement. There is also ambiguity.

> We caution that we have not discussed the implications that a recognition of valid Ministry would have for intercommunion or eucharistic sharing. Obviously recognition of valid Ministry and sharing the eucharistic table are intimately related, but we are not in a position to affirm that the one must or should lead to the other. At the same time, we note that the *Ecumenical Directory*, promulgated by the Vatican Secretariat for Christian Unity, states that Catholics in circumstances involving sufficient reason or urgent cause may receive the sacraments of the holy eucharist, penance, and the anointing of the sick from one who has been "validly ordained." (p. 33)

Where does the foregoing discussion point us? At the very least we need to return to the question of the mission of the church and how lay and ordained participate in it. In this age of increasing religious pluralism, are we being challenged to understand the Ministry in ways that recognize the variety for the sake of the church's mission? In fact, would consideration of *missio Dei*, in which the church participates, press us in unprecedented ways to find the way toward intercommunion? The *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* certainly is a major step forward. Indeed, it is a foundational consensus on the gospel that was not there in Rounds I–IX of the L–RC Dialogue.[11]

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11. See my article, "*JDDJ* and Christian Mission in the Context of Multi-Cultural and Multi-Faith Realities," *Dialog* 45 (Spring 2006): 83–91.

Toward De-Americanization through Transculturation

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"Americans . . . ought to serve mankind in other fields than in religion." This was the assessment in 1926 of the prophetic Japanese writer Kanzo Uchimura, who was a first-generation convert to Christianity through the sacrificial efforts of American missionaries.

A contemporary appraisal

Some eighty years later, we may wonder whether Americans have improved their reputation among those they have sought to serve in Christ's name. A brief review of recent mission history supplies the answer.

When the Iron Curtain was drawn back in the late 1980s, more than 1,500 different missionary and church-based organizations entered Russia seeking to fulfill their perceived divine mandates. Walter Sawatsky gave the following report:

> The inundation of Western mission representatives was such that local pastors sometimes failed to preach to their own congregations for months on end, due to the custom of deferring to visiting preachers. In fact, church leaders met so many guests offering new partnership projects that they rarely found time to follow through on anything agreed upon with previous visitors. . . .
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> . . . Younger leaders . . . have taken financial retainers from Western agencies. . . . This leads to disarray in the Christian community, including disturbed relationships with Western parachurch agencies and denominational bodies that had long maintained ties to Soviet churches.
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> . . . many missions are already very influential in shaping the evangelistic task, in creating alternative religious culture (including the potential Americanization of Soviet evangelicals), and in fostering greater denominational diversification and competition. . . .
>
> . . . the common assumption is that there is an evangelism program, package, or doctrinal framework that is right, which the Soviet partner should now follow.[1]

Subsequent relations between Westerners and their Russian counterparts unfortunately did not improve. According to Peter and Anita Deyneka,

> As the contact of evangelical missionaries with many national Protestants has continued . . . some Russian evangelicals have . . . grown increasingly critical of their cobelievers; they have become more discerning in deciding with which foreign missionaries they will work. In their "Open Letter of the Missionary Coordinating Council to All Western Missionary Organizations" (1993), national Christians from ten countries of the CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States] thanked Western missions. . . . But the statement also criticized Westerners who overwhelm the indigenous church. "In Moscow alone, over one hundred Western organizations were registered. And each one wants to accomplish its program by using the existing church infrastructure, which is still so weak that it cannot resist the pressure, neither organizationally nor spiritually. . . .
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> Indigenous missionary organizations cannot compete with strong Western missions and

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1. Walter Sawatsky, "After the Glasnost Revolution: Soviet Evangelicals and Western Missions," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 16 (1992): 54–59.

the best people prefer to work for Western organizations and, naturally, for better payment. . . . Finally, instead of [receiving] assistance and support from Western missionaries, local missions [find that they] have to defend their own vision of missionary service.[2]

The Deynekas quote Grigori Komendant, president of the Evangelical Christians–Baptists of Ukraine: "The West needs to be more realistic in recognizing that Russia is not a Third World country. The church has been here a long time, and we are not interested in the Americanization of our church." More recently, an astute observer of the varied ministries of CoMission, a consortium of more than eighty different evangelical organizations, concluded:

Despite CoMission's efforts to co-opt Russian church support by providing technological and financial assistance for the Orthodox University in Moscow, the Moscow Patriarchate ultimately could not countenance the affront of such open Protestant proselytizing in the Orthodox heartland. The ensuing Russian church opposition to foreign missionaries culminated in its challenge to the landmark 1990 legislation on religious liberty. In 1997 Russia's Parliament enacted a far more restrictive law, "On Freedom of Conscience and on Religious Associations." The irony is that although limited CoMission programming continues in Russia, CoMission proselytizing helped to drive the very 1997 restrictions on religious associations that ultimately spelled its own demise.[3]

In view of what transpired in Russia, William Taylor, of the World Evangelical Fellowship, called on Western mission organizations to not duplicate the same mistakes in China.[4] But his call, explains Samuel Chiang, apparently went unheeded:

While many individuals and groups have entered China both covertly and blatantly open in converting flocks, their presence has often destroyed the natural order of an existing church or church network. Dangling funds, promises of assistance, and sometimes force-feeding of theological positions have created a fragmented church. . . .

Outside influence through funds has not only caused leaders to fall, but also, sometimes, endangered entire networks of churches. Money talks. . . . One group has gotten the pastors in a local Guangdong district to work on "pyramid" selling products [an entirely American concept]. The funding was so good that the pastor has pressed and pushed his flock into sales. This outside group, in turn, highly influences the events in church life. . . .

These are not isolated incidents but are habitual patterns in church ministry in China. As a result, many thriving churches have divided, and natural church orders are disassembled.[5]

Lamentably, the debacle of Western missionary involvement in China during the first half of the twentieth century is being replayed for all to see.

"Christianity" made in America

American Christians who desire to work in harmony with the motives, methods, and goals of the *mission Dei* in the twenty-first century should stop, think, pray, change, and commit themselves to reversing this state of affairs. The first step on this path is to realize that American missions are both products of and purveyors of American culture. American missionaries have very

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2. Peter and Anita Deyneka, "Evangelical Foreign Missionaries in Russia," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 22 (1998): 57.

3. Stephen Bataldan, "Review of *The Quest for Russia's Soul: Evangelicals and Moral Education in Post-Communist Russia*," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 28 (2004): 84.

4. William Taylor, "Partners into the Next Millennium," in *Kingdom Partnerships for Synergy in Missions*, ed. William Taylor (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1994), 241.

5. Samuel Chiang, "The China Challenge: New Lenses for a New Millennium," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 36 (2000): 161–62.

often been transmitters of their own culture in attempting to spread Christianity.

That there is indeed a distinct variety of American Christianity, with innate strengths and weaknesses, is undeniable. It is tremendously creative, efficiently organized, strategically oriented, highly energized, incredibly diverse, and endowed with seemingly boundless resources—financial, human, literary, and technological.

It also exhibits serious shortcomings. At the top of the list is a systemized theological perspective. Through the influence of the scientific method, God has not only been approached as an idea to be examined but also forced into very arbitrary categories. However, what is often overlooked is that these categories are culturally derived and bound. For example, the preoccupation with eschatology among evangelicals comes from a crisis-oriented culture that is obsessed with the future. Most of the rest of the world abides in a noncrisis environment contented with the present.

Second, although Americans did not invent the professionalization of the ministry, they have taken it to new levels. If servants of Christ have not received a "proper" theological education, Americans generally deem them unqualified for church leadership. Not only does this have very little to do with the first-century church, which essentially was a lay movement and had no concept of a paid clergy, but the effectiveness of such training has been called into serious question.[6]

Third, American Christianity is extremely anthropocentric. As a direct consequence of the Enlightenment, the American gospel starts with humanity's need and invites God to meet it. Think of recent bestsellers—Bruce Wilkinson's *The Prayer of Jabez* (Multnomah Publishers, 2000) and Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life* (Zondervan, 2002). The first promises success in life, the second meaning to life. These writings demonstrate that Christianity is being manipulated to fulfill the American dream. Biblical authors such as the apostle Paul would not likely agree with this agenda, because he "did not *start* from man's need, but from God's deed [in Christ] . . . the message is not about man and does not describe him, [yet] it is intended to elicit 'faith.'"[7]

Fourth, Christianity American style has been thoroughly McDonaldized.[8] Consumer-oriented marketing principles have been embraced to attract and satisfy more and more people in order to sustain ever-increasing egos, visions, budgets, staffs, and buildings. In such an environment, almost any conceivable program is justified as a legitimate means to a desired end. Yet this is nothing but unrestrained pragmatism. Such a missional posture is open to severe criticism because, even if something works, it does not necessarily make it right, true, or conducive to forming genuine followers of Christ.

Fifth, capitalism governs the day in the typical American church. If greed riding the wings of capitalism is not the besetting sin of American Christians, I wonder what is. This greed is being fueled by the present experiment in globalization, which has been labeled "a restricted utopia—a utopia for those in a good position."[9] As the world's

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6. Robert Banks, *Reenvisioning Theological Education: Exploring a Missional Alternative to Current* Models (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 10.

7. E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 444, 446.

8. John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church: Consumer Culture and the Church's Future* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 40–42.

9. Ofelia Ortega, "Revolutionary Hope in the Church after Christendom," in *Hope for*

wealth accumulates in the hands of the few, more is at the disposal of Americans to support various ministry ventures. This results in money-intensive mission strategies. Indeed, to do Christianity the American way requires exorbitant amounts of money. And as this model is held up as *the* one to emulate, the poor from around the world come with open hands that are in turn filled with that which has been acquired in a context of injustice.

Sixth, American Christianity exhibits a dichotomistic worldview. It has been successful at dissecting almost every conceivable aspect of the Christian life: sacred/secular, church/state, church/parachurch, clergy/laity, faith/works, evangelism/social action, sovereignty/free will, natural/supernatural, literate/illiterate, and form/meaning. Such differentiations are of course not necessarily incorrect or counterproductive. The problem comes when they are superimposed upon others as the only way of viewing the world and doing Christianity, particularly among those who have a more holistic perspective on life.

To fail to recognize that American Christianity is a local creation and thereby does not have universal appeal and applicability is to hinder what Andrew Walls calls the "Ephesian moment" in cross-cultural mission. He explains:

> The Ephesian metaphors of the temple and of the body show each of the culture-specific segments as necessary to the body but as incomplete in itself. Only in Christ does completion, fullness, dwell. And Christ's completion . . . comes from all humanity, from the translation of the life of Jesus into the lifeways of all the world's cultures and subcultures through history. None of us can reach Christ's completeness on our own. We need each other's vision to correct, enlarge, and focus our own; only together are we complete in Christ.[10]

A better way

In light of the foregoing, contextualization must be placed at the top of the agenda for American missionaries. This subject is relatively new among evangelicals. Only since the Lausanne consultation on "Gospel and Culture" at Willowbank, Bermuda,[11] in 1978 have they been seriously discussing it. For some, the notion of contextualization implies compromise, but it is warranted on at least two grounds.

First, the manner in which God has chosen to communicate divine revelation is through the vehicle of human culture. For example, in the Old Testament the ritual of circumcision, a custom practiced in various Ancient Near East societies of Abraham's day, is adopted as a sign of what it means to be God's covenant people. Moreover, in the New Testament Paul discards the Jewish "Messiah" in favor of the Greek "Savior," a term taken from the religious climate of the eastern Mediterranean of his time, in an effort to impart knowledge about Christ's work. Thus, the only way in which we can hope to effectively pass on Christianity to others is by using their culture, their frame of reference. Yet, given that culture is not a neutral vehicle for expressing divine revelation, we must constantly be on guard against overcontextualization or syncretism. As a case in point, Paul rejected the Sophists and sided with the Cynics when it came to not

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the World: Mission in a Global Context, ed. Walter Brueggemann (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 132.

10. Andrew Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 79.

11. John Stott, *Making Christ Known: Historic Mission Documents from the Lausanne Movement 1974–1989* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 73–112.

charging for his services so as to not compromise the integrity of the gospel.[12]

Second, contextualization is not an attempt to change the inherent meaning of the gospel but to communicate it in such a way that people welcome it for the right reasons and not reject it for the wrong ones. Suffice it to say that Christians from various backgrounds will come up with vastly different responses to this kind of undertaking. Even the person of Jesus will be exegeted in diverse ways. The American Jesus frees from addictions; the African Jesus delivers from evil spirits; the Latino Jesus liberates from oppression; the Asian Jesus opens the way to transcendence. This should surprise no one, as cultural complexities are seemingly endless. Yet, as long as a shift in allegiance from false gods to the "true and living God" (1 Thess 1:9) remains the focus, one can be assured that the right path is being trod.

Ultimately, missionaries of all persuasions must learn the dance of transculturation. This entails the ability to move from the communicator's culture through biblical cultures to the receptor's culture so that the latter can comprehend God's message. To demonstrate how this dance is performed, I offer a contemporary case study in mission.

Personalities: American, ancient, and Arab

In view of recent events, the Arab world is arguably the greatest missional challenge facing the American church in the twenty-first century. To explore how Americans might successfully enter Arab culture and earn the privilege to be heard, each component of the transculturational model is described.

The typical American personality can be depicted in terms of the "me, myself, and I" triad. It is private, individualistic, autonomous, introspective, independent, egalitarian, competitive, achievement-driven, and inclined toward self-realization.[13] This personality has been nurtured in a "rights culture," and its conscience is governed by internal feelings of guilt. Bruce Malina explains:

> This sort of conscience . . . refers to the pain we feel within ourselves over some past specific action that we ourselves, individual and alone, judge to be "bad" because it was "wrong." . . .
>
> . . . In our culture we are brought up to stand on our own two feet, as distinctive wholes, distinctive individuals, male and female. We are motivated to behave in the "right way," alone, if necessary, regardless of what others might think or say. In our process of identity formation, we are led to believe and act as though we do so singly and alone, responsible only for our own actions, since each person is a unique sphere of feeling and knowing, of judging and acting. When we relate to other people, we feel that they are as distinct and unique beings as we ourselves are.[14]

The average American lives for self, questions anything which inhibits self, and finds no greater authority for self other than self.

In contrast, the first-century Mediterranean world was populated with people who exhibited what has been labeled a dyadic personality. They were public, communal, collectivistic, outward-focused, interdependent, status-minded, traditionally bound, and devoted to group well-being. They attained fulfillment by upholding kinship values. Such people were raised in a

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12. Christopher R. Little, *Mission in the Way of Paul: Biblical Mission for the Church in the Twenty-First Century* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2005), 33–35.

13. See *Handbook of Biblical Social Values*, ed. John Pilch and Bruce Malina (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), xxxxii ff.

14. Bruce Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 64, 67.

honor-seeking, shame-avoidance culture, and as such their consciences were primarily preoccupied with the views of others. Again, Malina elaborates:

> . . . [the] dyadic personality is one who simply needs another continually in order to know who he or she really is. . . . Such persons need to test this interrelatedness, with the focus of attention away from self. . . . Pivotal values for such persons would be honor and shame, not guilt. . . .
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> . . . Conscience [in their case] is sensitivity to what others think about and expect of a person. . . . [T]he person . . . does not think of himself or herself as an individual who acts alone regardless of what others think and say. Rather, the person is ever aware of the expectations of others . . . and strives to match those expectations. . . .
>
> Since dyadic personality derives its information from outside of the self and, in turn, serves as a source of outside information for others, anything unique that goes on inside of a person is filtered out of attention. Individual psychology, individual uniqueness, and individual self-consciousness are simply dismissed as uninteresting and unimportant. Instead, all motivations, motives, and attitudes derive from culturally shared stereotypes . . . from obvious and apparent group traits and behavior. People spend much of their concern on their honor rating within significant groups and in assessing the honor rating of their group relative to others.[15]

The normal human being in New Testament times was committed to social integration and community maintenance for the sake of honor. A clear example of this type of person is Paul. When encountered in the book of Acts he is dutifully discharging the obligations placed upon him by his religious leaders (Acts 7:58; 8:1; 9:1–2; 26:9–12; Phil 3:5). Furthermore, he is unaware of any personal failures in keeping the Law and therefore considers himself "blameless" (Phil 3:6). He reaches this conclusion because the people of his day avoided "introspection . . . and evaluate[d] behavior on the basis of externally perceptible activity and in terms of the social functions of such activity."[16] Paul considered himself an upstanding member of his community—"a Hebrew of Hebrews" (Phil 3:5) and one who "was advancing in Judaism beyond many of [his] contemporaries" (Gal 1:14)—because of the esteem he obtained from others as a direct result of meeting their expectations. Therefore, according to Malina, it was not guilt or anxiety relative to the Law that led him to Christianity or maintained his Christian conversion. To assume so is to superimpose "an internalized standard of morality" on him as Augustine, Luther, and those in their wake have done. The more likely alternative, as Seyoon Kim points out, is to attribute Paul's conversion solely to the Damascus Christophany.[17]

It should come as no surprise that the social values of first-century Mediterranean society survive in the same part of the world today, in particular among Arabs. Consequently, most if not all of the characteristics of the dyadic personality would apply to them. But Arabs, comprising both Christians and Muslims, also display what has been called a "Fahlawi personality." "The one overriding concern of such a personality is to save face, to appear as a person who adheres to the ethical norms of his society."[18] What the Fahlawi personality dreads most, according to Raphael Patai, is not failure in itself but the shame and disgrace when such failure becomes known. This personality has been reared in a culture of "familism" where the family is

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15. Malina, *The New Testament World,* 67, 81.

16. Malina, *The New Testament World,* 73.

17. Seyoon Kim, *The Origin of Paul's Gospel* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1981), 31, 231.

18. Raphael Patai, *The Arab Mind* (New York: Hatherleigh, 2002), 113.

considered extended, patriarchal, patrilineal, patrilocal, endogamous, and occasionally polygynous. In such a context, honor is viewed as a collective property of the family and upheld at all cost; loyalty to family takes priority over personal needs; status supersedes achievement; making a good impression on others is imperative; anything that threatens personal dignity must be rejected; and family honor is the greatest source of pressure to insure compliance to accepted behavior patterns. Thus, the Arab actually is dominated by concerns that lack counterparts in the modern American West, and, to make matters worse, the American personality at almost every point undermines the familism upon which Arab society is built.

De-Americanization in the Arab world

How, then, can American missionaries dance transculturally in the Arab world?

First, they must realize that it is the epitome of ethnocentrism to expect Arabs to comprehend and convert to an Americanized version of Christianity. Indeed, missionaries "have no mandate to spread their culture. The only legitimacy to their crossing cultural lines with a message for others is that the message is not their own, does not derive from their culture, but that it is God-given and thus transcends cultural variability."[19] Hence, the road less traveled in mission must include crucifying self by laying down strongly held theological, ecclesiastical, and/or methodological loyalties for the sake of God's kingdom. In this connection, Paul, who became "all things to all men and women" so that he "may by all means save some" (1 Cor 9:22), serves as a powerful model.

Second, American missionaries must acknowledge their cultural biases in approaching Scripture. In reality, the average American Christian is handicapped in this area. As David deSilva notes,

> Those living or reared in Asiatic, Latin American, Mediterranean or Islamic countries have considerable advantage in their reading of the New Testament . . . since many of those cultures place a prominent emphasis on honor and shame. Readers living in the United States . . . may recognize immediately that we live at some distance from the honor culture of the first-century . . . Semitic peoples in the East.[20]

This distance causes Americans often to be oblivious to issues of honor, shame, and community dynamics in the Bible. For instance, when it comes to the parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11–32), interpreters have projected their own world on the text. This is evident in the endless homilies that concentrate on the deviant behavior and guilt-ridden conscience of the younger son. However, the main figure of the parable is clearly the forgiving father, whose reactions to both of his sons are center stage. Furthermore, each incident in the story—the granting of the inheritance, the father running and kissing the younger son, the robe, the ring, the sandals, the killing of the fatted calf, the celebration with the household servants and village community, and the father's pleading with the older son to join in—are masterfully woven together by Jesus with shame/honor language in order to convey the lengths to which God the Father is willing to go to be reconciled with those estranged from him.

The book of Romans is likewise relevant here. Since the Reformation, it has been understood as a work that sets forth

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19. Robert Priest, "Missionary Elenctics: Conscience and Culture," *Missiology: An International Review* 22 (1994): 313.

20. David deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 25.

the doctrine of justification by faith (and its ramifications) in a systematic way. However, a summary statement for Romans that is built *solely* on justification by faith may be suspect because of Western cultural biases. The epistle should be evaluated from a perspective more resembling Paul's viewpoint. This point of view has been best summarized by Krister Stendahl:

> Paul's primary focus on Jews and Gentiles was lost in the history of interpretation, and when it was retained, the church picked up the negative side of the "mystery"—Israel's "No" to Jesus Christ—but totally missed the warning against conceit and feelings of superiority. Once this mystery became inoperative in the central thinking of the church . . . the road was ever more open for beautiful spiritualizations of Pauline theology. Romans became a theological tractate on the nature of faith. Justification no longer "justified" the status of Gentile Christians as honorary Jews, but became the timeless answer to the plights and pains of the introspective conscience of the West. And Paul was no longer seen "among Jews and Gentiles" but rather as the guide for those perplexed and troubled by the human predicament. . . .
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> . . . Thus even justification by faith, important though we have seen it to be, must be subsumed in the wider context of Paul's mission to the Gentiles. . . . Or perhaps we should say it this way: Paul's thoughts about justification were triggered by the issues of divisions and identities in a pluralistic and torn world, not primarily by the inner tensions of individual souls and consciences.[21]

This perspective also shows why the debate surrounding the "I" passages in Rom 7:14–25, where Paul is taken to be referring to either his pre-conversion or post-conversion experience from the standpoint of the inner workings of conscience, is fruitless. It is more reasonable to understand him "speaking as broadly as possible about humankind in Adam . . . the general malaise of fallen humanity when it comes to sin, death, and Law."[22]

Third, American missionaries must minister within the context of Arab honor/shame sensibilities if they hope to be trusted, respected, and heeded. Accordingly, confrontational approaches aimed at exposing the sins, failures, and/or flaws in Arab character, which are common American evangelistic strategies, are unwise and can be disastrous. Arabs, who are compelled to conceal vulnerability, will automatically try to defend their dignity even in the face of facts to the contrary. They will attempt to hide shortcomings and failures in order to preserve appearances and save their self-respect.

Successful missional encounter necessitates enculturation into the Arab world. Americans must live and operate "in such a way that [Arab] conscience functions as an independent . . . witness to the truth . . . it is [this] conscience . . . in agreement with biblical principles, which should provide [their] reference point." In other words, the American "who understands and works with native conscience [will find] conscience to be God's great and good gift, an ally which works to support repentance and faith."[23] On a practical level, this means that if the Christian faith is to become winsome to Arabs, American missionaries must excel in areas that Arabs value and admire. Specifically, they must outshine their Arab friends in such things as marriage, raising and loving children, producing respectable males and modest females, honoring parents, respecting the elderly, showing hospitality, being generous, caring for the stranger and poor, working for

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21. Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 5, 40.

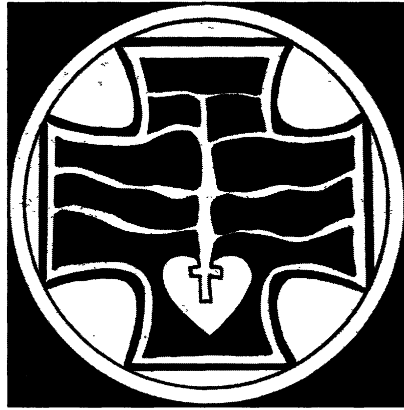
22. Ben Witherington III, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 194, 198.

23. Priest, "Missionary Elenctics," 310–11, 315.

justice, resolving conflict through mediation—in sum, being as honorable as Arabs themselves. As Americans concentrate on "doing things in such a way that everyone can see [they] are honorable" (Rom 12:17 NLT), by having "regard for what is honorable, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men" (2 Cor 8:21), Arabs will eventually be confronted with issues relevant to their own moral standards. This will provide an opportunity for the Holy Spirit, who has been sent "to convict the world concerning sin" (John 16:8), to use Arab misconduct, whether publicly acknowledged or not, to reveal their "shame before a holy God."[24]

Undoubtedly, the offense of the gospel will at some point have to be addressed. But, just as Paul used whatever cultural information was available to convey the significance of Jesus Christ to his audience, Americans should employ the material latent within the Arab society to communicate truth about the Messiah. Thus, trajectories for discussions concerning such concepts as the atonement should be conducted within honor/shame categories. Anselm's satisfaction theory is particularly promising for Arabs. In brief, he surmised that through human sin God was robbed of the honor due him. Divine justice required sinners to be punished, but divine love sought a solution by which they could be saved. However, because the offense to God was infinite, the satisfaction must likewise be infinite—that is, divine. In addition, because humankind was the source of the offense, a human must be the one to offer restitution. Hence the rationale arose for the God-man whose sacrifice not only satisfied God and restored his honor but also provided a means by which sinners could receive forgiveness and eternal life.

There are, of course, problems with this view as with all atonement theories.



The theory of penal substitution, heralded by American evangelicals as *the* correct way to understand the atonement, sets Christ "in opposition to the Father by maximizing the love of Christ and minimizing that of the Father."[25] For the Arab, the satisfaction theory is uniquely applicable as it not only makes the atonement comprehensible in readily accessible terms but also lifts up the God-honoring Messiah who places before humanity the necessity of living with the same doxological orientation.

In conclusion, the question as to whether "Americans . . . ought to serve mankind in other fields than in religion" must be reconsidered. Yes, they should serve only in these areas—unless they are willing and able to de-Americanize by dancing transculturally, particularly in the Arab world.

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24. David Hesselgrave, "Missionary Elenctics and Guilt and Shame," *Missiology: An International Review* 11 (1983): 480.

25. Leon Morris, "Atonement, Theories of," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 118.

Pastoring Chloe's People: Pathology and Ministry Strategies for Conflicted Congregations

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While the global community struggles with the possible threat of bird flu, we in the Christian church are facing the reality of a pandemic already infecting congregations all around the world: congregational conflict. Such conflict knows no denominational, cultural, or national boundaries. American authors are using such terms as "clergy killers," "pathological antagonist," "abused clergy," "collateral damage," "firestorms," and "the illusion of congregational happiness" to describe it.

It is an old phenomenon that has escalated to major proportions. In Paul's first and second letters to his Corinthian congregation we read about Chloe's people reporting to her and to Paul the eruption of conflict in the church he had founded. Gordon D. Fee adds background on the church fight.[1] It seems that Chloe was a wealthy Asian woman whose business interests caused those who represented her to go between Ephesus and Corinth. Evidently some had become Christians and were members of the Ephesus church. So, while in Corinth on business, they visited there, and upon their return to Ephesus they had given Paul an earful as to the real situation (1 Cor 1:10–17)—quarreling in the church.

Paul was probably blindsided with this information about the nature of the opposition and the kind of thinking that lay behind it. Verse 12 tells us that congregants had chosen up sides over to whom they would be loyal—Paul, Apollos, Cephas, or Christ. The quarrels seem to have been generated in the names of their various leaders, although it is unlikely that the leaders themselves were party to it. The problem was division over leadership.

Later Paul calls these troublemakers in this church "false apostles, deceitful workers disguising themselves as apostles of Christ" (2 Cor 11:13).

Antagonists in the church

Kenneth C. Haugk in his book *Antagonists in the Church* identifies these instruments of the power that works against God as "individuals who, on the basis of nonsubstantive evidence, go out of their way to make insatiable demands, usually attacking the person or performance of others. These attacks are selfish in nature, tearing

1. Gordon D. Fee, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament. The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987), 54.

down rather than building up, and are frequently directed against those in leadership capacity." He divides them into three separate groups: "hardcore, major and moderate."[2] "Hardcore" antagonists are frequently paranoid and always disturbed individuals. Paul refers to them in Acts 20:28–29. The "major" antagonists refuse to listen to reason. "Moderate" antagonists are not quite so threatening because they do not have the courage to start trouble on their own or the tenacity to keep it going.[3]

Not all conflict in the congregation is unhealthy, of course. There are many disagreements about the mission and message of the gospel. As long as congregations are made up of sinners and imperfect persons, that sin will manifest itself.

In Western culture, church people have been hammering away at the doctrine of "the priesthood of all believers" and that all the baptized should be "empowered" for their ministry. However, empowering without instructing and discipling results in congregations with groups of uninformed members, ignorant in ecclesiology, having power without skill and knowledge. Building loyalty to the church rather than to Christ is another sure recipe for conflict, as is ineffective church structure. Sometimes troublemakers are attracted to the church as a safe place to act out bizarre or even abusive behavior, and misguided and otherwise passive members in the congregation may join in supporting them.

Haugk's five levels of church conflict, gleaned from Speed Leas, are helpful as we try to diagnose the seriousness of a situation and find a remedy: "1) Problems to solve. 2) Disagreements. 3) Contest. 4) Fight/flight. 5) Intractable situations."[4] The first three can be successfully addressed, and peace can be restored; not so for the last two.

1. In "problems to solve" the communication is still open and the focus is not on the individual. There is no hidden agenda.

2. With "disagreements" the elements of self-protection and generalizations come into the conflict. Sometimes these situations can have win/win solutions.

3. In a "contest" case the conflict becomes much more difficult to manage. The element of someone winning and someone losing enters the scenario. The objective of solving the problem often is replaced with getting back at the opposition.

4. "Fight/flight" gets vindictive and mean and becomes impossible. The good of the congregation is replaced with punishing those who are "wrong." The choice is set in concrete: Win or leave.

5. "Intractable situations" is what Leas calls "conflict gone amok."[5] The antagonists must destroy their enemies no matter how it hurts them or the congregation.

Church constitutions are rarely helpful

Most churches have included in their constitutions a method for dealing with conflict and with the discipline of members. Almost all quote Matthew 18:15–17, which calls for three steps: (1) point out the faults privately, (2) take one or two with you as witnesses, and (3) tell it to the church. If these do not work, the constitution usually calls for removal from membership.

I have found these recommended steps ineffective in cases involving hardcore troublemakers with often clinical mental

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2. Kenneth C. Haugk, *Antagonists in the Church: How to Identify and Deal with Destructive Conflict* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 25, 26.

3. Haugk, *Antagonists*, 27.

4. Haugk, *Antagonists*, 23.

5. Speed Leas, *Moving Your Church through Conflict* (Washington D.C.: The Alban Institute, 1985).

pathologies of paranoia or antisocial behavior that lead to manipulative scheming. The personality characteristics that cause the troublemaker to behave in the disruptive ways listed by Haugk would further indicate that these steps in Matthew are not sufficient to solve such problems. He lists "negative self-concept, narcissism, aggression, rigidity and authoritarianism."[6]

Ron Susek takes a different approach in his book *Firestorm: Preventing and Overcoming Church Conflicts*.[7] He claims that we all have certain psychosocial needs and that when they are denied or improperly fulfilled we become dysfunctional in our relationships. He maintains, like Abraham Maslow in his hierarchy-of-needs theory, that we seek to meet these needs in different ways at various stages of our lives but that we do continue to try to satisfy them:

Acceptance. We all want to be accepted into a group. If troublemakers do not achieve this, they stir up trouble to gain acceptance and attention.

A sense of personal achievement. There is a basic drive to achieve something satisfying. If we do not, Susek says, we will likely ignite a firestorm in the congregation (see Phil 4:11–13). Perhaps this element was missing among Chloe's people and maybe in Paul's ministry.

A sense of value to a group. This can be the motivation for giving time and money to a ministry and needs to be rewarded.

A sense of safety. If we always must prove ourselves and are worried about being discarded, we will not function well and probably will launch an attack.

A sense of destiny. We all need to feel that we are making progress, heading somewhere.

Susek states, "Danger lurks when you are frustrated in one or more of these areas. When people fail and your position is not fulfilling, your destructive behavior may surprise even you!"[8]

When considering what Chloe's people were reporting to Paul, I wonder what kind of family background these people had. Family background can profoundly affect present behavior. Family-systems theory and behaviorist psychologists would probably list conditions such as broken homes; verbal, emotional, physical, or sexual abuse; enmeshment; overbearing father or controlling mother; rejection; triangulation; and displaced anger.

Triangulation and displaced anger, together with hidden agendas, are most often at the heart of destructive congregational conflict. In many arenas we cannot safely express our anger—at our job or with our spouse, parents, or relatives—so we may suppress our anger until we get to church, where "Turn the other cheek," "Love your enemies," and "Be kind to one another" are preached and ought to be practiced.

Triangularized relationships appear quickly when there is congregational conflict, usually with two partners against a third person. Or a conflict of two will draw in a third. This, according to David Augsburger, is "as old as human communication. In the Hebrew story of Adam and Eve, it is the first response to conflict. In stress, a third party is drawn in to release tension by providing support for either one party or for both persons (a more constructive option)."[9]

When we are threatened, our behavior may turn mean and vindictive. Hidden

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6. Haugk, *Antagonists*, 60–64.
7. Ron Susek, *Firestorm: Preventing and Overcoming Church Conflicts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999).
8. Susek, *Firestorm,* 88.
9. David W. Augsburger, *Conflict Mediation across Cultures: Pathways and Patterns* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 152.

agendas are major causes of congregational conflict and are driven by factors such as bias, fear, bitterness, pride, lust, and plain selfishness.

Sources of congregational conflict

Let us turn to some of the basic causes for conflict in congregations and what Chloe's people might have suggested to those in Corinth about whom they were reporting, like the household of Stephanas (see 1 Cor 1:16).

Roy W. Pneuman gives us nine common indicators in congregations who have severe conflict:

1. People disagree about values and beliefs. Congregants disagree about what the church is and what it ought to be about.
2. The structure of the congregation is unclear.
3. The pastor's role and responsibilities are conflictual.
4. The stated structure no longer fits the empirical congregation.
5. The clergy and parish leadership styles do not match.
6. A new pastor rushes into change.
7. Communication lines are blocked.
8. Church people manage conflict poorly.
9. Disaffected members hold back participation and pledges.[10]

I want now to expand on each one and give some suggestions of how one might guard against these factors causing conflict among Chloe's people and ours.

When people differ about values and beliefs, they have different opinions about what is important in ministry in a given community and congregation. This often can be prevented by a participatory process of drawing up a short, concise mission statement to which all can agree and to which the leadership can refer in setting goals, priorities, and spending plans. A warning, however: The statement is only as valuable as the broad participation in forming it and the consistent and persistent holding of the statement before the entire congregation.

Often the structure of a congregation is unclear because it is seldom referred to explicitly except when trouble is brewing. A written job description listing the responsibilities for all leaders is a must. The committee chairs, governing board, elders, assistant clergy and laity, secretaries and staff should have this mutually agreed upon job description before beginning their position, whether volunteer or salaried. And as the church grows the structure needs to expand along with it.

A prevalent cause of conflict is the expectations put upon the pastor by various leaders and congregational members who have come from differing church backgrounds with wholesome and unwholesome experiences. I recommend having a Pastoral Relations, or Mutual Ministry, or Minister's Advisory Committee. Whatever its name, this carefully chosen committee functions as a sounding board, advice giver, and support group for the pastor. Committee members must know how to keep confidences and have the respect of both the congregation members and the governing board. The drawing up of a ministry priority index upon the arrival of a new pastor, after consulting as many members as possible, can serve as an early task for this group to bond them with the pastor.

The size of a congregation also may be a source of trouble. If the membership is rapidly shrinking or growing, it may find that its structure is no longer a fit with the

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10. *Conflict Management in Congregations*, ed. David B. Lott (Washington D.C.: The Alban Institute, 2001), 45–53.

congregational size. This is a good reason to keep most of the operating rules in the bylaws rather than in the congregational constitution. Bylaws can be amended more easily to conform to the new reality of the congregation and its ministry.

Congregational leaders' and pastors' leadership styles vary widely. Call committees are notorious for selecting the opposite style in a succeeding pastor. This exacerbates the problem as he or she tries to work with leadership selected and groomed by the former clergy. If the style of a former long-term pastor has strongly impacted the present leadership or the entire congregation, conflict is certain to develop.

There are good and bad ways of implementing needed change. It is important for a new pastor to carefully explain the reason and need for change while showing profound respect for the traditions, history, and emotional investments of the congregation. No matter how badly needed, changes usually are better instituted after some time is invested in getting to know the congregation, earning their trust and the involvement of many of the stakeholders in the decision-making process. Only rarely can changes be effectively made during the honeymoon period of a new pastorate.

Pneuman writes, "Communication lines are more often blocked as a *result* of conflict rather than a *cause* of conflict."[11] This means that we ought to take deliberate measures to keep the lines open through congregational forums, board meetings open to all, minutes displayed for all to read, and a well-distributed newsletter describing the mission, activities, and deliberations of the parish. Also, one-on-one meetings of the pastor with the elected leadership and the nonelected leadership (sometimes described as "permission withholders") can prevent blocked lines of communication.

Because church members often manage conflict poorly, addressing conflict needs to be taught as a subject in adult forums and study groups before it is a crisis in the congregation. Conflict is inevitable, and we must not deny it, but we must learn to deal with it constructively.

Severe destructive conflict almost always degenerates into a battle over money. Therefore, we must have an agreed-upon spending plan/budget and a process for revision of the plan as the availability of resources changes. When we are conflict free, we need to preach and teach a stewardship that places financial giving on a whole different motivation than paying for the church's program if we like it and withholding our offerings if we do not.

Resolving conflict

Augsburger describes various options for handling conflict, viewed on a continuum.

Avoidance. Conflict is handled by denying its existence.

Repression. Open conflict is avoided by explicit action to punish or suppress its expression.

Displacement. Conflict is avoided by projecting a part or the whole onto another party or to a different issue with the same party.

Management. Conflict is directed in a limited or sequential manner or with diminished intensity by mutual agreement.

Resolution. Conflict is terminated by changes that alter its causes or modify its driving forces.

Utilization. Conflict is used not only to achieve a new integration of goals and values but to effect creative change in the system itself.[12]

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11. *Conflict Management in Congregations*, 50.

12. Augsburger, *Conflict Mediation*, 236.

Chloe's people were trying to use the displacement method, but Paul, through his letter to them, was practicing resolution methodology.

Augsburger quotes Roger Fisher and William Ury in their book *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In* (Penguin, 1991) as a model of conflict mediation process based on Western values which I find extremely helpful: "1) Focus on interests, not on positions. 2) Separate people from the problem. 3) Invent options for mutual gain. 4) Insist on using objective criteria."[13]

Moving away from positions that persons or groups of people hold to considering their interests will sometimes unblock conversations. These, in turn, may soften their positions.

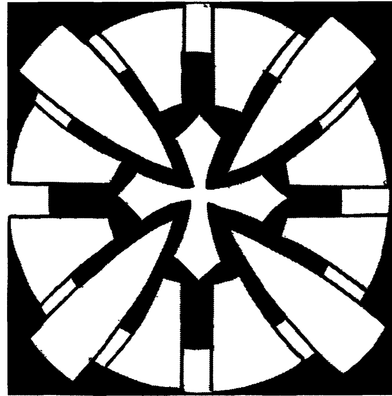
As mediators we must work on the problem faced, not on the people espousing it. The relationships and the essential nature of the struggle have to be dealt with separately.

Inventing options means constructing the solution so that all win something. This means we separate brainstorming possible solutions from selecting the best solution. And we do our best to prevent judgments about the value of the options until we have all of them expressed and recorded.

The best solutions are not arrived at by taking a power position and then bargaining from it (often corporate management's way of dealing with differences). Treating everyone equally and objectively with just results for all will serve the mission of God's people, and Chloe's, much better.

The concept of saving face

I have served as a practical theologian in Asia for nine years, and when I write about conflict management in this context I must consider the strong factor of "face." The avoidance of conflict in most Asian cul-



tures takes place under the high value placed on harmony and public conformity. David Ho writes,

> The importance of extending due regard for the face of others can hardly be over emphasized in Chinese social intercourse. To be careful about not hurting someone's face is not simply a matter of being kind or considerate; it functions to avoid conflict, or, more precisely, to avoid confrontation or bringing conflict out into the open. This conflict avoidance is a basic orientation in Chinese social processes rooted in the Confucian model of society based on the maintenance of harmony in interpersonal relations.[14]

A model of solving conflict in the Asian context might proceed something like this: (1) Disconnect the conflicted participants; (2) Hear each of them while they are separated; (3) Cool the emotive feelings; (4) Resolve the dispute; (5) Check later to see if what they agreed upon is holding; (6) Provide continued pastoral care and counseling.

This may seem acceptable, but I am not convinced of its effectiveness over the long term. Because the traditional Asian model of managing conflict calls for saving

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13. Augsburger, *Conflict Mediation*, 207.
14. Augsburger, *Conflict Mediation*, 95.

face for both parties in conflict, this can lead to conflict avoidance with no genuine resolution to the problems. This can lead to conflicts taking on a violent form when they eventually break out into the open.

Steps to conflict resolution

Dudley Weeks suggests a number of approaches to conflict resolution: "the conquest approach; the avoidance approach; and the role playing approach."[15] He then recommends what he labels "the conflict-partnership pathway to effective conflict resolution."

1. *Create an effective atmosphere.* Paul, Apollos, Cephas, and all of Chloe's people, including even Crispus and Gaius, might have benefited from this healthy process (1 Cor 1:14).

2. *Clarify perceptions.* Perhaps the rumors and reports received by Paul varied. And Paul's idea of the conflict may have differed widely from that of Apollos, Cephas, or even Chloe herself. And when Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Archaicus arrived, there would be three more perceptions for Paul to clarify.

3. *Focus on individual and shared needs.* It is important to gain an understanding as to what the real needs of each participant in the conflict are. Knowing Maslow's hierarchy-of-needs psychological theory will help us determine the way through the conflict.

4. *Build shared positive power.* Here is where our Christian beliefs come into play. Taking seriously the work of the Holy Spirit makes a huge difference as we attempt to implement this step. With God's inspiration, fervent prayer, and skillful group dynamics empowered by the Spirit, all can gain a sense of the possible and begin to acquire a "taste" of God's guidance and presence in conflict management.

5. *Look to the future and then learn from the past.* Before commiserating on the painful past, congruent with behaviorist psychology, we ask here the "miracle question": If you wake up tomorrow and the conflict has disappeared, how will you know it? So we try to bring a vision to the conflicted of what it could be like in the future when the conflict is resolved. Only then should we turn to the past and mine healthy learnings from what has unfortunately taken place.

6. *Generate options.* In this step we brainstorm options in a nonthreatening manner without making any judgments as to their workability or acceptance by all of the conflicted parties. It is important to insist that no one express likes or dislikes of the expressed options at this stage. We simply get them out for all to see.

7. *Develop "doables"—stepping stones to action.* Only after the above measures have been taken should we move to this stage of designing action that can be accomplished. A common mistake is to start designing a solution way too soon. If we do, the conflict is simply repressed for a while and then rears its ugly head again. This very well may be what happened among Chloe's people in Corinth.

8. *Make mutual-benefit agreements.* While paying attention to each individual's needs we can now draw up a brief list of agreements from which all can feel they will benefit and which are best for the entire congregation.

This method of managing conflict will improve the habits that the congregation has drifted into in handling inevitable conflict. We may even discover members who are very skilled in conflict management upon whom we can call the next time we

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15. Dudley Weeks, *The Eight Essential Steps to Conflict Resolution* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putman, 1992), 70.

must deal with such situations. And there will be a next time!

Maintaining a congregation relatively free of conflict

There are ways that we can prevent much of the conflict that arises in congregations. Consider the following suggestions.

1. Keep a functioning Pastoral Relations committee meeting regularly and accessible to all congregational members.
2. When anticipating any major change, inform the congregation ahead of time what, why, and how you plan to do it.
3. See to it that all committee heads, hired personnel, volunteers, and clergy have well written and mutually agreed upon job descriptions.
4. Have all policies established ahead of the need for them. See that they are published and accessible to all.
5. Spread out responsibilities broadly among members.
6. Make sure that everyone not only knows the policies but also follows them.
7. Have easily available and frequent methods for everyone to provide feedback on the priorities and ministries of the congregation.
8. Have a workable system in place for disciplining a disruptive member.

We do not know the final outcome at the Corinthian congregation. It seems that when Chloe's people reported the conflicts there, it caused Paul great concern. He hoped that his letters to them and Timothy's visit (1 Cor 4:17) would produce the necessary changes in the church before he had to manage the conflict in person (4:21). It is clear from 2 Corinthians that that hope was not fulfilled: "For I fear that when I come, I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish; I fear that there may perhaps be quarreling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder" (2 Cor 12:20).

Yes, Paul—and here in our congregations as well.

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Dialogue with Muslims: A Response

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In the June 2006 issue, James A. Scherer published an essay, "Harold Vogelaar: His Legacy and the Challenge of CCME [Center of Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice]." The following is a dialogical response to some of the challenges raised by Professor Scherer. —Ed.

James A. Scherer in his article has made a significant and thoughtful contribution not least in that he raises important questions and concerns that need to be addressed. In this writing I respond to some of these apprehensions.

1. Dr. Scherer wonders (p. 234) what the term "interface" between the two Abrahamic faiths means.

Here is my understanding. While it is true that the term "interface" could have many meanings, I take it to mean that dialogue needs to take place between people, face to face. Systems, dogmas, creeds, and written confessions do not dialogue; people do—and this, I believe, is a conviction deeply held by the National Council of Churches of Christ, the World Council of Churches, Vatican II, and other mainline church bodies.

2. Scherer states that it was through me that some of Samuel Zwemer's "charisma as the original 'apostle to Islam' rubbed off on the Lutherans who previously had shown little interest in the Muslim world" and that "Now, thanks to an 'apostolic succession' of Reformed missionaries, Lutherans find themselves in the forefront of Christian bodies devoting major resources to engagement with Muslims" (p. 235).

It would be nice if this were true, but in fact the Lutheran interest to engage Muslims, at least in the Middle East, came about largely through the vision, passion, and energy of Bruce Schein, who lived and worked for several years with Palestinians in Palestine/Israel. In this he was supported and mentored by Fred Neudoerffer, then serving in the LCA as area secretary for India and the Middle East. It was Fred who came to Oman and recruited us in 1971 to join this new venture, something we gladly did, but in conjunction with the Reformed Church in America, our sending board. So it was not we who "conceived" this "project" (p. 235)—and I prefer the term "venture"—but we certainly have worked hard to advance it, along with many others in what came to be the ELCA.

3. Scherer then asks a series of questions: "What exactly is the project? Is it 'mission' in the usual sense? Is it an expression of 'interfaith dialogue' as we have come to know it? Or is it a kind of hybrid venture—similar but new and different from

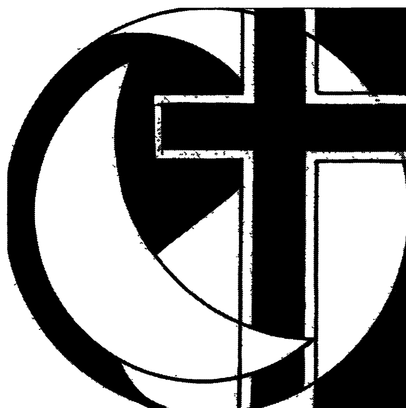
both? What is its rationale, what are its goals, and how are we to evaluate it?" (p. 236) He comments that "the project really cannot be considered an expression of 'interfaith . . . dialogue' as defined in ecumenical and Roman Catholic documents . . . —at least not at present or as presently conceived" (p. 236).

I too have often pondered these things, along with many others who share the vision. Some of these questions are answered in our statement of introduction to the program, which states quite clearly that our intention for the past fifteen years "has been to teach students how to witness to God's love in Christ Jesus while understanding and respecting the faiths of Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and neighbors from other faith traditions" (*http://www.lstc.edu/centers.html#ccmepj*).

So what are we doing to continue this honorable tradition? At present a Turkish Muslim community is entrusting to our care—and through us to the cluster of seminaries in Hyde Park in Chicago—a number of their finest students to study the Christian faith and to engage us in dialogue. What their ultimate motives may be only God knows; what we know is that we are in a relationship of trust and mutual respect, something many of us at LSTC cherish.

But is this really interfaith dialogue in "the ecumenical sense" in which, as Scherer rightly points out, participants are encouraged to "share their deepest convictions . . . even at the risk of changing or modifying their own previous understandings of the partner's position"? Does "authentic witness" to Jesus Christ take place? (p. 236)

Well, when our Muslim students are required to take courses in Bible, church history, and theology, all taught by our faculty, one can only presume that they will hear or at least be exposed to the Christian message in ways deep and profound. Add



to this their experience of living with and among Christians in community for two years, interacting on many levels, sometimes as roommates, it seems reasonable to assume that the gospel has been faithfully preached and life in Christ genuinely lived. It is hard to believe that an evangelist preaching to them could do it better. But is this truly an "expression of interfaith dialogue," an authentic witness to Jesus?

It is, I believe, if we consider that the ecumenical bodies mentioned above have said that genuine dialogue must be entered into with honest intention and not as a strategy or tactic for proselytization, a position that grows out of their equally strong conviction that dialogue must be seen as a legitimate form of Christian witness.

Will such living together in faith result in the conversion of either Christian or Muslim? We do not know, because conversion is the work of God. The Spirit blows where it wills. It is certainly never ruled out! Rather, this kind of intentional Christian-Muslim engagement for peace and justice is nothing other than a sharing of and living from the deepest resources of our respective faiths. If either faith is diminished, set aside, or even abandoned for

the sake of niceness, it is no longer interfaith dialogue but something else. Such diminishment of belief or disregard for integrity is something neither we nor our Muslim friends desire. Faith in God, as understood by each of us, is and must remain at the heart of what the Center hopes to accomplish.

> We may not be doing things "right" according to old patterns, but then we are no longer living in those times.

It may be that such an experience of interfaith engagement does not "conform to the classical definition of the global mission of the church," as Scherer fears (p. 236). We may not be doing things "right" according to old patterns, but then we are no longer living in those times. Many things have changed, some blessedly so, calling forth new forms of mission. The key now is whether we are doing the right thing for our times. Only time will tell. What needs to be watched is whether God continues to bless a venture that Scherer claims has "unmistakably redefined the overall mission of LSTC within theological education" (p. 235).

4. Scherer suggests that the Niagara Foundation provided grant money to establish the Center and endow the chair (p. 235).

The fact is that funding has come from a dedicated Lutheran couple who have a strong desire that LSTC become a center of excellence for the study of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations. From their experience in the business world, these two have long noted the need to build bridges of understanding between the two communities. That concern was translated by them into a very generous gift. Their hope now is that we and the church at large take this trust with utmost seriousness and build an effective program that will have lasting value. They see it as seed money to encourage others to contribute as well. As for the Niagara Foundation, the only money they have paid the seminary is to cover the educational costs of their students. This is not to say that if a donation were offered, it would be looked upon as unwelcome or undesirable.

5. Scherer wonders whether Muslims "are ready for this kind of dialogical engagement" (p. 236). He notes that the hospitality offered Muslims by LSTC can be interpreted as of "enormous benefit [to] the growing Islamic community in America." He cautions, however, that such friendship does not "begin to approach the demands and requirements of interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims" and warns that "for the Muslim, interfaith dialogue from the outset excludes the possibility of conversion and operates solely for the advancement and triumph of Islam" (p. 237).

Such notes of caution are well heeded. One needs to remain alert to the vagaries of human relationships and their vulnerability to evil intentions. This is true for all of us. Distrust and suspicion are mutual. But to think from the outset that for Muslims certain possibilities are excluded and results known is dubious at best and at worst short-circuits the work of God's Spirit. If Christians see the future "through a glass darkly," why would it be any different for Muslims? I think we all share a feeling of being vulnerable, of being asked to take

risks, of venturing—or sometimes being dragged—into unfamiliar paths and thus being opened to a future yet unknown. To be sure, we have our goals and high hopes, but the future belongs to God—who, history shows, is full of surprises.

Scherer warns that Christians themselves generally are not ready for the "demands and requirements" of interfaith dialogue (p. 237) and that the Center must take as one of its main responsibilities the task of preparing them. We could not agree more and will do our best to do so. Certainly, training future pastors and church workers here at the seminary in the art of dialogue and how to articulate their faith in conversation with others is part of that task. We also are working on how to integrate the study of other religions into the core curriculum of the seminary. Another goal is to have interfaith studies become one of the "emphases" that students can choose to pursue when they enter seminary. Online courses geared to lay leaders are being prepared as well; some have already been offered.

Part of what gives me confidence that we are moving in the right direction is that for the past fifteen years we have had Ghulam-Haider Aasi, a Muslim scholar, as an adjunct professor. Working together has enabled us to hold each other to a high standard of accountability. From me students learn about Muslims; though Dr. Aasi, they learn about Islam from a Muslim. The same can be said for our Muslim students who are learning about Christianity from Christians. The difference is significant because knowledge learned from someone is harder to use in negative and destructive ways. Meanwhile, to do all that we do within the bonds of friendship may be the best way to build that trust and confidence so needed "to go further and to explore [together the] deeper questions of faith," as Scherer puts it (p. 237).

I thank Dr. Scherer for his keen questions and astute assessment. Such scrutiny and friendly critique is welcome and will help keep the whole venture on course. Only things done wisely and well and in the spirit of faithfulness will have lasting value.

Book Reviews

Journeys of the Muslim Nation and the Christian Church. By David W. Shenk. Waterloo, Ontario, Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2003. 283 pages. Paper. $14.99.

Following ten years of educational work in Islamic Somalia and six years of teaching comparative religion and church history in Kenya, this Mennonite author now assists in coordinating interfaith activities for the Eastern Mennonite Missions headquarters in Salunga, Pennsylvania. This book is concerned with Muslim/Christian dialogue.

With modest knowledge of Islam, I discovered this book most helpful in providing a detailed portrayal of contemporary Muslims and their beliefs and practices. For example, Shenk explains the meaning of *sunnah* (following "the way" of the prophet Muhammad), *Hadith* (the collected traditions about the Prophet circulated during the first two centuries of the Muslim era), and *the Shari'a* (the ongoing judgments of authoritative Muslim teachers regarding how to obey the Qur'an as the revelation of Allah's unchanging will)—terms frequently used in current commentary about events in Iraq and the greater Middle East.

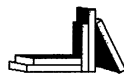
The author has more than an academic understanding of Muslims and their faith. He grew up in a devout Muslim home. Since becoming a Christian many years ago, he has remained in close contact and conversation with Muslims. Examples of these interfaith dialogues are sprinkled throughout his book.

The author's comparative treatment of Islam and Christianity has clear apologetic intent. Shenk's overall purpose is best expressed in his own words:

> *Journeys of the Muslim Nation and the Christian Church* is not for the sake of arguing with the Muslims; rather it seeks to commend the Messiah of the biblical scriptures to all readers, both Muslim and Christian. This book demonstrates both a concern for Christian distortions of, as well as Muslim misunderstandings or objections to, the Gospel. It is also concerned about Christian distortions of Islam and the Muslim community. (p. 10)

The first two chapters describe the nature of the Muslim nation and the Christian church and provide an overview of history. The remaining chapters, intended as resources for a three-month study, draw heavily on qur'anic and biblical sources to offer detailed comparison of dimensions of the two religions. Shenk shows where Islam and Christianity converge and where they differ. In a dozen chapters, each ten to fifteen pages long, he describes and compares Islamic and Christian perspectives on the topics of creation, the nature of grace and mercy, Jesus as Messiah and Muhammad as the "seal of the prophets," the Qur'an and the Bible, revelation, power in the Hijrah and the cross, the holy cities of Medina and Jerusalem, the unity of God, the place of pilgrimage, prayer and fellowship, and the understanding of global mission.

Shenk seems to present Islamic beliefs and practices in a sympathetic and fair manner, although a more thorough evaluation of his presentation must be left to others who are experts in Islam. Clearly he wants all readers, Muslims and Christians alike, to gain a favorable picture of the Christian faith and its foundational document, the Bible. He acknowledges the biblical writings as emerging from history, in contrast to the Muslims' claim that the Qur'an transcends history, but he does not always demonstrate a grasp of historical and theological study of the New Testament. For example, he too facilely points to texts in John's Gospel—in particular, Jesus' words in Jn 2:19, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days"—as direct evidence that the historical Jesus viewed himself as the new temple. This and other examples demonstrate little comprehension of Gospel texts, particularly those in the Gospel of John, as heavily shaped by the post-Easter faith and life of Christian communities of believers. Of course, Shenk wants to combat the Muslim charge that the Gospels distorted who and what Jesus was, but he needs to do so by means of the best of New Testament scholarship available.



Pastors and study groups in church communities, with knowledgeable leaders, will profit from a close study of this book. The time is ripe for congregations to embark on a serious study of Islam and actual engagement with persons of the Muslim faith. Shenk's book may be helpful in this larger endeavor.

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Leaving the Fold: Apostates and Defectors in Antiquity. By Stephen G. Wilson. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004. xvii and 158 pages. Cloth. $25.00.

Scholars have written much about evangelism and conversion in the New Testament and early church but very little about how conversions looked to members of the group left behind. Wilson, Professor of Religion at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, notes that a study of "apostasy remains a desideratum" and seeks "to draw attention to as broad a range of evidence" as possible and evaluate its implications (p. ix).

After an initial chapter evaluating earlier research, he discusses apostasy from Judaism (pp. 23–65), from Christianity (pp. 66–99), and pagan defectors (pp. 100–109). The relative length of the chapters reflects the available evidence. Jewish apostasy occurs in Palestine under Antiochus Epiphanes (1 and 2 Maccabees), in Alexandria (3 Maccabees, Tiberius Alexander in Josephus, *Ant.* 20.100), and in Antioch. Philo has many references to apostates, suggesting at least five reasons for leaving Judaism (p. 42). It is clear that Judaism must have regarded Paul as an apostate. (Were the Judaizers in early Christianity attempting to avoid being regarded as apostates?)

There are New Testament references to apostates (2 Pet 2:20–21, Gal 4:8–10, 1 Tim 4:1–3, etc.). Hebrews 6:4–6 avers that it is impossible for apostates to repent and return to the church. Cyprian in *De lapsis* offers insight into various Christian reactions in the Decian persecution in the third century. Wilson also discusses Peregrinus, Porphyry (possibly a defector), and Julian, the apostate emperor. Because Graeco-Roman religion was inclusive, there is no concept of defection as one adopts a new religion as a supplement to what one already has. It is possible to be a defector only from schools of medicine or philosophy or by deserting Graeco-Roman religion in favor of Judaism or Christianity. Wilson notes examples of such defections.

The last chapter draws conclusions. Following J. G. Barclay, Wilson distinguishes assimilation (social integration), acculturation (language/education) and accommodation (use of acculturation). The group one leaves labels one defector and apostate. "Your apostate is my convert" is certainly the case, as Paul illustrates. Wilson notes that apostasy often arose out of persecution and caused militant antagonism and social dislocation. I wish he had done more with the social structure of antiquity, both Jewish and Graeco-Roman. Apostasy was a threat to the social fabric of the city and its political well-being. Hence the New Testament urges positive attitudes to the state (1 Thess 4:9–14, Rom 12:1–7, 1 Pet 2:13–17), attempts to obviate such threats.

This is a useful survey that should stimulate more discussions of apostasy and conversion. It fills a gap, is a good read, and is well worth the price.

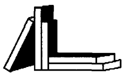
Edgar Krentz

Guided by the Spirit: A Jesuit Perspective on Spiritual Direction. By Frank J. Houdek, S.J. Chicago: Loyola, 1996. 181 pages. Paper. $18.95.

Frank Houdek has several working assumptions about God and the person seeking spiritual direction: God exists; God exercises a caring concern for the human family; there is a personal God; God is knowable; God invites us into a relationship with God and with one another. The person seeking spiritual direction needs to have the capacity for self-reflection, verbal skills, and a sense of the mystery in life.

Houdek writes that spiritual direction is an art involving conversation and dialogue. As the work of the Spirit of God, it expresses both faith and mystery. Furthermore, spiritual direction is neither psychological counseling nor psychotherapy. Spiritual direction is Spirit-driven.

I enjoyed the story of George Bernard Shaw's play *St. Joan* (Joan of Arc) when the presiding judge asks, "Do you mean to tell us



that you hear voices?" Joan pauses and replies, "Doesn't everyone?" In spiritual direction we, too, hear voices . . . the voice of the Spirit working in our hearts and in our minds.

There are four useful chapters discussing the directee and the process of spiritual growth; particular types of directees and their needs; prayer and spiritual discernment; and the director and the process of direction. Houdek underscores the notion that God is the initiator in the process of spiritual direction. The role of the spiritual director is not to get in the way of God's action. This thought needs to be uppermost in what we do as spiritual directors. This process is not about us; it is about following God's lead.

Chapter 3, regarding prayer and spiritual discernment, is most helpful. Prayer begins with God as the center and starting point of prayer. The spiritual director never pesters or nags the directee about his or her prayer life. Prayer is not so much about us as about God. A spiritual director can only assist the directee to become aware of God's action in life. Prayer is an awareness of God's constant and loving presence. Prayer involves giving God the power to possess us. I found it refreshing to hear Houdek's emphasis on the "unconditional love" of God. God offers compassion, mercy, and justice to everyone. After all, "God is love."

We need to come to an awareness that one cannot live without God. A good-spirited directee is one who is growing in personal responsibility, freedom, and maturity, as well as developing Christian virtue, particularly the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity.

According to chapter 4, both director and directee need to be aware of transference (directed at the spiritual director) and countertransference (directed at the directee). When these issues occur in a spiritual direction session, it is necessary to terminate the sessions and make a referral to a counselor or psychotherapist.

Supervision is essential for anyone practicing spiritual direction. I heard again that the role of the spiritual director is not to get in the way of God's action. The spiritual director needs to create a sense of ease, a safe haven, and a place of comfort in order for directees to relax and share their stories, thereby allowing the Spirit to do the work.

Chapter 2 made me aware of the numerous types of directees. Fear, anger, depression, sexuality, and authority are significant issues for any person. The whole section on dryness or aridity in personal prayer helped me reflect on the places to search for God's presence in work, leisure, nature, and relationships. I heard once again that dryness may actually mark the beginning of a more genuine gift of prayer.

Charles J. Lopez, Jr.
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For the Beauty of the Earth. By Steven Bouma-Prediger. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001. 234 pages. Paper. $21.99.

Bouma-Prediger in this book gives readers a vision of what role humanity plays in the care for God's earth and the ecological response needed for a wholesome relationship with the world. At the end of his first section, he sets the tone for the remaining text: "If we wish to properly care for our homes . . . then we, and all our fellow dwellers in our place, must love our homes" (p. 38). After this statement, he outlines significant ways in which we have not shown love to our planet and our neighbor.

As with any important ecological theology, Bouma-Prediger sets forth a theology of the earth, creating a strong tapestry of ideas based in sound scriptural reasoning. Rightfully following this chapter, he presents his ecological theology and ethic which "challenges us to live more earth-careful lives" (p. 135). He develops his vision further by practically describing how we should live on earth by being "earthkeepers." In chapter 7 he presents "An Apologia for Earth-Care," which strengthens his position and makes it concrete. He ends with the hope that "we bear witness to the great good news of the gospel" (p. 187).

While some readers may see this as another fashionable text on ecological theology, it moves beyond that preconception and challenges us to think of our own lives within an ecological theology. This is a wonderful introduction into ecology and theology and would be useful to the advanced student as well.

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Face to Face: Portraits of the Divine in Early Christianity. By Robin Margaret Jensen. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004. xviii and 234 pages. Paper. $22.00.

Jensen, historian of early Christian art (*Understanding Early Christian Art* [Routledge, 2000]) is Professor of the History of Christian Worship and Art at Vanderbilt University Divinity School. This remarkable study combines her perception of early Christian art, liturgy, and theology of imagery. First she discusses briefly the problem of art, especially portraits, in the Judeo-Christian context. Then she turns to the issue of imagery in the Roman context. Given the Judeo-Christian aversion to images as idolatry and the Greco-Roman suspicion that material images cannot convey reality, Jensen thoroughly examines the Christian debate over divine imagery in second- to fifth-century Christian writers. Returning to her skill as an art historian, she describes in detail various pictures of Jesus and the later Christ. She concludes with an analysis and description of such saints as Peter, Paul, and Mary. All of her descriptions are amply illustrated with examples from early Christian art (102 examples).

Jensen's enterprise is far from simple. She has to juggle Jewish concerns about the idolatry of images, the Greco-Roman sense of reality, early Christian theology regarding the human Jesus, liturgical practices, and actual early Christian art. Despite the complexity of the problem, she does a remarkable job. Her book will remain a critical resource for years to come.

At the serious risk of oversimplification, I would state her case in this way: For Jews God was not available to human eyesight (anyone who saw God would die [Exod 33:20]). Even so, some Jewish art implied the presence of God (normally a hand as in Dura Europos), and God was visible occasionally in the Hebrew Scriptures (e.g., Exod 33:23; 34:33–34; p. 76). Still, any image that blocked a real relationship with God would be considered idolatry (pp. 15–19). Considering the large number of god images that have survived from Greek and Roman antiquity (examples on pp. 62–63), it comes as a surprise to know that such images were frowned upon by Roman writers at the time of early Christianity. Simply put in a neo-Platonic world, ultimate reality could not possibly be seen in anything material (pp. 28–30; 66–68). To think otherwise misleads the observer. About 400 C.E. Christian writers had to deal with these issues from a different perspective. They agreed with their Jewish heritage and with Roman philosophers that God could not be portrayed by material means. Very few Christian artisans attempted to create images of God. However, Jesus trod on this earth and was seen by many. When issue of divine nature came to the fore, it had to be admitted that an image of the historical Jesus, fresco, mosaic, or statue, referenced the divine (pp. 131–34; 165–72).

In her articles and books, Jensen consistently reads early Christian art in conjunction with theological writing and liturgies. This work is a classical example of that methodology. Others of us believe Christian art was at first contextually symbolic and not directly related to the intellectual or even devotional life of the early church. Seen from a sociological perspective, much of the first art reflected the Christian attitude toward the Roman Empire and Roman culture. Other symbolic art reflected the attractive qualities of the early Christian community such as peace and fellowship. Later art made peace with the leadership structure of the Roman Empire. Jensen recognizes the probability of an early Jesus who reflected sociological concerns and whose appearance developed along imperial power lines rather than an increasing sense of divinity (pp. 146–59), but the theme of her book implies that Christian images are primarily theologically oriented.

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Sunday of the Passion—Seventh Sunday of Easter, Series C

The Other Three Days

For a few years I was honored to preach at LSTC's contemplative Eucharist on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday of Holy Week. Those three days became a meaningful time for me, when I was privileged to proclaim the gospel to a seminary community whose members would scatter to lead worship in congregations on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter. At the request of many of my students, I offer one set of those brief homilies here. I pray that they will, in some small way, help to prepare your spirit to preach during The Three Days.

I have no doubt that the contributions that follow, by **George C. Heider**, will enliven your exegesis and inspire new insight. Heider, whose recent contribution to Preaching Helps inspired positive e-mail in this editor's inbox, is Visiting Professor of Theology at Valparaiso University. Several readers asked me to "have him write again soon." I am grateful that George was willing to do so.

Monday: Wasting Costly Oil (John 12:1–11)
There was so much going on at Mary and Martha's house the night of that dinner party. Lazarus had come home from the dead, and a great crowd had shown up to see him. The chief priests dropped by. And you know how nervous folks get when the clergy show up at a party. And then Mary did that thing with the oil—anointing Jesus' feet and wiping them with her hair. Right in front of God and everyone. Mary used so much oil that the whole house stank of perfume. No wonder a fight broke out. It seems the dispute was about the oil. Judas claimed he wanted to use the oil to liberate the poor; but really, Judas wanted the oil to make himself rich. I wonder: Was the writer of this story an embedded journalist? If CNN had a camera in Bethany that night, we'd be watching as the whole party stopped.

There is so much going on here, today, at this dinner party. We who by baptism have come home from the dead are here. As in Bethany, this house is full of crowds abuzz with the latest news. There's the war, of course. Then there are the daily battles of the call process, the internship-assignment process, the candidacy process, the construction process, the budgetary process, the curriculum-review process, the scheduling-of-meetings process. And sometimes I have

trouble remembering—don't we do something around here that involves classes?

Wouldn't it be great if someone would do something outrageous, like Mary did?—something that would shock this house into stopping? Amid all the busyness of that dinner party, Mary sees it. Jesus says, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial." How long had Mary kept that oil? And how did Mary know that this was the time to bring it out? While these things are fun to think about, they really don't matter. Mary sees that the day of Jesus' burial is drawing near and that nothing else matters. And, moved by love or gratitude or devotion or faith, Mary pours her oil, Mary pours herself, out in extravagance.

We know that our remembrance of the day of Jesus' burial draws near. It's less than a week away. On the cross Jesus brings war-torn nations, cumbersome ecclesial processes, questionable public policies, departed loved ones, unreconciled relationships, and a dying creation home from death. In the midst of our busyness, how will we prepare for that day?

What if we make today about wasting costly oil? What if, aware of the coming day of Jesus' burial and moved by love or gratitude or devotion or faith, we make today about doing something for someone else that is so wonderfully wasteful, so shockingly extravagant, so pleasingly provocative that this whole house stops to smell the fragrance of Jesus' burial?

Okay, it's fun to think about, but we won't do it. We're just too busy, aren't we? So maybe we can carry the image of wasting costly oil for others with us as we unite in prayer, as we share Christ's peace, as we make our way to the table, and return to the busyness of our day. And maybe, as we carry out our busyness, we can try hard to smell the fragrance of Jesus' burial. For it does fill this whole house.

Tuesday: Grains of Wheat (John 12:20–36)

Today Jesus concludes his public ministry. Some Greeks say, "We wish to see Jesus." Jesus responds that the hour has come. He bids farewell in terms of grains of wheat. He speaks of his death on a cross. And after he says this, Jesus departs and hides from the crowd. The next time the world sees him, Jesus will be lifted up from the earth, dying on a cross, driving out the ruler of this world, drawing all people to himself.

We, too, wish to see Jesus. We who are insiders to the events of this Holy Week, we who know the story so well. We honestly, desperately wish to see Jesus. We who preach the Word, wash the feet, strip the altar, adore the cross, light the new fire, splash the water, eat the bread and drink the cup, we want nothing more than that Jesus will not be hidden from us.

Jesus tells us where to look. He tells us to look to the cross. But even as we

make the sign of the cross, even as we carry the cross, even as we mark newly baptized and newly absolved Christians with the cross, these are but hints, echoes, images, reminders of the cross on which Jesus died for us. We cannot go to Golgotha and see our Savior strung out on the cross.

So how do we really, truly see Jesus during this Holy Week? If we cannot see Jesus, perhaps we should look for those who follow him. If we cannot see the cross, we can see the grains of wheat. We can see those who by dying to themselves bear much fruit. We can see those who follow by serving. We can see those who by losing their life in this world give a glimpse of eternal life. They are right here. They surround us right now. Somewhere within an arm's length or a phone call's reach are those grains of wheat who choose to follow Jesus by losing their life for us.

So often we get overwhelmed by all that the gospel calls us to be. So often we get angry because we're doing such a bad job of being it. We get impatient that the inclusive reign of God is coming so slowly. We become demoralized because expressions of justice and mercy feel so unfair.

But you know, when you dig around in the dirt of this seminary, you find that it is filled with grains of wheat. Everywhere you touch you find followers of Jesus who in some way have chosen to fall into the dirt of this seminary and die to themselves rather than remain alone. The dirt of this seminary is filled with grains of wheat who give a glimpse of eternal life in the way they choose to lose their lives. And sometimes they do that for us.

Perhaps we can keep these grains of wheat in mind as we unite in prayer, share Christ's peace, make our way to the table, and return to the dirt of this seminary. Maybe we can try hard to reach out and touch one of those grains of wheat. Better yet, we could allow one of those grains of wheat to take root in the dirt that surrounds us. Who knows? We may end up seeing Jesus.

Wednesday: A Piece of Bread (John 13:21–32)

A few weeks ago, our Gospel Choir sang a song: "You know that I'd rather have Jesus than all of the silver and all of the gold. I'd rather have Jesus than all of the riches and wealth untold. I'd rather have Jesus than all of the houses and all of the land."

I went away thinking, If only the choice were that simple, that obvious, that safe! Given the choice between Jesus and all the money in the world, everyone in this room would choose Jesus. If that wasn't true, we'd be in some other room right now.

We can easily rebuff so obvious a betrayal of Jesus. But what about when the betrayals get smaller, sneakier, stealthier? What about when betrayal dresses up in words like "compromise," "greater good," or "being realistic"? What about

when, rather than a choice between right and wrong, betrayal confronts us with the choice of two not quite rights? We need to choose carefully the hill on which we are willing to be crucified, because we can't die on them all. The only way we can avoid betraying Jesus is by being Jesus. And, despite what some Form D's might suggest, none of us is Jesus. When the disciple whom Jesus loved asks, "Who is it that will betray you?" Jesus points out Judas. But in truth, Jesus could have pointed at all of the disciples. Jesus could have pointed at all of us.

I find it interesting the way Jesus points out his betrayer. I might have said, "It is the one to whom I extend my anger." But Jesus says, "It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread." Jesus gives his betrayer a piece of bread. It would be amazing enough if Judas betrayed Jesus and then repented, and Jesus responded by giving him the piece of bread. But Jesus gives Judas bread from Jesus' own table, knowing that Judas will get up from that table and go out and betray him.

This sounds to me like the Eucharist. This sounds to me like what Jesus does for his betrayers whenever we gather around word and table. Jesus gives us who will betray him not merely the bread of his table; he gives us the bread that is his own body and the wine that is his own blood.

And Jesus gives us his very self, knowing that we will get up from the table and go out and betray him. When we come back the next time and say, "We confess that we have sinned," we tell Jesus that he was right. And no matter how many times we admit that we are betrayers, Jesus extends the bread and the cup, given and shed for you.

Perhaps we can manage, perhaps we can risk, to unite in prayer, share Christ's peace, and make our way to the table knowing that we are Jesus' betrayers. Rather than being repentant for what we have done, let us be mindful of what we will do. After receiving the bread, we, like Judas, will go out and betray Jesus. Our betrayal will lead Jesus to the cross, where he offers up his body. Knowing the betrayal we are about to do, Jesus still extends his body to us in that piece of bread. In that piece of bread Jesus extends God's life and love to us who will betray him. And all we can do is receive it.

Craig A. Satterlee
Editor of Preaching Helps

Sunday of the Passion (Palm Sunday) April 1, 2007

Luke 19:28–40
Isaiah 50:4–9a
Psalm 31:9–16
Philippians 2:5–11
Luke 22:14–23:56 or Luke 23:1–49

Very few Sundays of the year present the variety of potential emphases and themes that this one does. Recent liturgies include at least two, beginning the service with the "Procession with Palms" and the Gospel reading about Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, but transitioning quickly to the solemnities of Holy Week with the reading of all or part of the passion narrative for the year. In addition, at least some congregations retain the longstanding custom of conducting the Rite of Confirmation (or Affirmation of Baptism) on this day—a remnant of the ancient practice of catechesis during Lent and then baptism and first communion at the Easter Vigil. And, of course, secular calendars remind us that this year, to top it all off, it's April Fool's Day.

Of all these options, the one that dare not be omitted is the passion narrative. The Epistle reading tells why. The only way to the fullness of exaltation for Jesus was through the rock bottom of humiliation, as he gave up all divine prerogative through human birth and (what's worse) became a slave and (what's worst) died on a cross. To be sure, every Sunday is a "little Easter" (so that we observe Sundays *in* Lent, not *of* Lent), but this of all Sundays provides an opportunity to articulate clearly Luther's theology of the cross. An overemphasis on, say, Palm Sunday can undercut that opportunity. But the procession into Jerusalem can be turned to good purpose by saying, in effect, that Jesus may have "gone up to Jerusalem" and started the week (as we start this day) on a "high," but it was all downhill from there, as far down as death on a cross.

Since the days of Bernard Duhm (and who could resist citing "Dr. Duhm"?), Isaiah 50:4–9a has been read as the third of four "Servant of YHWH" poems in the exilic section of Isaiah (cc. 40ff.). With this poem, the task of the Servant takes a sharp turn for the arduous: while the Servant's calling remains centered on mediating God's justice and light to the nations (as in 42:1–4; 49:1–6), it comes with a stiff price, including torture and degradation (50:6). In the context of the four Servant poems, this text prepares the way for the fourth and final one, 52:13–53:12, to be read on Good Friday.

Tragically, not merely ink but blood has been spilled over the centuries in polemics between Jews and Christians over the identity of the Servant. While there are no facile solutions to the question, it is fair to say that, in fact, the original referent was Israel, as stated plainly in 49:3 (cf. 41:8f. and 48:20). In the context of the most traumatic event in Israel's history, the fall of Jerusalem in 587/6 B.C. and the ensuing exile, the prophet makes the audacious claim that Israel was suffering not merely for its own transgressions but also for the sins of the world (cf. 40:2: "she [Jerusalem] has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins"). However, when read through the overtly Christian filter of the New Testament, we see that the Servant's vicarious work finds its climax and ultimate expression in Jesus (cf. Acts 8:30–35, regarding the fourth poem).

In the context of the aforementioned theology of the cross, our focus necessarily moves past this exegetical debate to the realization that the Servant is a model for God's servants in all times and places. As such, we note first that faithful service begins with

listening (especially when one reads v. 4a with the Hebrew and against most English translations: "The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of those who are taught"; cf. v. 4c). Interestingly, the text does not specify to whom the Servant listens. The logical and likely implication is, of course, to God, but it is equally possible (and, in the end, essential) that those who would serve listen to those whom they intend to serve. The point is reiterated when the poem continues with the specifics of the mission: "that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word." If one is truly to help the weary with a word, one has to know *why* they're weary. The gospel is indeed universal, but it is never "one size fits all." (Similarly, note the arguably intentional ambiguity in v. 5a: the Hebrew literally reads, "The Lord GOD has opened to/for me an ear." Whose ear? It could be the Servant's or it could be God's. Or both—because both must be open for the Servant to do the work of sustaining the weary.)

The reading concludes in the style of many of the individual laments in the Psalms (including today's Psalm 31) and the very similar "confessions" of Jeremiah, with a statement of confidence that, despite all the torture and degradation, the LORD has the final say, and that verdict is one of vindication of the Servant.

The organic connection between the Servant and all later servants who bear his name is reiterated in the introduction to Phil 2:5–11. As has been widely observed, vv. 6–11 are likely an early christological hymn, inserted by Paul at this point. It is his lead-in that is not to be missed: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (v. 5). Twenty-first–century Americans, with their hyperindividualism and "most toys" standard of success, have difficulty with even the thought categories that Paul is advocating, of renunciation of privilege and deference to others' needs (vv. 3–4). Holy Week is the best possible time to bring to bear on the consciousness of us all (ourselves, as well as our hearers) the notion of an alternative that, if taken as task, will turn our worldview and our values upside down. In fact, as we'll see, of all possible Holy Weeks there's no beating Year C, the Year of Luke, to demonstrate from the climactic events of Jesus' own life this divine inversion of priorities.

Luke's passion narrative strikes a fine balance between the deserted, agonized Jesus of Mark's Gospel and the exalted, triumphant one of John's. As such, it's a fitting partner with readings that emphasize both the downs and the ups inherent in faithful service. As always in the Gospels, it's the little things that make the point. (Here and throughout these reflections, I acknowledge the influence of my colleague Fred Niedner, who kindly permitted me to sit in on his Gospels course in the fall semester.)

For example, both Matthew and Mark place the dispute among the disciples over greatness just before Jesus' "Palm Sunday" entrance into Jerusalem (Mt 20:20–28; Mk 10:35–45). Luke moves the incident to the following Thursday evening, soon before Jesus' arrest. Luke omits the request of James and John for the seats of honor in the kingdom but includes a promise that all twelve will "sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (22:30). Then, instead of discussing specifically who sits where, Luke shows us who gets the places of honor: "criminals, one on his right and one on his left" (23:33). Only Luke places the disputation between those so situated at the climactic moment: one calls to Jesus to aid his escape from the cross (a literal theology of glory), while the other accepts the cross and asks only to be remembered (23:39–42). It is the latter who receives the promise of a place in Paradise (23:43).

Similarly, only Luke includes three words of concern for others on that fateful Friday. Jesus speaks to the women weeping for him as he bears the cross (23:28–31), prays forgiveness for those killing him (23:34), and, as noted, comforts his fellow victim of Roman "justice." The purpose of raising these Lukan distinctives is not to suggest an absence of concern for others in the other Gospels (cf. Jn 19:26f.) but to highlight that it's an especially high priority in Luke. And the outcome of such an approach to life is that others are brought together, even despite themselves, as with Pilate and Herod Antipas (23:12).

Finally, having cared for his friends, his enemies, and his fellow in suffering, Jesus is able to let go of his servant vocation and yield himself into the care of God: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (23:46). As my colleague Walter Wangerin, Jr., has so artfully depicted the moment in his novel *Jesus* (Zondervan, 2005), the Son hearkens back to an evening prayer that he learned as a child, Psalm 31, and speaks the first-century Jewish equivalent of "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take."

"Therefore God also highly exalted him," as St. Paul says (Phil 2:9)—but that's next Sunday's story. GCH

Maundy Thursday April 5, 2007

Exodus 12:1–4 [5–10] 11–14
Psalm 116:1–2, 12–19 (NRSV)
1 Corinthians 11:23–26
John 13:1–17, 31b–35

As with the preceding Sunday, the readings for this day seem at first to pull in different directions. The very name of the day finds its source in the Gospel reading: "I give you a new commandment [Vulgate: *mandatum novum*], that you love one another" (v. 34). This calls to mind its context of footwashing and mutual service and self-sacrifice.

By contrast, the day is far more firmly linked in the popular Christian mind with the institution of the Eucharist, and this latter theme is featured both in the reading from 1 Corinthians 11, which contains what is probably the earliest written form of the *Verba*, and in the reading from Exodus 12, in which the Passover meal is instituted "as a perpetual ordinance" (v. 14). The potential conflict is only exacerbated when one recalls that not only does the Gospel according to John not include an account of the institution of the Supper (at least per se, however much one may see allusions in chapter 6) but that the Gospel goes out of its way to dissociate whatever meal Jesus may have shared that night with his disciples from the Passover by stressing that the festival began on Friday evening that year (19:14), not Thursday evening, as in the Synoptics.

What is the preacher to do? Most of the foregoing observations belong in the study (or perhaps in a Bible class on the lectionary), not the sermon itself. The sermon is, indeed, a teaching moment, but seldom should exegetical observations be offered for their own sake. On the other hand, it is

at best harmonistic—and at worst a travesty of the text—to run roughshod over such distinctions as we have seen. How best to make these tensions creative for ourselves and our hearers?

One possibility suggests itself by analogy with a liturgical experiment that met with some success in my early days as an assistant pastor, while still in graduate school. On Maundy Thursday I led the congregation in a Passover Seder meal (very little changed from a Jewish model, as I have problems with "Christianized" Seders—but that's another story). The congregation then proceeded immediately into the church for the Divine Service. The latter then *began* with the sermon, which served as a pivot between the two rites and meals, allowing me to lift up both commonalities and what's "new" about the "new covenant in my blood."

Mutatis mutandis, as they say, perhaps the sermon can serve a similar function within a Maundy Thursday service using this year's readings. Depending on where in the service one places the footwashing ceremony, one could use the sermon as a pivot to the Eucharist or (if one begins with the sermon) simply to draw together the somewhat divergent elements that we have already seen, perhaps employing some of the observations below.

The Gospel reading that inspires both the name of the day and the washing of feet helps us understand that, as used by Jesus, the culturally ubiquitous word "love" has some very specific content. Contrary to popular song (ironically, most recently by a group named "Darkness"), love is *not* "only a feeling." For Christians, love is incarnated in Jesus, above all as he "lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13 RSV). That love, in turn, provides inspiration and finds echo in mutual—even menial—service (13:14), and it is the ultimate proof and witness that we are his disciples (13:35). That Jesus explicitly has us *today* in mind is suggested by his comment "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them" (13:17). The only other use of the word *makarioi* (blessed) in this Gospel is in the "doubting Thomas" incident in 20:29, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe," in which John's Jesus explicitly references future generations.

The public witness provided by that willing mutuality of obligation lies close to what St. Paul says of the Eucharist in 1 Cor 11:23–26. In the context of sharp words directed at all things that divide the church (but especially economic status, in this case), Paul recites the words of institution that he had "received from the Lord" and then draws this conclusion from them: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (v. 26). Whatever else he may mean by "proclaim the Lord's death," he is surely declaiming an important facet of the liturgical axiom *lex orandi, lex credendi.* He is saying that the way the Corinthians share in the body and blood of Christ—whether with mutual respect and deference (11:33) or as factions (11:19–21)—tells much about what they truly believe about the purpose and result of the cross that lies at the heart of the faith (2:2). In the broader context of this epistle, it is equally clear that unity or factionalism at the Eucharist is only the most obvious measure and culmination of broader issues of Christlike service versus self-advancement to be seen elsewhere (as in the succeeding discussion of spiritual gifts, including Paul's famous discourse on love in chapter 13—cf. the Gospel reading from John 13, above).

Where the preacher must take care in all of this is in the risk of letting hearers infer that faithful life and worship are their burden. It is, perhaps surprisingly for some, the reading from Exodus that prevents such a

mistaken foray into Law. The Passover meal is an eternal memorial (and, indeed, a re-presentation, as in 12:27) of the Lord's monergistic deliverance of his people, Israel, from slavery and death. Deliverance does not come without cost. Blood is shed; lives are lost; indeed, gods die (v. 12). But for Israel it is a gift that reorients their whole lives, beginning with their calendars (v. 2). It is worth noting that the Passover celebration maintains a balance between the communal and individual that often has proved difficult for Christians, who seem to zigzag between "holy mother church" and "me and my Jesus." The Passover is eaten at home, by family units, but the nation's observance is supervised by the priesthood (cf. v. 1, one of the few times the LORD speaks to Aaron as well as Moses), and the slaughter of the lambs is done by "the whole assembled congregation of Israel" (v. 6).

In sum, Passover was (and continues to be) for Israel a sign of God's grace in remembrance of God's grace, to be eaten by a people "on the way" (v. 11). They, or at least their houses, are all "marked by the blood of the lamb" (vv. 7, 13) and thereby delivered from destruction, and their obedience in response is a witness to all the world to the awesome and terrible love and power of their God. For the people of the new covenant, "Pascal victim" and "Pascal bread" proclaim their own deliverance and call them to the same witness of responsive obedience: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35). GCH

Good Friday
April 6, 2007

Isaiah 52:13–53:12
Psalm 22
Hebrews 10:16–25
John 18:1–19:42

One of the bits of historical trivia that I recall from my elementary-school American history courses is that when the British surrendered to the colonial forces at Yorktown, the British army's band played a then-popular tune titled "The World Turned Upside Down." This factoid is no doubt related to school children as a metaphor for the unlikelihood of the related event: the army of the world's superpower of the day beaten by amateurs.

The Bible repeatedly speaks of even greater reversals of human expectations and values. Often cited are the song of Hannah in 1 Sam 2:1–10 and its New Testament echo, Mary's Magnificat, in Lk 1:46–55. Yet the reversal that rises above all others to the point of stumbling block and foolishness is the cross (cf. 1 Cor 1:23): How can anyone seriously believe that the execution of one Jew among thousands by the Roman *imperium* constituted the ultimate judgment of all human pretensions to power and the ultimate demonstration of the psalmist's claim "Say among the nations, 'The LORD reigns'" (Ps 96:10)?

Such, however, is the fundamental point of today's Gospel reading, the passion narrative from John. Caesar's vicar, Pontius Pilate, twice asks Jesus whether he is a king (18:33, 37) and, with typical Johannine irony, unconsciously proclaims the truth to the crowd: "Here is your king!" (19:14) The soldiers are equally correct, and equally clueless, when they crown Jesus and dress him in royal purple, saying, "Hail, King of

the Jews!" (19:3) What is beyond the comprehension of them all is that they are in the presence of the king not merely of the Jews but of all nations and, indeed, all worlds.

Unlike the other Gospels, in which Jesus speaks exactly two words to Pilate (in Greek), "You have said so," in response to Pilate's question "Are you the King of the Jews?" John's Jesus is positively loquacious with the governor. He spells out for Pilate the nature of his kingdom (18:36), the purpose of his kingship (18:37), and even the relationship between his kingdom and the one that Pilate represents (19:11). He could not be more straightforward. But it's all Greek to Pilate. All he manages to make of it is that Jesus is no danger to the Roman state (18:38; 19:12). Yet by failing to act even on the little that he knows, Pilate winds up as the first evangelist (i.e., gospel writer) in three languages on the *titulum* nailed to the cross: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" (19:19). In its own way, the church has never forgotten Pilate's contribution: he is memorialized forever in its two main creeds.

Still, there is nothing ironic or indirect about John's understanding of what was happening that afternoon. When Jesus is "lifted up" on the cross, he is manifested to all as the messianic Son of Man, to whom God gives "dominion and glory and kingship" (3:13f.; 12:32–34; cf. Dan 7:13). In fact, he is all that God had promised and more (three of John's seven references to fulfilled Scripture, plus both cases of fulfillment of Jesus' own words, are in cc. 18–19). His inaugural address is brief: "*Tetelestai*"—"It is finished!" (19:30) A scribe's addition to an old Latin version of the Psalm verse quoted above says it all: "Say among the nations, 'The Lord reigns *from the tree*!'"

Read from a confessedly Christian perspective, the Isaiah passage testifies to this same Great Reversal of human expectations and worldviews. Like John's Jesus, the Servant of YHWH is "lifted up" (52:13) to the awestruck incredulity of those who think they know power (52:15). The first six verses of chapter 53 intentionally place us, the readers, among those guilty of incomprehension and culpability via their repeated "we," "us," and "our." We, too, have "no king but Caesar" (Jn 19:15)—that is, no glimmer of how God does "peace and justice" (53:4, 8)—until we can own up to our part in the Servant's weird enthronement and, beyond that, grant that the prophet had it right two chapters later, when he commented on the differential in human and divine calculus: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (55:8f.). Like Pilate, we have to learn that real power comes "from above" (*anōthen*, Jn 19:11), a concept that we can grasp only when we ourselves are born "from above" (*anōthen*, Jn 3:7).

The First Reading briefly references the Israelite sacrificial system in explaining the work of the Servant ("When you make his life an offering [*'āshām*] for sin"—Isa 53:10). The Second Reading is dominated by its imagery and terminology, as one might expect in a reading from the Letter to the Hebrews. Jesus is both sacrificial victim (v. 19) and high priest (v. 21), through whose very body (likened to the curtain at the entrance of the Most Holy Place in the temple) we have both access (v. 19) and atonement (v. 22). Of special interest are the hortatory subjunctives that follow from this state of affairs: "let us hold fast [*katechōmen*] to the confession of our hope" (v. 23) and "let us consider [*katanoōmen*] how to provoke one another to love and good deeds" (v. 24). Faith and good works as a *consequence* of Jesus' saving sacrifice are parallel and inextricable from one another. Spe-

cifically, the author exhorts us readers to "synagogue" together (*episunagōgē*) in worship and thereby encourage/exhort (*parakaleō*; cf. "Paraclete") one another (v. 25). Such is, indeed, the nature of a Christian congregation: an assembly where we faithfully confess and "provoke" one another to acts of love, within and without the fellowship.

Everything we are and do, whether in the kingdom of power (the civil order, including the likes of Pilate) or the kingdom of grace (the communion of saint-sinners, including the likes of this or any congregation), finds its orientation and meaning in the events of this day. In fact, the only God we know is the one who thinks a cross makes a very fine throne indeed. GCH

The Resurrection of Our Lord
April 8, 2007

Acts 10:34–43 or Isaiah 65:17–25
Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24
1 Corinthians 15:19–26 or Acts 10:34–43
John 20:1–18 or Luke 24:1–12

The great twentieth-century form critic Hermann Gunkel famously asserted, "*Urzeit ist Endzeit*"—the beginning of all things and the end of all things are one. Gunkel was articulating what readers of the Christian Bible have long perceived, that Genesis and Revelation form the ends of a great arc, at which God the Creator reigns supreme over a perfect cosmos with which God is in perfect harmony and that is itself, in the words of Charles Wesley's great hymn, "lost in wonder, love, and praise."

It is, of course, the rest of the arc, between the termini, that makes up the history of the world and the story of salvation. Today and today's readings focus on the pivotal moment in that history and story. In doing so, they "kick it up a notch," as a popular television chef is wont to say, and thereby go Gunkel one better. The end is indeed one with the beginning, but it subsumes and exceeds it in glory.

The basic story of the day begins this process of linking past and future. The Gospel reading is Luke's account of the first witnesses to the resurrection. Luke's story ends where it began, with angels proclaiming the good news to the least likely of hearers. (Then it was women and shepherds in cc. 1–2; now it's women, whose credibility is well attested by the apostles' reception of their testimony as a literally in-credible "idle tale," v. 11; cf. v. 23.) Only in Luke is the angelic statement of fact ("You seek Jesus [of Nazareth], who was crucified"—Mt 28:5; Mk 16:6) replaced with a question that immediately lets the proverbial cat out of the bag: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" (v. 5)

In all four of the Gospels "resurrection faith" is not immediate, but Luke seems especially concerned to push the process along. The key to connecting the dots in Luke is the process of remembrance. The angels tell the women, "*Remember* how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again" (v. 6f.). "Then," we are told, "they *remembered* his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest" (v. 8f.). Remembrance leads to witness. Witness takes time to bloom into the full flower of faith (as with the travelers to Emmaus in the following narrative). But with recollection the seed is planted. Perhaps Paul Ricoeur had Luke's Easter narrative at least partially in mind when he coined his magnificent axiom "Hope is the same thing as remembering."

It falls to the Second Reading, taken from Paul's "resurrection chapter" in 1 Cor 15, to spell out the implications of this day's events. In keeping with the typology that he details in Romans 5, Paul reaches back to the near-beginning of history's arc and cites the origin of the human predicament: "death came through a human being . . . all die in Adam" (v. 21f.). Death, he goes on to explain, is the "last enemy" (v. 26) and the polar opposite of all that God wants for creation. Although Paul does not explicitly personify death in today's reading (well, maybe in v. 26), it is difficult not to hear overtones of the ravenous monster of Ugaritic (pre-Israelite) mythology, Mot, whose broad throat engorges even the mightiest of gods and heroes—particularly in view of Paul's use of two OT quotations that probably *do* personify Death in v. 54f.

But the preacher need not reach back to the ancient Near East to make this point. Any hearer who has buried a beloved parent, spouse, sibling, or even—that most unnatural event in all the world—a child, does not need to be persuaded that death is the ultimate threat to all human aspiration and an opponent beyond all hope of human victory.

The point of Easter, says Paul, is that Christ's resurrection is not the proverbial exception that proves the rule. Rather, it is the decisive demonstration that the end of death as end has now begun. Paul alludes to the vision of Daniel, in which, in keeping with the nature of apocalyptic, God personally intervenes in history at the right and decisive moment to establish his reign and vindicate his faithful. God delegates "dominion and glory and kingship" to "one like a human being [Aram., 'son of man']," who subdues all pretenders to ultimate authority (Dan 7:9–18). It is Paul's claim that this right and decisive moment has now arrived with the resurrection of Christ and rightly so, given that Christ is a human, just like the first one, only more so (given God's intent for "human"). Paul states that Christ's destruction of "every ruler and every authority and power" (v. 24) is a process that will culminate in the death of death (v. 25). But Paul is not laying out a chronology here: the "end" (v. 24) that will terminate the process is not so much a point in time as a goal (Gk. *telos*; cf. Jesus' *tetelestai* in Jn 19:30, discussed in Good Friday's helps). Christ's "coming" (Gk. *parousia*, v. 23), like his incarnation and resurrection, is a function of God's right and decisive moment for intervention, in which all people have their proper "order" (Gk. *tagma*, v. 23; see BDAG, p. 803, for a provocative application to this passage). For now, it is not euphemism but realism to understand literally Paul's description of those who have died as "asleep" (Gk. *koimaō*, v. 20).

It is finally, then, the Isaiah passage (65:17–25) that, read in the context of the lectionary, takes the Easter event and its meaning for humanity and sublimely projects them on a cosmic screen. The reading begins with the point stated at the outset: God will create a new cosmos (cf. "heavens and earth" as *merismus* in Gen 1:1) that so transcends the old as to banish it from memory (v. 17). Just as in chapter 43 the prophet had spoken of God the Redeemer as on the verge of effecting a new and incomparably greater exodus (Isa 43:18–21), so now God the Creator will outdo himself the second time around. This is very much in keeping with the church's historic understanding of Easter as the eighth day of creation, i.e., the first day of the new creation.

In fact, the pericope is filled with "You ain't seen nothin' yet" references and allusions to earlier mighty works and promises. Long ago, the gift of the Promised Land had been summarized as the enjoyment of "large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill,

hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant" (Deut 6:10f.; cf. Josh 24:13), and the consequences of apostasy had been expressed as the reversal of these gifts: "You shall build a house, but not live in it. You shall plant a vineyard, but not enjoy its fruit" (Deut 28:30; cf. Deut 28:39; Amos 5:11; Zeph 1:13). The latter curses had indeed come to pass in the fires that destroyed Jerusalem and in the trauma of exile. But now YHWH will again take delight in his city (v. 18f.), and, rather than either dispossessing others or being dispossessed by them, as in the old blessings and curses, builders and growers will benefit from their own labors (v. 21f.). The immediately following promise of the blessing of offspring recalls a pair of psalms, 127 and 128, in which "house" refers first to one's home and then to one's progeny. These, in turn, call to mind the promise that lay at the foundation of messianic hopes and theology: the dynastic oracle to David in 2 Samuel 7, with its triple play on Heb. *bayit*, "house."

But there's more. Even better than God's invitation to "call upon me in the day of trouble" (Ps 50:15) is the assurance "Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear" (v. 24). The oracle concludes with a reprise of Isaiah's "peaceable kingdom" from 11:6–9 in v. 25: In the new creation, as in the prelapsarian old one, animals will not kill or eat one another—although there is one holdover from the Fall: snakes will still eat dust! (cf. Gen 3:14)

At the heart of all lies the vision of a new Jerusalem, inhabited by a people who are not merely delivered from premature death but are granted extraordinarily long life (as it was in the beginning; cf. Genesis 5). We shall hear an echo of this vision later in the Easter season, in Rev 21:1–6 (see Easter 5). To be sure, the prophet does not speak explicitly here of the death of death or of life eternal. But "like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be" (v. 22) isn't far from it. GCH

Second Sunday of Easter April 15, 2007

Acts 5:27–32
Psalm 118:14–29 or Psalm 150
Revelation 1:4–8
John 20:19–31

An introductory comment is in order, as the Easter feast continues for a "week of weeks." The six sets of readings for the Second through the Seventh Sundays of Easter are taken from the same three books. The First and Second Readings follow a *lectio continua* format from Acts and Revelation, respectively. The Gospel readings are all from John, with the latter half taken from Jesus' "farewell discourses" on Maundy Thursday.

Given the format of the First and Second Readings, it is to be expected that there may not be as close a coherence among the three readings as is present in the lectionary for other festival days. Nevertheless, a certain centeredness may be detected. The two series made up of the first two readings may be imagined as the concentric circles emanating (and finally overlapping) from two stones dropped in a pool: the first, a set of ripples spreading out from the historical Easter; the second, a set expanding from the *Telos*, the great and final Easter. For its part, the Gospel according to John, by both canonical position and content, offers an ultimate "What does this mean?" to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This interpretive ultimacy is most appropriate for the Sundays *of* Easter (not merely *in*, as with Advent and Lent, or *after*, as with Christmas, Epiphany, and Pentecost).

The Gospel for the Second Sunday of Easter, John 20:19–31, is the same for all three years of the lectionary. It is not hard to figure out why: Verses 26–29 (the "doubting Thomas" account) are explicitly (and uniquely, among the gospels) dated to one week after Easter. The reading includes three distinct, though hardly separate, parts: vv. 19–23, Jesus' gifts of the Holy Spirit and of the "office of the keys" to the disciples; vv. 24–29, Thomas's skepticism and later faith; and v. 30f., the evangelist's explicit statement of the purpose of the book (and, likely enough, its original terminus).

The red thread that runs through all is "coming to believe." In the preceding, Easter, account (20:1–18) we are told of two cases where "the light went on and the penny dropped": the beloved disciple, upon seeing the empty grave wrappings (but before understanding the testimony of the Scriptures), in v. 8f.; and Mary Magdalene, upon hearing the Lord call her name, in vv. 16–18. We know that the other disciples have heard the witness of Mary (v. 18), but as of that evening, at the beginning of today's reading, they evidently haven't bought it (v. 19). Only when Jesus appears, greets them, and shows them his stigmata do they believe (v. 19f.). Given this context, it hardly seems fair that it is Thomas who has been saddled with the sobriquet "doubting." Like them, he refuses to take others' word for it. Like us scientific moderns (and postmoderns), he wants empirical proof. This Jesus explicitly provides, item by item, as demanded.

Thomas's response is arguably the climax of the Gospel, as he finally articulates what the evangelist has been saying about Jesus since the prologue in chapter 1: "My Lord and my God!" (v. 28). But the evangelist still has more fish to fry (no reference intended to the Gospel for Easter 3 in the following chapter). In what we shall see is a repeated dynamic within John's Gospel (e.g., see Easter 7), the text explicitly reaches out beyond its own time and place to embrace and appeal to future readers, who are not literally witnesses to the risen Christ. First, the evangelist does so indirectly, by reference: "Have you believed because you have seen me?" says Jesus. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (v. 29). Then those same future readers are addressed directly, in the second person: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (v. 30f.). It is perhaps especially those of us who have been trained to see the vast temporal and cultural gulf between ourselves and the biblical world, and maybe even more those of us scholars whose vocation it is to deal with the text as an object of study, who need to recognize here that the text itself intends to cross time and space and objectivity that we might "come to believe." Nor is John alone among the Scriptures in this regard: as in Exodus (12:27) and Deuteronomy (5:2–5), it is not a matter of theological maneuver but the stated intent of the text to incorporate the later reader (and preacher) personally into the story.

The reading from Acts begins the aforementioned ripples outward from the Easter event. If one accepts the tradition that identifies "the beloved disciple" of John's Gospel with John, son of Zebedee, it is the same two apostles who once raced to the empty tomb (John 20:2–10) who now stand before the Sanhedrin and testify to the risen Christ (v. 30). In any event, the passage is the testimony of two "witnesses (Gk. *martur*) to these things" (v. 31) who once were not so sure. Their proclamation is not simply to the fact of the resurrection but also to its import—that is, the "ripples": "God exalted

him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins" (v. 31). The titles are significant. "Leader" (*archēgos*) appears twice in Peter's speeches in Acts, the other referring to Jesus' status as "Author of life" (3:15), thereby linking Jesus with God the Creator. Otherwise, the same title is used frequently in the Septuagint (LXX) to translate terms like "prince" and "chief"—the highest titles available short of "king," which, in the view of one significant point of view in the Old Testament, belongs to God alone. "Savior" (*sōtēr*) in the LXX always renders forms related to the same Hebrew root as Jesus' name (*ysh*ʿ), while both occurrences in Luke's Gospel (1:47; 2:11) appear in the context of the lowly being delivered (cf. also Acts 13:23 for the deliverance of all Israel). Taken together, the two titles form a capsule summary of the One by whom God has broken into history and commenced a new era in which the claims of others to be "leader" (cf. German *Führer*) or "savior" (like Hellenistic and Roman rulers; cf. BDAG, p. 800f.) pale before God's designee.

The key distinction is the goal of this elevation. It is not personal aggrandizement or national prestige but rather "repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins" (v. 31). Given the horrendous history of Christian-Jewish relations, it is worth noting in particular that the text expresses no interest in God's judgment of those who were involved in the historical particulars of Jesus' death (here, the Sanhedrin), to say nothing of their descendants. At most, statements like "whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree" (v. 30) appear in the spirit of Joseph of old, addressing the brothers who had betrayed him: "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good" (Gen 50:20). Peter's point is all gospel. Jesus is triumphant, but no triumphalist.

The triumphant Christ is front and center in the passage from Revelation. As in the Acts reading, there is reference to all three persons of what Tertullian would label the "Trinity" a century later (understanding "the seven spirits who are before his throne" as at least an allusion to the whole Holy Spirit, in keeping with the common usage of the number seven in the book as a cipher for completeness). The passage is replete with recollections of the book of Exodus, from the Divine Name, YHWH ("who is and who was and who is to come"; cf. Exod 3:14 LXX *ho ōn*), to the "job description" of the redeemed Israel as "a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (Exod 19:6). These references to the Bible's second book anticipate Revelation's depiction of Christ as the [Passover] Lamb, beginning in chapter 5, and the abiding theme throughout of God's miraculous deliverance of God's people from oppression. Further Old Testament references link Jesus Christ with the messianic "one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven" of Daniel's apocalyptic vision (Dan 7:13) and with Zechariah's "one [Heb. 'me'] whom they have pierced" (Zech 12:10; cf. John 19:37, the only other NT occurrence of *ekkenteō*, "pierce"). Finally, after the Lord God identifies himself as exilic Isaiah's YHWH, who is both "beginning" and "end" (Isa 44:6; 48:12), form follows content, and the passage ends as it began, "who is and who was and who is to come."

Actually, there is one final equation added thereafter: God as *Pantokratōr* ("Almighty"), the first of nine occurrences of the term in Revelation (otherwise seen in the NT only in 2 Cor 6:18 and literally a term of art in Eastern Orthodox depictions of Christ regnant).

It is a brave preacher who takes on a text from the canon's final book. One recalls both Luther's disdain for it—he grouped it at the end of his translation with the likes of Hebrews and James—and the absence of a

commentary on the book by the otherwise prolific and comprehensive Calvin. Yet there is grist here for the homiletical mill.

As church historian Justo Gonzalez puts it well, reading the book of Revelation is like reading a whodunit from the back forward: one can then understand all that precedes as having happened "because the butler did it." Revelation begins with the end of all things as a settled issue. In the light of that outcome, we can grasp the significance of Christ's redemptive work and our place in the great "meantime" (which, as the book goes on to say, can truly be a *mean time* for the faithful). Today's text leads off the book by assuring its readers that anything that Christ asks of us as "a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father" (v. 6) he himself has already experienced: he is "witness" (Gk. *ho martur*; cf. Acts 5:31, above), "faithful one," and "firstborn of the dead" (v. 5). We know from the first that we have nothing to fear from any persecutory power, because he is finally "ruler of the kings of the earth" (Gk. *ho archōn tōn basileōn tēs gēs*; cf. *archēgos* in Acts 5:31). And we know where we stand with him. He "loves" us (present participle) and "freed" us (aorist participle—it's a done deal) from our sins by his blood. The perduring question of the Scriptures (above all, in exilic Isaiah) is thereby answered: Does God have both the power and the will to deliver us? From the first, and to the last, Revelation answers with an unequivocal "Yes!" GCH

Third Sunday of Easter April 22, 2007

Acts 9:1–6 (7–20)
Psalm 30
Revelation 5:11–14
John 21:1–19

One of the most effective political campaigns in the twentieth century supported a candidate who, by all accounts, ranks among the worst presidents in the history of the United States. Warren G. Harding promised that he would lead a "Return to Normalcy." Coming not quite two years after the armistice that ended the Great War's hostilities, the nation leapt at the notion.

In doing so, Harding tapped into a universal human sentiment. We can usually deal well enough with the highs and lows of life, as long as there's a "normal" to return to thereafter. We can do great things on adrenaline, but not forever. Like Peter in John 21, we get to a point when we're ready to resume the *status quo ante*. "I am going fishing," said he, and his companions replied immediately, "We will go with you" (v. 3).

The preacher on this day faces such sentiments not merely in the sermon's hearers but in the preacher's own heart. "Hail Thee, Festival Day," we sang two weeks ago. And again last week (OK, at least I would; it's one of my favorite hymns). But a *Third* Sunday of Easter? Enough already!

What we tend to forget is that, as of Easter, "normal" isn't normal any more. We have turned a corner. We have entered a new eon. Today's three texts show this from distinct but complementary angles.

In John 21, Peter and six companions spend their night fishing a football field away from shore (v. 8) but without success (v. 3). In a scene reminiscent of that in

which, according to Luke 5:1–11, Jesus began calling his disciples, Jesus instructs them to lower their nets, and the catch is overwhelming. Just as in the Lukan incident Jesus had interpreted what had just happened by saying, "from now on you will be catching people" (v. 10), so John specifies that a total of 153 large fish were caught.

Given the importance of numbers throughout John's Gospel, while one cannot be absolutely certain of its significance, St. Jerome's conjecture that it represents the number of species of fish and is hence symbolic of all people is surely more likely than the conclusion of the often brilliant sainted Martin Franzmann, "the most natural explanation of the number 153 would seem to be that there were 153 fish in the net" (*Concordia Self-Study Commentary* [1979], p. 103). The Risen Christ is telling the seven disciples (note the perfect number) that the fishing will be great from now on but very different from before.

The new time has come, but there is still old business to be dealt with. Specifically, unlike the Synoptics, John's Gospel had never said that Peter repented of his denial of Jesus (18:27; cf. Mt 26:75; Mark 14:72; Luke 22:62). This chapter, likely as not an addendum to the original Gospel (given the apparent closure in 20:30f.), allows Peter to grieve (*elupēthē*, v. 17), but, even more, it accords this leader among the apostles a singular honor. Jesus tells him that he will die in the manner that he himself did, and the evangelist adds a typically Johannine editorial comment: "He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God" (v. 19)—cf. the nearly identical wording regarding Jesus in 12:33. Peter is not merely forgiven; he is promised enthronement in the manner of his Lord. This is the perfect complement to the conversation between Jesus and Peter at the footwashing scene in chapter 13: it is especially Peter's hands, head, and feet that will "have [a] share" in Jesus' kind of servant-leadership. Long before Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote it (and subsequently lived it himself), Peter knew the literal truth: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die" (*Cost of Discipleship* [ET MacMillan, 1948]). There was no going back to fishing.

Acts 9 recounts what is arguably the most dramatic change in life direction in all of Scripture, the conversion of Paul. Like Jesus, Paul (here called by his Hebrew name, Saul) comes back to the land of the living on the third day (v. 9). Like Peter, the text explicitly states that Paul's new life will entail a "theology of the cross" (albeit not quite as literally, given his Roman citizenship): "I myself [Jesus] will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (v. 16). Also like Peter, Paul comes through the water to his Lord—in his case, as he undergoes baptism (v. 18). And, just as in the Johannine account, both fish and food play a prominent role in this kairotic moment: "something like scales [Gk. *lepis*, "fish scales"] fell from his eyes . . . and after taking some food, he regained his strength" (v. 18f.). As God did with Elijah at a turning point in his life (1 Kgs 19:5–8), in both the Gospel and First Reading the Lord (in Paul's case, through Ananias) sees to it that his followers are well fed for their new journeys (cf. John 21:12f.). In sum, while Paul's conversion is likely the most atypical in the history of the church, what follows is paradigmatic for the faithful of all times and places: the death of the old and the birth of the new, all in Christ.

In its own way Rev 5:11–14 marks the turning of the times as well. Following the addresses to the seven churches in Asia (Minor), there is a splendid portrayal of the Lamb enthroned in cc. 4–5, followed by the opening of the scroll's seven seals in cc. 6–8. Thus, this reading forms a part of the

great opening vision of the book, depicting the victorious Pascal victim, who has now "ascend[ed] to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (John 20:17). The rest of the book calls on the church to remain faithful through the "mopping-up operations," which NT scholar Oscar Cullmann helpfully compared to the Allies' efforts in Europe following D-Day.

As is typical in Revelation, the reading is full of symbolic numbers and allusions to OT texts. Thus, the Lamb is lauded with seven attributions in v. 12 and four in v. 13—both perfect numbers. The four (!) living creatures are those whose first biblical appearance was in the "chariot chapter" (chap. 1) of Ezekiel's call vision—and these, in turn, are surely what OT scholars term Ezekiel's "baroque" ornamentation of the seraphim in Isaiah 6 and the cherubim that flanked the ark in Exod 25:18–20. The upshot is that the Lamb is both addressed and envisioned in terms otherwise reserved to God. For example, it is the Lord YHWH who is seated on the throne-chariot, or ark of the covenant, in Ezekiel 1, just as the Lamb is here. Indeed, "the elders fell down and worshiped" (v. 14; cf. 22:8f., which clarifies that no one but God is to be worshipped in Revelation). And not only the elders participated: "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them" praise God and the Lamb in majesty coequal (v. 13). Now that Easter has happened, it is just as Paul said in the Second Reading for the Sunday of the Passion: "at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:10f.). GCH

Fourth Sunday of Easter April 29, 2007

Acts 9:36–43
Psalm 23
Revelation 7:9–17
John 10:22–30

The church has long observed one of the Sundays in the Easter season as Good Shepherd Sunday. Traditionally, it was the Second Sunday after Easter [*sic*], "*Misericordias Domini.*" Since the advent of the three-year lectionary it has become this, the middle Sunday of the season. In either event, the emphasis on this theme preserves an important image, especially given its usage in today's well-known psalm. The challenges to the preacher include clarification of what the Bible means by God (or Christ) as "shepherd," a task that inevitably entails "making strange" some very familiar and beloved texts. It is also incumbent on the preacher to make manifest what this image has to do with Easter.

Perhaps one should start with the psalm, however infrequently it may serve as the text for the sermon. Volumes have been written in an effort to acquaint moderns with the realities of ovine husbandry. For present purposes, the emphasis falls not on the sheep but the shepherd. One simply must keep in mind that in the ancient Near East, since at least the time of Sargon the Great of Akkad (ca. 2300 B.C.), "shepherd" had been a royal title, implying both care and control of the ruled (see Jer 23:1–8 and Ezekiel 34 for OT examples). The point is that to say "The LORD is my shepherd" is to call to mind power far more than gentleness. The same "rod" (Heb. *shēbet*) that comforts in Ps 23:4 can also "shepherd" much more forcefully in Ps 2:9 (reading *tir'ēm* with LXX rather than MT *tĕrō'ēm*, "smash"). The meek-

faced "Good Shepherd" of much Christian iconography is the product of romantic imagination, not historical reality or careful exegesis.

We turn, then, to the readings for the day. No surprise, the passage from John 10 comes from the "I am the good shepherd" chapter of that book (v. 11). Actually, however, it does not come from Jesus' speech but relates an incident that followed soon thereafter. The setting is Hanukkah (the text's "festival of the Dedication"), which recalled the deliverance of Jerusalem from the brutal Syrian Hellenizer Antiochus IV Epiphanes by forces led by Judas Maccabee in 165 B.C. Like Passover, which celebrated Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt, the history behind the festival stood in painful contrast to the present reality of Roman occupation. Therefore, the challenge to Jesus to say openly whether or not he was the Messiah could simply be understood in the context of raw patriotic emotion. However, as one of my seminary professors suggested, there may be more to it than that. The account of the rededication of the temple in 1 Maccabees 4 describes a problem presented by the altar, which the Syrians had defiled with a "desolating sacrilege" (1 Macc 1:54): "They deliberated what to do about the altar of burnt offering, which had been profaned.... So they tore down the altar, and stored the stones in a convenient place on the temple hill until a prophet should come to tell what to do with them" (4:44–46).

It may well be that, in fact, it was this issue that provoked the challenge to Jesus, "If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly" (John 10:24). But are these words intended as a trap or as encouragement? In part, the answer depends on how one understands "if" (Gk. *ei*). It could be a straightforward conditional, suggesting an effort to induce a response that could be cited as seditious, but it could also shade into a postulate, with the effect of "since" (cf. v. 35; see BDAG, p. 219, for discussion). Moreover, usually "the Jews" (John's oft-discussed *hoi Ioudaioi*) are Jesus' opponents in John's Gospel. Yet this particular account follows immediately upon an instance of division in their ranks: "the Jews were divided because of these words [viz., the 'Good Shepherd' discourse]" (v. 19). The immediate context therefore suggests that some hearts may have been inclining in Jesus' direction (and even in the case of diehard opponents, there is always the possibility of Johannine dramatic irony).

In sum, whether v. 24 is heard with malice or with hope, Jesus' response shifts the burden back onto the inquisitors. Unlike Mark's Jesus, in John Jesus has made no secret of his identity from the start: "I have told you" (v. 25). Jesus has spoken by his works as well as his words (v. 25; Gk. *erga*, certainly including the "signs," *semeia*, to be climaxed in the next chapter by the raising of Lazarus). Those who hear and believe are Jesus' "sheep," and he is already giving them eternal life (Gk. present tense *didōmi*). In brief, Jesus is described as incorporating his flock into the resurrection, even before he himself has experienced it. The gift is guaranteed by the Father, with whom Jesus is "one [thing]" (Gk. *hen*, neuter; see R. Brown's commentary [Anchor Bible 29; Doubleday, 1966] for a pithy discussion of the significance of this word in later Trinitarian debates).

The First Reading continues the series from Acts, coming from later in the same chapter as last week's account of the conversion of St. Paul. There are no literal references to sheep or shepherds in this text, and one must take care not to go into the hotel furniture business with Procrustes. The connection with Easter is clear enough, however. Peter's words "Tabitha, get up" (v. 40) recall the very sound of Jesus' raising of Jairus' daughter ("Talitha, cum"; Mark

5:41) as well as Jesus' own resurrection, because Peter's verb, *anistēmi*, is the same one used often in reference to it. As in the Markan account, there is a bilingual aspect built into the text, with a Greek translation provided for Jesus' words (in Mark) and Tabitha's name (in Acts)—a subtle reminder of the multicultural nature of the church, even in its days as a Jewish "Jesus movement" (cf. Acts 6:1). If one is to reach for a connection to this Sunday's theme, it is finally not that far a stretch: The actions of both Tabitha/Dorcas and Peter remind us that the Good Shepherd often cares for his flock through others and that he has a special place in his heart for those who are of low degree and in need.

The passage from Revelation, like the First Reading, moves on from last week's, in this case by taking us from the opening words of praise for the Lamb to renewed worship between the breaking of the sixth and seventh (and final) seals on the scroll. In brief, the reading would reassure those caught in the calm (or not-so-calm) before the storm. This passage makes explicit what is implicit in John's Gospel—that the Pascal Lamb has become the Good Shepherd (v. 17). Indeed, the same verse confirms that the book's repeated references "to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb" (e.g., v. 10) are, in fact, to one entity, "the Lamb at the center of the throne" (cf. *hen* in John 10:30).

As usual in Revelation, Old Testament references and allusions abound. The promise of protection from hunger, thirst, sun, and scorching heat paraphrases exilic Isaiah's words of comfort (49:10), while the assurance of wiping away tears recalls Isaiah's "little apocalypse" and specifically the immediately preceding words therein, "he will swallow up death forever" (25:8). In the midst of these comes the first act of the Lamb/shepherd; "he will guide them to springs of the water of life" (including sweet water, not salty tears). We have come full circle, back to the psalm: "he leads me beside still waters" (Ps 23:2; cf. John 4:10).

"Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" (v. 13). One of the elders asks this rhetorical question of the seer. That is, who is the "their" of "their shepherd" in v. 17? It is an innumerable, oecumenical host (v. 9; *contra* those who would take the 144,000 of vv. 4–8 literalistically). They participate in a Palm Sunday that has no Passion Week to follow. The multitude consists of those who have come through death and fates worse than death ("the great ordeal") and who have now washed and whitened their robes in a baptism of blood—of the Lamb. (Speaking of "great reversals," one of the worst known staining agents becomes the finest of all detergents in God's economy!) Their two acclamations to God and the Lamb basically echo the two in last week's Second Reading, only reversing their order and substituting "thanksgiving" for "wealth" (vv. 10–12; cf. 5:12f.). After all of the privation and exposure, the white-robed martyrs of the *Te Deum* worship 24/7 in the temple, while God shelters (lit., "tabernacles") them forever. History has not yet played itself out to the end, yet already they are victors. Just like the faithful of all times and places. GCH

Fifth Sunday of Easter May 6, 2007

Acts 11:1–18
Psalm 148
Revelation 21:1–6
John 13:31–35

In 1931 Gustav Aulén published *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement* (ET: SPCK, 1953). In that monograph Aulén presented a powerful case for the temporal and theological priority of what he termed the "classic" model of the atonement, that Christ's saving work is best conceived of as his triumph over sin, death, and the devil. With due respect, I believe that he was overly dismissive of the "objective" model of Anselm of Canterbury, which stresses Christ's sacrifice as payment for sin, particularly in view of the theology of the Passion history in Matthew's Gospel. But there is no question that he raised to the consciousness of Western Christianity what those of the East had never forgotten: "He [God] disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it [the cross]" (Col 2:15 NRSV; Gk. *en autōi* also permits the RSV's "in him [Jesus]"). Nowhere is this "classic" understanding of the work of Christ more clearly displayed than in two of the three books that are supplying the readings for this year's Easter season, the Gospel according to John and Revelation.

Holding this theme in mind is particularly helpful as one considers the reading from John. The preacher faces a challenge in this passage, because it so recently served as part of the Gospel on Maundy Thursday. The issue is, in brief, to consider this text in a new light, that of the Easter dawn. At least one entree appears when we note a subtle difference from the Maundy Thursday pericope, which omits the beginning of v. 31, "When he [Judas] had gone out." By including this temporal clause in the Easter 5 Gospel, the lectionary highlights the typically Johannine contrast between the successful work of Jesus ("Now the Son of Man has been glorified") and the instrumental but ineffectual efforts of the powers of darkness ("Satan entered him [Judas]," v. 27; "And it was night," v. 30).

It is in view of this contrast and triumph that Jesus spells out the implications for his disciples. Soon they will not be identifiable by visible proximity to Jesus ("Where I am going, you cannot come," v. 33), because the consummation of his victory in the cross and resurrection will take him physically away from them. Rather, "by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (v. 35). Otherwise put, the chief mark of Christian discipleship is the triumph of *agape* over the self-interest (Luther's "*incurvatus in se*") that is the essence of human sin.

The Revelation reading skips from last week's section, past the preponderance of the book's contents, to its penultimate chapter. The promise of the First Reading for Easter Day, Isa 65:17–25, has now come to full flower: *Endzeit* has recapitulated and exceeded *Urzeit*, as God has created "a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea [i.e., the embodiment of chaos and evil] was no more" (v. 1). A new creation is adorned with a new Israel, God's bride, picking up on a pervasive OT metaphor for the Sinai covenant and all the history that followed. As was true from wilderness days on, God "tabernacles" among mortals—just as John's Gospel would remind us he did climactically in Jesus Christ (1:14).

What is new and different is that the old Israel's mission has now been fulfilled.

Following the collapse of God's attempts to restore humanity as a whole to himself in the course of the Primeval History (Genesis 1–11), God had chosen Abraham and his descendents to serve as his channel of blessing to the world ("in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed," Gen 12:3). That work is now done, and God's covenant marriage is now with "his peoples" (v. 3; cf. last week's reading, "from all tribes and peoples and languages," Rev 7:9). Even the summary formula of the covenant is that of old: "they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them *and be their God*" [reading with Nestle-Aland text to include italicized words; cf. underlined phrase with Exod 6:7; Lev 26:12; Hos 2:23]. A similar covenantal echo is heard in God's assurance of the reliability of the promises represented by this vision: "these words are trustworthy and true" (v. 5; Gk. *pistoi kai alēthinoi*). "Trustworthy and true" may be likened to the Hebrew *chesed wĕ' emet*, used more than twenty times in the OT to refer to God's "gracious loyalty," by which God binds himself by his own being to "marriage" with Israel.

This citation of God's very being continues in v. 6, as "the one seated on the throne" reiterates the self-identification from chapter 1 ("I am the Alpha and the Omega"; cf. 1:8) and then explicates it with "the beginning and the end." By claiming *hē archē kai ho telos* as attributes, the divine voice reminds us that "beginning" and "end" are more than dots on a timeline; God is personally the source and goal of all that is and will be. In other words, God is not the same as creation (old or new), but God is, we might say, intimately engaged.

The victory is now complete. As was promised last week to those "who have come out of the great ordeal" (7:14), God has done away with the briny water of both sea and eye and now provides fresh "water as a gift from the spring of the water of life" (vv. 1, 4, 6; cf. 7:17). Indeed, what was implicit by reference to Isaiah 25:8 then is now explicit: "Death will be no more" (v. 4). It was St. Paul who called Death "the last enemy" (1 Cor 15:26), but it is Revelation 21 that speaks of the enemy's end as *fait accompli*.

Once again this week, the First Reading does not fit into the suggested theme (this time, *Christus victor*) in a way that one can wrap neatly with a bow. But that is not to say that there are no interconnections at all. The reading is an *apologia* for the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles that is delivered by Peter, evidently before the division of labor that assigned to Paul the "gospel for the uncircumcised" and to Peter the "gospel for the circumcised" (Gal 2:7f.). Unlike later debates over circumcision as a prerequisite for gentile Christians, Peter is challenged to defend simple association—specifically, eating—with gentiles, i.e., whether they belong at all. Peter relates a vision with eating at its nub, in which he is instructed to "kill and eat" animals excluded by the Torah, because "what God has made clean, you must not call profane" (vv. 5–10). In fact, the point of the vision is not the kosher laws of Leviticus 11: neither the original account of Peter's vision and subsequent visit to the gentile household in Acts 10 nor the retelling in today's reading ever speaks of anyone actually eating a meal. It is only mentioned in 11:3 by Peter's critics. The transcendent issue is the extension of "the repentance that leads to life" "even to the Gentiles" (v. 18; cf. "repentance to Israel" in 5:31, Easter 2). When the Spirit sent Peter to the household of Cornelius and subsequently "fell upon all who heard the word" (10:44), the hitherto-Jewish "Jesus Movement" took its first but ultimately irrevocable steps toward the "all tribes and peoples and languages" of Rev 7:9.

What has arisen here is simply a tran-

scription of a tension to be found throughout much of the Old Testament and, indeed, throughout the history of the church. On the one hand stands God's call to his people to be "holy" and therefore distinct from others; on the other is God's expressed love for all nations and the expectation that God's people will be blessing and host to them. (For select OT examples out of numerous possibilities, contrast Leviticus and Ezra-Nehemiah with Ruth, Jonah, and Isaiah 60.) At a different time and place, St. Paul addresses this tension at least in part through a call to "live in the flesh, but not according to the flesh" (2 Cor 10:3). Yet even that has always been more easily said than done. Today's church wrestles hard with issues of discerning the will of God in a cultural context that is worlds away from that in which the Bible was written. Some argue for "inclusivity" as a theological trump card, others for "hate the sin, but love the sinner" as a *modus operandi*, still others for a deliberate push-back against secular cultural trends.

God's people look to the pulpit for guidance that is "strong, loving, and wise" (2 Tim 1:7). If that expectation does not drive preachers to their knees, nothing will. It may be helpful, or at least comforting, to observe that for all the rejoicing at the end of Peter's speech, the issue of what to do with the gentiles doesn't go away quickly. The "Council of Jerusalem" comes but four chapters after today's reading in Acts, and at some point Peter and Paul had a face-off on the matter (Gal 2:11–14). Today's passage challenges the preacher to ask exactly what has God made clean, or, in the terms of the other two readings, what the triumph of Christ has wrought even now. If Peter's experience is any guide, it will take some doing for the Spirit to get through to us, so that we can at last join him in asking (at least in retrospect) "who was I that I could hinder God?" (v. 17). GCH

Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 13, 2007

Acts 16:9–15
Psalm 67
Revelation 21:10, 22–22:5
John 14:23–29 or John 5:1–9

One of the most famous statues from classical antiquity is the "Winged Victory [Gk. *Nikē*] of Samothrace," now in the Louvre. Its graceful lines call to mind the "glory that was Greece," to quote Poe. As it happens, the island on which it was found was also the first place that Christianity, or at least St. Paul, set foot in Europe, according to Acts 16. With this, the faith took another significant step. Last week, it was outreach to the Gentiles, this week, a new continent—one that would prove both hospitable and fateful in the history of the church.

This week's reading includes another, more subtle, act of inclusion. Verse 11 marks the beginning of the "we" section of Acts. If one holds with the tradition that the author is Luke, the narrative has picked up not just Greece but a Greek.

In fact, place names and personal identities say much in this text. The action begins in Asia Minor, in Troas, just south of the site of the *Iliad.* Following their stop-over on the island, Paul's party proceeds to a literally "new city" (Gk. *Nea Polis*) and thence to Philippi, "a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony" (v. 12). Past glories are all around, as Paul walks in the land of Alexander and mingles with retirees from the Roman legions (sort of an ancient San Diego). No wonder that, at a later date, Paul would write to the church in that place, "We are a colony of heaven" (Phil 3:20 Moffitt trans.)—the recipients knew exactly what he meant. At the end of the week, Paul meets a wealthy business-

woman, Lydia, at the local river, amid some "worshippers of God" (possibly Jews, possibly gentile "God-fearers"; see "Lydia" in *IDB* and *ABD* for differing views). Like the first witnesses to the resurrection, the first person in Europe to accept the gospel is a woman. She offers hospitality to Paul and company, to stay with her, and they do.

One of the great challenges of preaching is that we often use words that have very different meanings when employed in a Christian context, as opposed to their secular usage. We saw this, for example, with "love," as discussed on Maundy Thursday. Similarly, this First Reading illustrates a distinctive, Christian understanding of success or *nikē* (although the text does not use the term per se). For Homer or the soldiers and sculptors of the classical world, victory was an epic accomplishment, the work of gods and heroes. The book of Acts takes a different, longer view, as step by step the gospel spreads, sometimes stymied but never thwarted. Today's text illustrates well the old observation that the true title of the book should be "The Acts of the Holy Spirit," as the Spirit blocks Paul's work in Asia and Bithynia (16:6f.) in order to open hearts in Macedonia (v. 14). The baptism of Lydia and her household was but the first of millions in European waters. Pope Benedict XVI is surely correct that Europe is now one of the world's great mission fields, but even now, culturally speaking, the ripples of that baptism are felt there.

The Spirit is also active in the reading from Revelation, as it bears the seer, like Moses at the end of his days, to a high mountain to view God's future for his people. Here, too, otherwise common concepts are transfigured, as "temple" becomes God and the Lamb (21:22), and "light" finds its source no longer in sun and moon, as it has since Gen 1:14–19, but in the glory of God (cf. the "Shekinah" of the OT tabernacle and temple) and in the Lamb (v. 23). Numerous promises of the "old story" now come to pass. Isaiah 60:3 had said, "Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn," and it is so (v. 24). The most sustained, yet unfulfilled, vision of the OT prophets had been Ezekiel's portrait of the restored land of Israel, city of Jerusalem, and temple (cc. 40–48); now the "river of the water of life" flows out from the divine throne in the midst of the new Jerusalem (21:10; 22:1; cf. Ezek 47:1). Moreover, that prophet's endlessly fruitful foliage and therapeutic leaves are there (cf. Ezek 47:12)—only now for the benefit of the "nations" (v. 2; Gk. *ethnē*; cf. Mt 28:19). Indeed, Eden's Tree of Life is that greenery, and its fruits are accessible, for there is none present to eat of it and live forever confirmed in sin (21:27; 22:3; cf. Gen 3:22). Wonder of wonders, God's servants even see his face and live—as even Moses could not do (v. 4; cf. Exod 33:20). And, incidentally, no longer will a sentence like "and it was night" (John 13:30) be heard with foreboding, for night will be no more (v. 5).

By now, we get the definite feeling that the stage is being set for the gift of the Spirit on Pentecost two weeks hence, and the reading from John does nothing to dissuade us. As in last week's Gospel, we continue to hear from Jesus' Maundy Thursday discourses. Jesus is preparing his disciples for his physical absence. Indeed, he claims that things will be better that way. For one thing, he will be with the Father, and those who love Jesus can only rejoice with him in that (v. 28). For another, once Jesus is gone, the Father will bequeath the Advocate (Gk. *Paraklētos*), the Holy Spirit, who will both teach the disciples and review Jesus' teachings (v. 26). Still again comes the argument that we have already seen in John's Gospel, that succeeding generations (including our own) in fact have an advantage: "Blessed

are those who have not seen [me] and yet have come to believe" (20:29).

As if sensing the skepticism that such a claim naturally engenders in us all, Jesus then gives a gift even in advance of the Father's bestowal of the Spirit: "my peace" (Gk. *eirēnē*, v. 27). Like victory in Acts and light in Revelation, peace in John is not intended in its usual connotation; in fact, Jesus pointedly distinguishes the two ("I do not give to you as the world gives"). Of course, there lies behind Jesus' "peace" the holistic well-being entailed in the Hebrew shalom. But in the present context the term has a very specific focus: freedom from anxiety over being without him, because both Father and Son "will make our home" (Gk. *monēn poiēsometha*) with the faithful (v. 23). All in all, it sounds very much like the promises in Revelation. And it should: The Apocalypse speaks not merely of the "not yet" but also of the "even now." GCH

Seventh Sunday of Easter May 20, 2007

Acts 16:16–34
Psalm 97
Revelation 22:12–14, 16–17, 20–21
John 11:20–26

One of the themes implicit in the Easter season is that of our living "between the times." We spoke of this metaphorically five weeks ago, in describing Acts and Revelation as ripples emanating from the historical and eschatological Easters, such that we who live between them are pushed and pulled by both. If such a conception is true of the Easter season as a whole, it is exponentially more so of this last Sunday of the season. On this day we stand between Ascension and Pentecost, between the departure of the visible Christ and the visible gift of the Spirit.

It is very much in keeping with this between-the-times theme that all three of the day's readings feature a certain open-ended closure. John 17:20–26, for example, comes at the very end of Jesus' Maundy Thursday discourses, immediately preceding the commencement of the Johannine passion narrative. These are, in a way, Jesus' famous last words. Specifically, they are the conclusion of his High Priestly Prayer, in which he turns from interceding with his Father on behalf of the disciples there present to "those who will believe in me through their word," that is, all future generations. Jesus extends to them (i.e., us) the trajectory that began with "The Father and I are one" (10:30), seen above at Easter 4, and continued in "that they [his original disciples] may be one, as we are one" (17:11). Such unity is to be manifested for a specific purpose: "so that the world may believe that you [Father] have sent me" (v. 21; cf. v. 25). Thus, the oneness of Christ's followers is the visible incarnation of the Spirit's work in the church and in the world. With respect to the church, as we saw last week, "the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, . . . will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you" (14:26)—including that "the Father sent me" (20:21). Regarding the world, the Advocate "will prove the world wrong," including its unbelief in the unity of the Father and the Son (16:7f.). But since the world cannot "receive" the Spirit, "because it neither sees him nor knows him" (14:17), the Spirit must act through those whom the world can see and hear.

Such service by Christ's followers will come at a cost: "In the world you will face persecution" (16:33). Jesus puts it another way in today's reading: "The glory that you have given me I have given them . . . that they may become completely one, so that

the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (17:22f.). The attentive reader of John's Gospel has figured out by now what Christ's "glory" looks like. To the terrestrial eye, it looks like unspeakable suffering. To the one enlightened by the Spirit, it is the triumph to be consummated the following day on a cross (cf. 19:30 Vulgate, "*Consummatum est*"). But that act will simply be the execution (so to speak) of a plan in place since "before the foundation of the world" (17:24; cf. Eph 1:4). Thus, immediately after warning his disciples of persecution in 16:33, Jesus can affirm with equal certainty, "But take courage; I have conquered the world."

As we have seen repeatedly in this Easter season, such is precisely the point of Revelation, from which the Second Reading is taken. Like the passage from John, this pericope has two facets—including both a sense of ending (the final words of the book) and a yet-to-be ("Surely I am coming soon," v. 20). In fact, "I am coming soon" (Gk. *erchomai tachu*) forms an inclusio around this reading, appearing in both v. 12 and v. 20. It is the "consummation devoutly to be wished" in a way and on a scale beyond Hamlet's comprehension (iii.1). Jesus approaches as the take-no-prisoners (but neither leave any behind) conqueror of exilic Isaiah ("my reward is with me," Isa 40:11). Jesus appropriates to himself the source-and-*telos* titles Alpha/Omega, first/last, beginning/end heard earlier applied to God (1:8; 21:6). He is both "the root and the descendant of David," i.e., the Messiah, and more—the bright morning star (v. 16; cf. 2:28). In v. 17 the Spirit and the bride (that is, the church) take up the plea to "come" (Gk. *erchou*), only to have their prayer turned around into a benefaction, "let everyone who is thirsty come" (Gk. *erchesthō*). Indeed, the book's constant alternation between calls to faithfulness in the midst of persecution and assurances that all is already in hand is nowhere so clear as in this passage. "Blessed are those who wash their robes" (v. 14) is the seventh, final, and therefore perfect beatitude (Vulg. *Beati*; Gk. *Makarioi*) of the book, yet it refers to those who even at that moment are in the midst of the "great ordeal" (cf. 7:14, Easter 4).

The attentive preacher will not fail to note the excision of three verses (15, 18, and 19) from this pericope. One can certainly understand the omission, as these verses are painful and even graphic warnings of exclusion, plagues, and death. Such themes are not easily treated, at Easter time or anytime, and the last thing to be commended in Christian preaching is any attempt to scare anyone into submission. At the same time, we are under obligation to proclaim "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27 RSV), and, with due respect, that may begin with wrestling with texts like this in their integrity.

The Acts reading follows immediately upon that for Easter 6. The incident of exorcism with which it begins recalls earlier encounters with the demonic, above all Jesus' cleansing of the Gerasene demoniac in Luke 8:26ff. (with parallels in Matthew 8 and Mark 5). There, as here, the demonic voice confesses what the humans round about have yet to know, that they are in the presence of the Son (in the Gospels) or the slaves (in Acts) of the "Most High God." In both cases, the spirit is commanded to come out (Gk. *parangellō exelthein*—Luke 8:29; Acts 16:18). Indeed, the parallel is so close that it cannot be accidental. In both cases, Luke is clearly stating that among the signs of the arrival of Christ's gospel in a new place (whether the gentile Decapolis or Europe) is first the confession and then the expulsion of powers that enslave the possessed.

An additional allusion to a still older time is the single NT usage of "divination"

[Gk. *manteuomai*] in v. 16: it is used regularly in the LXX to translate nominal and verbal forms of Heb. *qsm*, "to divine," such as in the story of the medium at Endor, 1 Sam 18:8. Yet another change is rung on the *Christus victor* theme of Easter.

The reading continues with a second account of liberation. Having been beaten and jailed for the economic disruption that they have caused by ending the demonic and human exploitation of the slave girl, Paul and Silas are freed by "an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken" (v. 26). Just as Easter was marked both by an earthquake (Gk. *seismos*; Mt 28:2) and by Christ's proclamation to those in "prison" (1 Pet 3:19), the liberating tremors and hymns continue.

The upshot is a third liberation—following those of the slave girl and the two disciples—showing yet another ripple of the expanding Easter gospel: from last week's possibly Greek, definitely female Lydia to the unambiguously gentile and male jailer at Philippi, an official at least in Roman employ if not Roman himself. Closer and closer we draw to the goal of the book: the arrival of the Good News in the very capital of the Empire. Now to him and his household comes the "way of salvation" (Gk. *hodos sōtērias*, v. 17; cf. the several references in Acts to Christianity as the "Way," e.g., 9:2).

They enter into that way just as Christ's followers have for nearly two millennia since—by being "buried with him [Christ] by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:4). Baptism is, in a nutshell, Easter made personal, and the ripples of its waters continue to spread out, encountering and joining the stream from the other, greater Easter, "the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb" (Rev 22:1). GCH

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